

Common Themes in American Indian Philosophy

This chapter introduces the four common themes that are the focus of the interpretation of American Indian philosophy as *a dance of person and place*: relatedness and circularity as world-ordering principles, the expansive conception of persons, and the semantic potency of performance. It also offers a few clarifications and caveats that must frame the discussion, and explains why crafting a *rational reconstruction* of the “traditional” American Indian world version might be our best and only hope. Finally, it introduces the somewhat remarkable notion that *an American Indian world version constructs a well-made, actual world* from a culturally sophisticated constructivist perspective grounded in the philosophy of Nelson Goodman.

First Introductions

kiwaakomelepwa! nitesiθo miyaaθwe natoke. saawanwa nilla no’ki ni m’soma peleawa.¹ Greetings to you all! My name is Owl Listening. I am Shawnee and my clan is Turkey. The elder who dreamed my name, Michael Spivey, passed recently, and this work remembers him.

I present one possible interpretation of American Indian philosophy as *a dance of person and place* by examining four important notions—common themes, if you will—that seem to recur across American Indian traditions: two world-ordering principles, relatedness and circularity, the expansive conception of persons, and the semantic potency of performance. My exploration views Native philosophy through the lens of a culturally sophisticated constructivism grounded in the work of analytic philosopher Nelson Goodman.² This work, then, also remembers Jim Parmenter, the elder, colleague, and friend who first introduced me to the philosophy of Professor Goodman.

I need to say something at the outset about the Western philosophical tradition—the tradition of Plato and Aristotle, Descartes and Hume, Quine and Goodman—and my place in it. The Western intellectual

tradition deserves a close political analysis from a Native standpoint, and contemporary American Indian critics are now beginning to take on that task.³ Indeed, I won't be able to resist the occasional historical or political observation, pointing out Western prejudices or biases, in the reflections to come. My purpose, however, is not to critique the Western tradition, but to argue that—contrary to centuries of condescension and derision—an American Indian world version makes a legitimate world, *even within a culturally sophisticated Western constructivist framework*.

As for my own history and bias, I am mixed-blood Shawnee and an enrolled member of the Piqua Sept Shawnee Tribe; but I am also well schooled in the concepts and methodologies of Western philosophy of mathematics and logic. I am not undertaking this project because I have some special expertise or clarity about issues in contemporary philosophy—the debate between realism and constructivism among them. Nor have I some special insight into and about Native world versions; I am neither an elder nor one with medicine. In fact, I know of others who have that special knowledge, expertise, and insight into each of these traditions. I am undertaking this interpretation of American Indian philosophy because I happen to be at a special place and time, where and when American Indian philosophy is on the verge of legitimacy within the discipline of philosophy; perhaps my efforts may be an “Open Door” for the Native philosophers who can do the better job. I speak for no one but myself, so any errors are mine alone; and there will be errors, for my understanding of the traditional American Indian worldview is evolving, perhaps as yours is. Know well that I will say nothing that a diligent scholar couldn't find somewhere in print, for the rest belongs to the People, and it is not my place to share it.

Before beginning my promised constructivist interpretation of American Indian philosophy, I must offer a few clarifications and caveats, some of which may be a bit sobering. The first is deceptively nontrivial: What is the appropriate way to refer to the indigenous people called *Indians*? Of course, it is currently trendy, especially within the academy, to use “Native American,” but I reject the label—perhaps shockingly—in favor of “American Indian,” despite the fact that “Indian” is a name imposed by colonial powers that recalls the disease, depredations, and dispossessions Native peoples have suffered at their hands. However, I know of no Indian who really appreciates being called a “Native American.”

First, the name “Native American,” fashioned after “African American” and similar labels, suggests that Indians are American citizens who just happen to be of Native descent. However, unlike African or Asian Americans, who *are* American citizens of African or Asian descent, Indians are also proud citizens of *sovereign* Indian nations—Cherokee, Choctaw, and Shawnee among them—so the “politically” appropriate label misconstrues and inac-

curately portrays the actual political situation. Unlike her Asian American neighbor, who is an American and state citizen, an enrolled Cherokee woman is a citizen of a third sovereign entity: The Cherokee Nation.

I once heard an Indian voicing a second perhaps more compelling reason for rejecting the label “Native American.”⁴ He argued that the approximately 390 treaties struck between the federal government and various tribes refer to indigenous nations by name or to “Indians.” In fact, Article 1, Section 8 of the U.S. Constitution empowers the Congress “[t]o regulate Commerce with foreign Nations, and among the several States, and with the Indian Tribes” (Mount 2007). “If we begin calling ourselves ‘Native Americans’ and not ‘Indians,’” he argued, “then that will just give the federal government another way to abrogate the old treaties, because the treaties were made with Indians, but all of the Indians will be gone—*replaced by Native Americans.*”

Anyway, Indians call themselves “Indians,” both formally and informally, as the National Congress of American Indians and the American Indian Philosophical Association illustrate. So, rather than adopt some monstrous invention like “Amerindian,” or some overbroad and imprecise labels like “indigenous” or “aboriginal people,” I’ll stick with “American Indians” (and sometimes “Indians” or “Natives”). This usage has the additional virtue that folks who *are* Indian will know that I’m talking about them.

I offer yet a second clarification before my investigation begins. Just as in the case of Western philosophy, there is no monolithic set of beliefs that constitute *the* American Indian philosophy. At the time of first contact with Europeans, there were hundreds of Native tribes and nations, each with its own culture, language, history, origin story, and ceremonial cycle—even with its own “intellectualism,” or ways of thinking about the world:

Philosophical differences between American Indian intellectualism and mainstream intellectualism are actually based on the differences among the various tribal cultures. Hence, the difference is not accurately between “Indian intellectualism and mainstream intellectualism” but between mainstream intellectualism and *the different tribes’ intellectualism*. (Fixico 2003: 13, emphasis added)

That said, there are a number of notions or ways of regarding the world—I call them *themes*—that seem to recur across various American Indian traditions. The four I consider—relatedness and circularity as world-ordering principles, the expansive conception of persons, and the semantic potency of performance—together comprise one possible interpretation of Indian

philosophy. Another interpreter might identify and develop a different set of common themes.

A third clarification must preface this constructivist interpretation of Native philosophy. In Western thought we draw easy distinctions between various branches of knowledge—religions and sciences, technologies and humanities among them. If evidence for the claim is necessary, simply consider how Western universities are organized into isolated departments tucked within college “silos”; although there are obvious connections, no one confuses philosophy and science, religion and history, or music and literature. However, there are no such easy distinctions between various realms of knowledge in American Indian traditions, as Brian Burkhart (2004) observes:

Literature and philosophy, science and religion are all very different branches of knowledge in Western thought. Out of these four, most consider only two, science and philosophy, to be branches of knowledge at all. The other two are thought to be entirely different ways in which humans express their being in the world. However, in American Indian thought this is not the case. None of these four can really be separated from the others. (22)

The consequence is that there is no analogue of Western philosophy—understood as an isolated and self-contained discipline posing a set of fundamental questions about reality, knowledge, and value, and attempting to answer those questions with some sort of rational methodology—in American Indian world versions. That said, ontological, epistemological, and axiological beliefs and actions abound in Native world versions, and so in that sense there are beliefs and actions that we may confidently designate “philosophical.”

Nicholas Black Elk’s narrative, shared with John Neihardt, provides a perfect example of the seamlessness of Native knowledge. First published in 1932, *Black Elk Speaks* is at once a religious and moral text, a personal and tribal history, poetry, medicine, song, and dance. Described by Vine Deloria as a standard by which any newly emerging “great religious classic” must be judged, the poignant Black Elk narrative is the account of a Lakota holy man who, given a powerful vision early in life, is unable to harness fully the power of the vision in the service of his people. At one point in the narrative, Black Elk’s (2000) description of a “happy summer” of hunting, fishing, and cutting tepee poles flows seamlessly into a moral story, “High Horse’s Courting,” which teaches how one should and should not conduct oneself in order to “get a girl when you wanted to be married”

(47–58). At another point, a historical account of the Lakota's sorrows at being removed to a reservation moves through a detailed description of a lamenting ceremony and the resulting religious vision (136–44). I note, of course, that my description here erects the kinds of artificial boundaries that are really absent in American Indian knowledge.

I often use *Black Elk Speaks* and similar narratives, told or written by Indians, but interpreted or edited by Western writers, cultural anthropologists, and ethnographers as examples or evidence, but this immediately presents a pair of very sobering challenges to my project. The first challenge is determining when a source is reliable, that is, when a work conveys an unvarnished and untarnished Native world version, and when, on the other hand, a source is suspect. You see, American Indian traditions are oral traditions wherein tribal culture, knowledge, history, and values—all of the elements of a Native world version—are transmitted from elder to youth through story. However, until quite recently the American Indian world version has suffered from the Western sociological dogma that culture evolves from the primitive to the civilized, much as a species evolves. “And, given that Western culture is the *most* civilized,” goes the dogma, “every world version that is *different* must be more primitive, hence inferior, since ‘primitive’ means ‘inferior.’” In his comments about the “native races of North America,” ethnographer J. W. Powell (1877) observes that:

The opinions of a savage people are childish. Society grows! . . . The history of the discovery of growth is a large part of the history of human culture. That individuals grow, that the child grows to be a man, the colt a horse, the scion a tree, is easily recognized, though with unassisted eye the processes of growth are not discovered. But that races grow—races of men, races of animals, races of plants, races or groups of worlds—is a very late discovery, and yet all of us do not grasp so great a thought. (3–4)

If the thought that races of men, animals, plants, or worlds “grow” was lost on most who early-on studied American Indian world versions, the thought that Native opinions were “childish” and “savage” was not. And so, the interactions between whites and Indians—where the principal white concern was finding a solution to the “Indian Problem” through warfare, removal, assimilation, and even the termination and nonrecognition of some tribes—served to attack, weaken, and ultimately erase much of the oral tradition that preserved the “childish opinions” of the American Indians.⁵ As a result, the older sources we have—the ones closer to unadulterated Native thought—consist of ethnographers like the scornful Powell and apologists like the sympathetic Neihardt interpreting a rapidly vanishing Indian world

version, as well as assimilated Indians like Dakota Charles Eastman and Shawnee Thomas Wildcat Alford, who adopted “the way of civilization.” In each case, whether because of disdain, admiration, or assimilation, the reliability of older sources must be trusted with caution.

The state of more recent sources may be even more problematic, as Vine Deloria (2004) argues. “When we speak of American Indian philosophy today,” he observes, “we are probably talking about several generations of Indian people who have *popular* notions of what Indian philosophy might have been, . . .” but only a scant knowledge of old beliefs and ceremonies (4; emphasis added). And although I am not as skeptical about the knowledge of our elders as Deloria, I take his point that because of “the rush toward assimilation” over the past forty years, the elders—our traditional source of Native culture and values—may recall the boarding school days of the 1920s, the Great Depression and the 1950s revival of ceremonies, but “would know little else of importance.” Moreover, as a result of the stereotypical portrayal of American Indians in contemporary popular culture—movies, Castanedian “teachings” and the like—“things ‘Indian’ have become more fantasy than real” (4–5). If so, then more contemporary accounts of Native culture, religion, and beliefs may be even more unreliable than the older sources recorded and interpreted by non-Natives.

The first sobering challenge, then, is how to regard the accuracy of both old and new sources when developing an American Indian world version. Deloria recommends an intensive study of each while recognizing their respective shortcomings, knowing ultimately that the best we may expect is a “projection”—what I call a *rational reconstruction*—of a Native world version: “The task today is that of intensive research and study to enable people to *project* what the various tribal peoples *probably* meant when they described the world around them” (4; emphasis added). Such is one reason why this will be only one possible interpretation of American Indian philosophy, for there are many other “projections” that are possible. It is a rational reconstruction, and so must be judged on whether or not it plausibly accounts for a variety of data, including linguistic studies, old ethnographies, anthropological observations, archeological speculations, interpreted Indian narratives, as well as the work of contemporary Native and non-Native scholars, themselves trying to reconstruct an American Indian world version.⁶

The second challenge to my project is even more sobering and is, perhaps, insurmountable, because of a fundamental contemporary constructivist tenet: The pure content of sense experiences alone underdetermines the ontology of the world. Instead, sense experiences are identified, categorized, and ordered—*worlds are constructed*—through the use of language and other symbol systems. In other words, there are no facts without a conceptualizing intellect using some system of description, exemplification, or expression. This constructivist tenet is explored with some care in the next chapter,

but one of its consequences important to this volume is that speakers of radically different languages—using radically different systems of identification, categorization, and ordering—will conceive of the world in radically different ways. *Different words make different worlds*. So, any translation of an American Indian language into a Western language, no matter how carefully or neutrally crafted, will recast Native thought into the conceptual categories—hence, the ontology—of the Western language. Indeed, I argue later that much of our talk about “spirits” in the Native world version makes this very mistake, giving American Indian beliefs an unwarranted air of mysticism in Western popular culture—and in the academy—because of the supernatural connotations of the Western category *spirit*.

I resisted the constructivist tenet that different languages construct different worlds early in my philosophical career, but nothing made its plausibility more evident than my attempts to learn Shawnee, one of the many Algonquin languages.⁷ After several years of reflection, I have come to believe that native Shawnee speakers specifically, and the old Indians in general, lived in a radically different world than ours—a substantial claim this work seeks to support. Two brief bits of evidence suffice for now.

Consider first that European languages regard gender important enough to mark grammatically. All have gendered pronouns and possessives, and many—French, Spanish, and German among them—have gendered nouns, although no one can say exactly why “mouse”—*la souris*—should be feminine, whereas “cat”—*le chat*—is masculine. What is important, however, is that these linguistic traditions use gender categories to organize experience, and in so doing recognize and reinforce gender difference as one of the most fundamental distinctions in the Western world version and the world it constructs. Many American Indian languages like Shawnee use a syntactic device to mark a different sort of category, namely, the *animate*, recognizing and reinforcing the fundamental distinction between animate and inanimate entities in their worlds. Shawnee does so with an ending morpheme “-a,” as in the nouns, “kweewa” (woman), “hanikwa” (squirrel), “weepikwa” (spider), and “sacouka” (flint) (Wagar, pers. comm.; Ridout 2006). Shawnee also uses the formative suffix “-θa” when referring to *persons*—with the ending morpheme “-a”—as in “wiyeeθa” (someone), “skoteeθa” (fire person), “nepiiθa” (water person), and “weepikwaθa” (spider person) (Voegelin 1939: 335). Again, as in the case of gender in European languages, what is important here is that Shawnee uses the categories “animate” and “inanimate” to organize experience, and in this way reinforces the difference between animated beings and those not animated as one of the most fundamental distinctions in the Shawnee’s constructed world.⁸

Second, notice that European languages have one first-person plural pronoun, for example, the “we” of English, the *nous* of French and the *wir* of German. However, Shawnee has two first-person plural pronouns, the

exclusive “niilape” and the inclusive “kiilape.” If I were to say to you “saawanwa niilape,” then I would be saying “We [excluding you] are Shawnee.” On the other hand, if I were to say “saawanwa kiilape,” then I would be saying “We [including you] are Shawnee.” Now this difference is clearly expressible in English—I just did so—but unlike the gender distinction in English, it is not a difference fundamental enough to mark grammatically. However, in the Shawnee world the composition of a group or community—and how one stands with respect to the group—is critically important enough to be recognized and reinforced by two first-person plural pronouns.

These two bits of evidence will be buttressed by others, suggesting that speakers of American Indian languages—languages that use systems of identification, categorization, and ordering far different from Western languages—conceive of the world in radically different ways. As a consequence, translations of Native narratives into their Western counterparts will recast the fundamental ontological categories of the Native world version into Western categories, and so misinterpret American Indian ontological beliefs. For example, someone unaware of either the Shawnee grammatical mark for the animate category or the subtleties of the Shawnee pantheon of “deities” might translate “tepe’ki kisaθwa” as “moon,” masking that the “night luminary” is an entity that gives light, and is not only *animate* as the ending morpheme “-a” indicates, but is a powerful *person*.⁹ “[The Shawnee] have no definite idea of the formation, size or shape of the sun or moon, but suppose them to be a man & a woman of immense power & size.” (Trowbridge, in Kinietz and Voegelin 1939: 37).

On the other hand, a translation of a Native expression into a Western one may impute properties absent in the American Indian worldview, as in the translation of “neir” (from some unspecified American Indian language) as “wind.” In his own inimitable inimical fashion, Powell (1877) recognizes and poses this challenge as one among many obstacles in “fully present[ing] . . . the condition of savagery”:

The . . . difficulty lies in the attempt to put savage thoughts into civilized language. Our words are so full of meaning, carry with them so many great thoughts and collateral ideas. In English I say *wind*, and you think of atmosphere in revolution with the earth, heated at the tropics and cooled at the poles, and set into great currents that are diverted from their courses in passing back and forth from tropical to polar regions; you think of ten thousand complicating conditions by which local currents are produced, and the word suggests all the lore of the Weather Bureau—that great triumph of American science. But when I say *neir* to a savage, and he thinks of a great monster, a breathing beast beyond the mountains of the west. (5)

Expressed without Powell's effusive pride in Western civilization and scholarly contempt for Native traditions, we may take the point to be that translating the Native "neir" as "wind" stands in danger of imputing all of the "great thoughts and collateral ideas"—all of the *ontological baggage*—of the English understanding of "wind" to the Native "neir."

The second sobering challenge to my project should now be obvious: Using *any* non-Native translation cannot do full justice to the underlying ontological, epistemological, and axiological beliefs and values of the original Native world version. What's worse, my account to come—crafted in a non-Native language—cannot escape this same inherent difficulty. Thus, we have a second reason why my interpretation is, at best, a rational reconstruction of American Indian philosophy—just one among many possible interpretations. Taken together with the first challenge of distinguishing between reliable and suspect sources, our reflections on the constructivist tenet that "different words make different worlds" mandate that we proceed with extreme caution and with modest expectations for success. You may want to put this book down and start another.

Four Common Themes: A First Look

Donald Fixico (2003), an American Indian history professor, anticipates two of our four common themes in American Indian philosophy, *relatedness* and *circularity* as world-ordering principles, when he observes that:

"Indian Thinking" is "seeing" things from a perspective emphasizing that circles and cycles are central to the world and that all things are related within the universe. . . . "Seeing" is visualizing the connection between two or more entities or beings, and trying to understand the relationship between them. (1–2)

Reserving our discussion of *circularity* for Chapter 7, Chapter 4 shows that *relatedness as a world-ordering principle*—visualizing or constructing relationships or connections between entities—has important implications for our understanding of Native ontology, verification, and knowledge. Indeed, Deloria (1999) characterizes relatedness as "a practical methodological tool for investigating the natural world" (34).

Deloria illustrates the American Indian views that "all things are related," and how it is used as an investigatory tool, by appealing to one of Luther Standing Bear's (2006) boyhood recollections:

I also remember a small fruit or berry which grew in sandy soil on low bushes. When ripe, they were black like cherries, so white

people called them 'sand cherries.' Our name for them was *e-un-ye-ya-pi*. There is something peculiar about these cherries. When we gathered them, we always stood against the wind and never with the wind blowing from us across the plant. If we did, the fruit lost some of its flavor, but if gathered in the right way, they were sweeter than if gathered in the wrong way. This, I believe, is one of the many secrets which the Indian possesses, for I have never met a white person who knew this. (12)

Deloria interprets this bit of Native knowledge about the harvesting of sand cherries as "unquestionable" evidence of a particular human–plant relationship, in which humans benefit if respectfully approaching the plant. Moreover, these kinds of "secrets" can be discovered when one investigates the natural world assuming that such relationships exist—that "all things are related" (34–38). However, I suggest here that such relationships in the American Indian world version are constructed rather than discovered—that relatedness is one way that Natives order sense experiences.

A good friend, Walter S. Smith, suggested a little exercise to give a Western mind a place to begin when first introduced to an American Indian worldview; I have modified it a bit to reflect my own understanding, but the idea is essentially his and I thank him here. Having used it in numerous classroom and community forums over the years, it almost has never failed to produce the same, predictable results. A group is first given twenty seconds to make a list of as many kinds of animals as possible, and then twenty seconds to make a list of as many kinds of persons as possible. The brief period of time for each task is supposed to elicit a reflexive rather than a considered response on the assumption that unreflective responses best reflect deeply ingrained conceptual categories. A typical list of kinds of animals sounds like "dog, cat, bird, fish, mouse, lion, tiger, and bear (oh my!)" with an occasional "aardvark," "rhinoceros," "triceratops," or even "zebra muscle." There is no typical list of kinds of persons, for there are many ways participants can interpret the request; indeed, for this reason, lists of persons are always much shorter than lists of animals, because, unlike the request for different kinds of animals, each participant must first decide just what she or he is being asked to list. Lists of kinds of persons tend to fall into three categories: human characteristics, human nationalities, and human ethnicities. A typical example of a list of human characteristics is "man, woman, bald, thin, and happy"; a typical list of nationalities is "American, Canadian, Mexican, and Irish"; and a list of human ethnicities usually runs "Caucasian, African American, Asia American, and Native American."

The interesting thing to note—and the thing that makes this an illuminating exercise when first introduced to an American Indian worldview—is

that the one animal notably absent from typical lists of animals is “human being.” Moreover, typical lists of persons have never included any nonhuman being. But why should this be surprising? After all, it is a deeply ingrained Western religious view that human beings are different in kind from animals by virtue of ensoulment, and it is a deeply ingrained Western scientific view that human beings are different in kind from animals by virtue of their highly advanced evolution, so it is unsurprising to find these prejudices reflected in participants’ lists of animals. And because every Western academic discipline, religious doctrine, and barroom discussion assumes that being human is a necessary condition for personhood—assumes it almost as naturally as breathing—it is a most unremarkable occurrence that a list of persons would include nothing but human characteristics, nationalities or ethnicities. Traditional Native list makers, however, would include “human being” on the list of animals without a second thought, and, remarkably, would include nonhuman beings on the list of persons. Indeed, it would not be at all surprising if the list of animals were a subset of the list of persons.¹⁰

Our little exercise illustrates something that cultural anthropologists and ethnographers have often observed, namely, that human beings and other animals are in some sense “equal” in the American Indian world version. According to J. W. Powell (1877):

There is another very curious and interesting fact in Indian philosophy. They do not separate man from the beast by any broad line of demarkation [sic]. Mankind is supposed simply to be one of the many races of animals; in some respects superior, in many others inferior, to those races. So the Indian speaks of “our race” as of the same rank with the bear race, the wolf race or the rattlesnake race. (10)

However, I argue in Chapter 5 that Powell and others misinterpret this “very curious and interesting fact.” Human beings are not lowered to the status of other animals as Powell implies; instead, animals and other sorts of nonhuman beings are raised to the ontological and moral status of *person*. This expansive conception of persons is the second common theme explored here.

The third recurring theme across American Indian world versions, the semantic potency of performance, is considered in Chapter 6. My understanding of this component of the Native worldview—that performing with a symbol is the principal vehicle of meaning in Native traditions—was framed by Sam Gill (1982, 1987), and I thank him here. Gill’s crucial insight is that an understanding of Native religions depends on an appreciation of American Indian oral traditions in which songs, prayers, ceremonies, and other sorts of performances—and not the written word—are the primary and

the potent bearers of semantic content. The point extends from a narrow consideration of religion to the entire Native worldview, for we have seen that there are no sharp distinctions between various domains of human activity in American Indian world versions.

Gill (1982) observes that “[w]e live in a world in which writing is taken for granted,” and that the written word “is central to our forms of government and economy, our society and material culture (i.e., the things we have), and certainly to our pursuit of knowledge and the ways in which culture is transmitted from generation to generation” (41–42). Indeed, the written word is so ubiquitous in the Western world that it dissolves into the background, becoming just another virtually indistinguishable feature of the environment.

A 1959 episode of Rod Serling’s *The Twilight Zone* entitled “Time Enough at Last” illustrates the centrality and power of written language as a cornerstone of Western culture. Bespectacled bank teller Henry Bemis is addicted to reading, and his addiction gets him into trouble at home and at work. While spending his lunchtime reading in the bank vault, a nuclear attack takes place, leaving Bemis the sole survivor. Making his way to the library, Bemis stacks books by month, planning his reading schedule for years to come—Shakespeare and Shaw, Shelley and Keats. Bemis has “time enough at last” to read—but then he shatters his coke-bottle eyeglasses . . . (“The Twilight Zone” 2009). Irony aside, the important point here is that the last man on earth has access to the whole of Western culture—its philosophy and history, literature and science, religion and values—because the written word is its principal vehicle of meaning. Although we speak metaphorically about “having a conversation with an author” when reading, Gill (1982) is correct in observing that, “Writing and reading are usually private acts, done by oneself in isolation from others” (45).

This is manifestly not the case in American Indian oral traditions in which speech acts and other performances—either symbolic acts or actions with symbols—are the primary bearers of semantic content. As well, unlike communication in Western culture, oral traditions require some members of the community—the elders—to be repositories of knowledge and values, to preserve and transmit them across generations. Consider Black Elk (2000), for example, who was anguished at age seventeen because he still did not understand the great vision given to him eight years earlier, so his parents asked an elder for help:

[M]y father and mother asked an old medicine man by the name of Black Road to come over and see what he could do for me. Black Road was in a tepee all alone with me, and he asked me to tell him if I had seen something that troubled me. By now

I was so afraid of everything that I told him about my vision, and when I was through he looked long at me and said: "Ah-h-h-h!", meaning that he was much surprised. Then he said to me: "Nephew, I know now what the trouble is! You must do what the bay horse in your vision wanted you to do. You must do your duty and perform this vision for your people upon earth. You must have the horse dance first for the people to see. Then the fear will leave you." (122–23)

Along with another old and wise elder, Bear Sings, Black Road helped Black Elk perform the horse dance from his vision for the people, and with its performance—ceremonial actions with symbols—the vision came to have meaning and power. But Black Elk could not have performed the vision in isolation; unlike Bemis—who needs no one to help him understand a book—Black Elk's understanding comes only with the help and wisdom of the elders. No wonder the forced removal of American Indians from their tribal lands was such a tragedy, for the harshest rigors of removal fell on the elders—the repositories of tribal knowledge and culture—many of whom did not survive. It would be as if we all forgot how to read and write, or, like Bemis, shattered our eyeglasses.

It is a commonplace that American Indians regard some places as sacred, for example, the Black Hills for the Lakota, the Petroglyph National Monument in New Mexico for Puebloan people, and the Hopewellian ceremonial complexes in Ohio like the Newark and Fort Ancient earthworks. And it is equally common to find both Native and non-Native authors alike proposing that the fundamental difference between Western and Indian religious traditions is that the former is framed by time, sacred events, and history while the latter focuses on space, sacred places, and nature. Deloria (1994) makes the point this way:

When the domestic ideology is divided according to the American Indian and Western European immigrant . . . the fundamental difference is one of great philosophical importance. American Indians hold their lands—places—as having the highest possible meaning, and all of their statements are made with this reference point in mind. Immigrants review the movement of their ancestors across the continent as a steady progression of basically good events and experiences, thereby placing history—time—in the best possible light. (62)

However, in Chapter 7 I argue that there is a more fundamental distinction to be drawn, one that supports the difference between Western time and

Native place. Fixico again anticipates the difference between the American Indian way of “seeing and thinking” and its Western counterpart by explaining that Natives “see” things from a perspective emphasizing *circularity*, while the Western mind is *linear*. Hence, the last common theme in American Indian world versions we consider is *circularity as a world-ordering principle*.

By the way, if circles and cycles—and not lines and linear progressions—are central to a way of constructing the American Indian world, then the iron-fisted one-dimensional temporal progression that rules over the Western mind and world will not hold sway over Native peoples; they are neither obsessed with nor driven by linear time as are their Western counterparts.¹¹

This is not to deny, of course, that “Indians hold their lands—places—as having the highest possible meaning,” that is, *sacredness*. Indeed, in the sanctity of particular places we find yet another reason why the forced removal of American Indians from their tribal lands was so devastating. Without doubt, there are sacred sites in Western religions, for example, the purported site of the birth of Jesus, where now stands the Church of the Nativity. However, Christianity could get along quite well without knowing about these places, for events are more important than places in the Christian tradition. But without the event of the Resurrection, there simply would be no Christianity. In Native religious traditions, place is more sacred than an event, although a place can be sanctified by an event that occurred at that site (Deloria 1994: 267–82). So, removal for American Indians was not a mere trade of occupied tribal lands for other land elsewhere. Removal separated Native people from their sacred places, the consequence of which would be as devastating as separating a Christian from the event of the Resurrection, if such a thing were possible.

Constructing an Actual American Indian World

Here we have, then, a first look at the four common themes we consider in this interpretation of American Indian philosophy as the dance of person and place: relatedness and circularity as world-ordering principles, the expansive conception of persons, and the semantic potency of performance. But presenting such an interpretation of a Native philosophical worldview is just a part of my current project. I argue as well that from a culturally sophisticated constructivist perspective grounded in the philosophy of Nelson Goodman, an American Indian world version constructs an actual, well-made world.

Since first contact with the indigenous peoples of the Americas, the Western intellectual tradition has sometimes regarded Native worldviews as interesting and rich subjects of anthropological study, but almost always as

primitive and uncivilized, false and empty, and very often as moral abominations to be extinguished. Lewis Hanke's (1959) analysis of the great debate in Valladolid in 1550 between Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda and Bartolomé de las Casas shows that there was never doubt about the moral inferiority of the Native worldview, but only about whether or not Indians have an Aristotelian "slave nature." If so, as Sepúlveda argued, then it is right to Christianize them through warfare; if not, as las Casas argued, they could be converted without warfare. The obvious goal in either case was to compel Native people to abandon their false and morally corrupt beliefs.

About three hundred years later, ethnographer Powell (1877) offered a scholarly assessment of the ethical value of "Indian theology":

The literature of North American ethnography is vast, and scattered through it is a great mass of facts pertaining to Indian theology—a mass of nonsense, a mass of incoherent folly . . . ethically a hideous monster of lies, but ethnographically a system of great interest—a system which beautifully reveals the mental condition of savagery. (13)

In 1907 ethnographer L. T. Hobhouse offered a similar opinion about the lack of Western metaphysical distinctions in Native worldviews:

primitive thought has not yet evolved those distinctions of substance and attribute, quality and relation, cause and effect, identity and difference, which are the common property of civilized thought. These categories which among us every child soon comes to distinguish in practice are for primitive thought interwoven in wild confusion. (Gilmore 1919: 20-21)

Unsurprisingly, these kinds of "scholarly" views about Native worldviews provided one rationale among many for the U.S. government's policy of forced assimilation between the late 1880s and mid-1930s, designed to "civilize" American Indians—to "kill the Indian and save the man," as Richard Henry Pratt famously put it. "Civilizing" American Indians—ridding Native peoples of their primitive thought and savage ways—required the destruction of Indian cultures and art, the banning of Native religious ceremonies, the allotment of tribal lands, and the placement of children in boarding schools where they were unable to speak their native tongue (Beck, 2001).

Our respected philosophical contemporaries are no less dismissive of the Native worldview. W. V. O. Quine (1960) speculated that among the "disreputable origins" of dubious discourse about abstract objects are "confusions over mass terms, confusions of sign and object, perhaps even a

savage theology”—a witticism, perhaps, from an engaging writer; but I believe we know Quine’s answer were he asked whether or not a Native version of the world is false or empty (123, emphasis added). Goodman (1984), himself, uses a Native commonplace to illustrate the view that not all world versions are true: “[A]fter all,” he writes, “some versions say the earth . . . rests on the back of a tortoise” (30, emphasis added).

Now, a fundamental Goodmanian constructivist tenet is that a world is “well made” and actual only if it is constructed by a true version, so if a world version is false or empty, then there will be no well-made, actual world created by it. And, assuming that ill-made or unmade worlds are of little philosophical interest, scant philosophical value will be found in a Native worldview if it turns out to be false or empty—as the prevailing Western attitude has it. Anthropological voyeurism aside, what of philosophical importance will there be to discover in the American Indian world version? Clearly, one of my present purposes must be to show that the prevailing western attitude is incorrect, and that an American Indian world version is neither false nor empty, and so constructs an actual, well-made world. This task is begun in Chapter 2 with the introduction of important tenets of Goodman’s constructivist view, including (1) the view that facts are fabricated by world versions, (2) the doctrine of ontological pluralism, that there are many internally consistent, equally privileged, well-made *actual* worlds, (3) the criteria for an ultimately acceptable world version, and (4) the view that ultimate acceptability is sufficient for truth, and true versions construct well-made actual worlds.

Chapter 3 begins the argument for the legitimacy of an American Indian world version from a constructivist perspective, beginning with an argument in favor of a constructive *realism* rather than Goodman’s constructive *nominalism*. I then argue that Goodman’s criteria for the ultimate acceptability of a world version are culturally biased, so they beg the question against any non-Western world version, especially an American Indian world version. However, a culturally sophisticated reinterpretation of Goodman’s criteria should find an American Indian world numbered among the internally consistent, equally privileged, well-made actual worlds.

Chapter 4 concludes the argument for the legitimacy of an American Indian world version from a culturally sophisticated constructivist perspective through an examination of a Native conception of knowledge, for truth and verification within an American Indian world version are important to understanding the culturally informed criteria for an ultimately acceptable version. And, given that ultimate acceptability is sufficient for truth, and that true versions construct well-made actual worlds, I conclude that an American Indian world is, indeed, numbered among the internally consistent, equally privileged, well-made actual worlds and so it is worthy of philosophical treatment—and respect—from the Western perspective.