kiwaakomelepwa! nitesiθo Thomas Norton-Smith. saawanwa nilla no’ki ni m’soma peleawa. Greetings to you all! I am Thomas Norton-Smith. I am Shawnee and my clan is Turkey.

I present one possible interpretation of American Indian “philosophy” 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 account views Native philosophy through the lens of a culturally sophisticated constructivism grounded in the work of contemporary analytic philosopher Nelson Goodman.

I should begin by saying something about the Western philosophical tradition and my work’s curious place within it. The Western intellectual tradition deserves a close political analysis from a Native standpoint, and contemporary American Indian critics are now engaging in that task. 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. Insofar as my interpretation builds a bridge between Native and Western philosophies, it has something to offend everyone. And insofar as my work seeks to reconcile Native and Western world versions in my own mind, it
cannot help but be biographical. Any errors are mine alone, and 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.

There are several significant challenges to my project, many of which I consider in the “Burden”—the working title of my book. The most sobering—perhaps insurmountable challenge—arises because of a fundamental 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*—though the use of language and other symbol systems. In other words, there are no facts without a conceptualizing intellect utilizing some system of description. Thus, speakers of radically different languages will construct radically different worlds. *Different words make different worlds.* So, any Western translation of a Native language will recast Native thought into the conceptual categories—hence, the ontology—of Western language. So, no non-Native translation or account—including mine—can completely capture the underlying Native ontological, epistemological and axiological beliefs and values. My account is, at best, a “rational reconstruction.”

I begin by rehearsing Goodman’s view that there are many actual worlds constructed by ultimately acceptable world versions. But then I observe that his criteria for such world-constructing versions are biased against any non-Western world version. I finally present a “rational reconstruction” of a Native philosophy understood as four world-ordering principles constructing an American Indian world.
2. Nelson Goodman’s Constructivism

On a fine spring morning in May—now six years ago—I looked out the back door and saw some critters around the backyard bird feeder. Here is a picture of them:

![Cardinals at the feeder](image)

Now, I’m no ornithologist, but I am a fairly competent at identifying backyard flora and fauna. The morning light was bright, my eyesight was not impaired, and the distinctive red color, black eye-patch and topnotch were together a dead giveaway. The fact is that there were three cardinals around the feeder. That fact makes true the statement that there were three cardinals around the feeder; and, given that my true belief is justified, I know that that there were three cardinals around the feeder.

Here are some more facts with their corresponding truths: The cardinal on the feeder was red; there were two cardinals on the ground; there was one kind of bird—the
cardinal—exemplified by the birds around the feeder; the feeder was not moving; and there were no persons around the feeder.

Remarkably, my stationary bird feeder with its avian guests was also moving at a blazing 67,000 miles/hour, the speed at which the Earth races around the sun. How, then, are two contradictory statements, “The bird feeder did not move” and “The bird feeder moved,” true in virtue of two competing facts? I reject out of hand that the real fact of the matter is that the Earth is racing at a reckless speed, so that my belief that the feeder did not move is really false, for I have as much evidence for a stationary Earth as did Aristotle. Neither I, my feeder, nor you is moving. I am not advocating a return to a pre-Copernican view of planetary motion; nor am I interested in embracing the multi-millennial distinction between appearance and reality—that is, it appears to be stationary, but it’s really moving. Instead, I embrace constructivism, which maintains that the notion of a mind-independent world of facts is mistaken. A fact is “fabricated,” as Goodman famously put it (1978: 91ff). Truth, understood as a correspondence relation between statements and mind-independent facts, fares no better.

The speciousness of the bare fact as an epistemological foundation—compellingly argued by Berkeley and Kant—is a common theme in constructivist thought, as the pure content of sense experiences alone underdetermines how the world really is. Indeed, one cannot even describe what the pure given might be apart from the order or structure imposed by a description, for, of course, one must employ a description in the account. (1978: 6). Thus, the question whether my feeder is really moving or not is empty, for without a system of description, there is no fact.
Now, if our sense experiences underdetermine reality, there are many possible versions of my backyard scene that are consistent with my experiences—but which sound very odd—for English speakers are used to a single linguistically informed ontological interpretation. In a world version wherein “red” is regarded as an intransitive verb like “moves,” the statement “The cardinal atop the feeder redded” is true. In another version employing the predicate “grue” (where a thing is grue if it is either green or blue) it is true that “The cardinal atop the feeder was not grue.” “There were three individual cardinals at the feeder, but no natural kind—the cardinal—they exemplified” is true in a nominalist version, and if we suppose a world version wherein “cardinal” is a mass term like “water” or “gold,” then it is true that “There was cardinal at the feeder.” We’ve already seen that “The feeder moved” is a fact according to a heliocentric frame of reference. These are some odd facts indeed, for most contradict our habit of thinking and talking about the world, our preferred linguistically categorized and ordered world version—but not one of them is inconsistent with the content of our sense experiences.

While curious to a Western ontological conception of the world, some of these facts and their corresponding truths are very much at home in Native versions. Algonquin languages like Shawnee have no verb “to be,” treating English predicates such as “red” as intransitive verbs (Rick Wagar in correspondence). So, a Shawnee speaker commenting on my backyard scene might say “meci skwaawa,” expressing about the cardinals the fact that “They redded.” As well, the Shawnee stem “skipaky-“ applies to a thing if it is either blue or green—or better said, if the thing either blues or greens. (Voegelin 1939: 314). Perhaps most remarkable difference between Western and Native versions is this: While “There were no persons around the feeder” is true in the Western
version, in the Native world version the fact is that there were three persons around the feeder.

Space prohibits discussing the various ways that experiences are ordered—naming, predicing, collecting, and patterning among them; you’ll just have to buy the book. I turn instead to Goodman’s ontological pluralism, the view that there are many actual ontologically diverse, yet equally privileged worlds constructed by world versions. But not every world version constructs an actual world; Tolkien’s version does not create middle-earth. In the absence truth to sort right versions from wrong ones, ultimate acceptability must do, where ultimately acceptable world versions satisfying a number of conditions make actual worlds. First, if a version violates the standards of deductive validity, it is unacceptable, and if it violates the standards of inductive rightness it is likewise unacceptable. The utility of a version is a third standard of acceptability, and simplicity over rivals is a forth. Finally—and crucially—if a version is empty, then it is unacceptable, for when a version is empty, there is no perceptual content to be identified, categorized and organized by language and other symbol systems.

The problem I expose is that all of Goodman’s criteria for the ultimate acceptability of a world version—except non-emptiness—are culturally determined, so they beg the question against any non-Western world version, especially a Native one. However, I argue in the “Burden” that a culturally sophisticated understanding of Goodman’s criteria finds an American Indian world version ultimately acceptable, hence numbered among the equally privileged, well-made actual worlds.

Consider, for example, Goodman’s culturally informed criterion of inductive rightness—which supports Western versions. Acceptable world versions project only
well-entrenched predicates, like “green” over “grue”; “All emeralds are green” is confirmed by past observations, but not “All emeralds are grue.” More importantly, acceptable world versions routinely project exquisitely well-established regularities with great confidence. Who—besides a sophistical quibbler—would question whether “All men are mortal”? However, from an Indian perspective, the Western confidence in projecting well-established regularities is both exceptional and breathtaking, for Native induction is more cautious in its projections; the possibility of a non-mortal man is a real possibility. (Deloria 2004, 6) This kind of caution in drawing inductive conclusions—a caution that makes a Native world version unacceptable according to Goodman’s criteria—reveals a deep ontological belief about the nature of the constructed world, and especially about how relatedness is employed as a way to categorize and organize the world—as a world ordering principle.

The Western ontological assumption about the world is that it is material and inanimate, mechanical and rational, amenable to quantitative description and governed by fixed physical laws. It is orderly, fixed and finished. No wonder the natural assumption—expressed by the principle of induction—is that a very well-established regularity will extend into unobserved regions of space and time. All men are mortal. However, the Native version constructs a world that is creative and animate, dynamic and purposeful, interconnected, unfixed and unfinished. Because the constructed world is animate, creative and constantly unfolding, it would be hasty to extend even the most well-established regularity into the future without continual reexamination.

The Indian world version also informs how experience is categorized and organized into relevant kinds. Because all sorts of entities in the Native constructed
world are alive and *interconnected*, the process of right categorization is ongoing and evolving. However, unlike their Western counterparts, Native constructors of an interconnected and interdependent world *actively* search for the newly emergent, previously overlooked, unexpected and strikingly unusual connections between experiences. The panoply of relevant kinds constantly evolves because of the ontological conviction that *everything is related*.

Because Native observers of the world actively search for relationships in organizing experience—that is, employ *relatedness as a world ordering principle*—connections between apparently disparate experiences are recognized as relevant and employed for practical purposes. Vine Deloria tells a story about one such connection, recognized by the Pawnee, between the maturing of the seed pods of the milkweed during the late summer hunt on the high plains and the immanent maturing of the corn crop in their villages some distance away (1999: 35). According to Deloria, the Pawnee had *perceived a plant relationship*, using the milkweed as an indicator plant to tell how the corn crop was progressing. *I say that in the Pawnee world version there was a useful relationship constructed between milkweed and corn maturing experiences.*

Goodman’s other criteria for the ultimate acceptability of a world version—save non-emptiness—are no more culturally aware, so they beg the question against a Native version.

### 3. *A Second “Common Theme”: An Expansive Conception of Persons*

A deeply ingrained Western conviction—reinforced by science, religion, and common sense—is that human beings are different in kind from nonhuman animals. But
cultural anthropologists and ethnographers often observe that American Indian traditions regard human beings and other nonhuman animals as in some way equal. “They do not separate man from the beast,” says J. W. Powell, “[s]o the Indian speaks of ‘our race’ as of the same rank with the bear race, the wolf race or the rattlesnake race” (1877: 10). But what Powell regards as a “very curious and interesting fact” is an often repeated misinterpretation. Instead, a recurring theme in Native traditions is an expansive conception of persons, in which nonhuman animals—and other sorts of other-than-human beings—are recognized as persons in a sense as robust as a Western conception of human persons. Thus, the value of human beings is not diminished, but the value of other kinds of entities in the world is enhanced. (Deloria 1994: 89-90).

A Native expansive conception of persons in which not only animals but plants and places, physical forces and cardinal directions, even the Sun, Moon and Earth are persons is clearly different from various Western conceptions in which only humans are persons. Perhaps remarkably, I find elements of philosopher Ross Poole’s (1996) Western conception of a personhood in an Indian conception, namely, that (1) personhood does not constitute the essence of a human being; (2) an entity is a person by virtue of its membership and participation in a network of social and moral relationships and practices with other persons; and (3) moral agency is at the core of personhood. There are, then, two questions that need to be carefully distinguished as we proceed. First, what is essential to being human qua animate entity in the Native worldview? Second, what is essential to personhood?

First, human beings qua animate beings are essentially spirit beings—who just happen to have a changeable outward human form—and it is this which human beings
have in common with other animate beings. It is usually at this juncture that the skeptical Western scientific and philosophical minds guffaw, then disengage, because the claim has nothing but the air of the supernatural—which endangers, by the way, our constructivist claim that the American Indian world version is nonempty. For, apparently one cannot perceive a spirit, so the predicate “spirit” is empty. In response, I argue that the experiential content of the Native concept manitou is analogous to the experiential content of the Western concept mind. And if there are no constructivist qualms about minds, then manitouki should not be rejected out of hand, simply because they seem to be supernatural by Western lights.

I have mental experiences, so the predicate “mind” is not empty. Although I do not have direct access to the beliefs and desires, private internal conversations and secret unspoken aspirations of other human beings—although I cannot directly experience the minds of others—I know other human beings have minds. I rehearse the familiar argument if one is required: I exhibit outward behaviors in conjunction with and sometimes caused by my mental events. I grimace when in pain, blush with the occasional lie and smile when I think of Linda. But I see others exhibiting the same sorts of outward behaviors; others grimace, blush and smile. I infer, then, from their outward signs that other human beings have pains, sometimes play fast-and-loose with the truth, and think fondly of their mates just as I do when I behave in similar ways; I infer from the outward sign that other human beings have minds like I do. So, there is pretty good empirical evidence—though not the conclusive evidence demanded by the curmudgeon in the philosophy department—that other human beings have minds.
Now, the Native speaker experiences her own animation, so “manitou,” like “mind,” is not empty. As an animate being, she eats pemmican and sometimes smokes, shivers in the cold and sweats in the heat, and has a living body now that will probably die. She directly experiences other human beings eating and smoking, living and dying, and she infers from their outward signs that they, too, are animate. So she knows that other human beings have manitouki as well. But human beings are not alone in eating and shivering, living and dying; nor are they alone in exhibiting the kinds of behaviors indicative of animation. Other things in the world—animal, plant and place, physical force and cardinal direction—are experienced to be or to act as animate beings; they have manitouki too. And exactly like the deeply ingrained Western conviction that other human beings have minds, the notion that things appearing to act as animate things do not have manitouki would strike our traditional Algonquin speaker as bizarre—manitouki are a part of the American Indian constructed world.

In the American Indian worldview, then, personhood does not constitute the essence of a human being qua animate being. Instead, an animate being is a person by virtue of its membership and participation in a network of social and moral relationships and practices with other persons, so moral agency is at the core of a Native conception of persons. This means that one cannot be a person in isolation in Native traditions, even with something like Lockean self-reflection or Kantian rationality. However a significant difference from Poole’s Western conception is that membership in the network of social and moral relationships goes well beyond the merely human to include many other sorts of nonhuman persons—some very powerful, like Kokumthena and Coyote—not to mention their plant and animal siblings, the ancestors, and the manitouki of particular
places. It is participation in this concrete nexus of moral relationships and obligations—more akin to kinship relationships than to the contractual relationships in Western accounts of persons—that constitutes their personhood.

4. The Semantic Potency of Performance

One must participate in those performances and practices that sustain both social relationships and religious ceremonies to be Shawnee. In my own experience, going to the Shawnee grounds is not just showing up; it means very long travel, reconnecting with folks, receiving counsel from elders, listening to the stories, sharing the evening feast, remembering those who have passed—and then there’s the raffle. More importantly, going to ceremony means participating in purifications and prayers, in the ritual ball and hoop games, and sometimes even in the dance. Being Shawnee means performing the ceremonies.

Now, the notion that participation in ceremony—playing a part in ritual performance—is important to being Shawnee should not be such a foreign notion; indeed, many a bride and groom have participated in a wedding ceremony with profound ontological consequences; the ceremony transforms its participants and empowers its symbols—the vows and rings among them. Likewise, Native ceremonies and performances are transformative and empowering. More generally, performances have the power to categorize and order, or re-categorize and reorder—in short, create and recreate—the American Indian world.

The function of a symbol is the same in Western and American Indian traditions. Whether a national flag, a wedding ring, the written text of the Gettysburg Address, a
Dine sand painting, the Lakota pipe, or a Native dream or vision experience—all symbolic entities—a symbol is something that *stands for or denotes something else.* But while a symbol can be meaningful, *the symbol is largely impotent unless it is performed*—and this insight is at the heart of the semantic potency of performance. Consider that the wedding ring in the jeweler’s case is certainly symbolic, as is the text of a traditional wedding vow. Yet neither of them have any power until they play a part in a wedding ceremony, that is, until there is a performance with them. The acts of speaking the vow and giving the ring in ceremony empower the symbols and effect a transformation of the participants—and the creation of all sorts of new relationships and obligations. Likewise, the Lakota pipe is symbolic, but it is not fully potent until it is used in performance in the offering ceremony, and the power of a Dine sand painting is not realized until it is utilized in a healing (Gill 1982: 62-66).

The performance with a symbol imbues the symbol with power, but there are other related and interconnected influences and results. Performances with symbols can create and reinforce social and moral relationships—as in the Western performance with wedding vows and rings—and in the Native performances of naming, dancing, and gifting, which I explore at length in the “Burden.” A performance can enhance or reaffirm the significance of a symbol itself, as when the entire stadium rises to the flag and sings the national anthem. Goals can be achieved by the performance with a symbol, as in Dine sand painting cures or ceremonies to restore balance or equilibrium in the world or in the People. A performance with a symbol can enhance one’s emotional understanding, as when a mourner touches the flag-draped coffin of his father during the funeral ceremony.
Perhaps the most profound and fundamental American Indian world creating performance is the speech act in its many forms, including saying prayers and singing sacred songs, and especially telling stories. Indeed, it would be fair to say that a speech act plays a central role in almost all other Native performances and ceremonies. In the speech act, one performs with meaningful symbols—words, of course—but the performance of the words in ceremony empowers them and is transformative. The text of the Gettysburg Address is certainly meaningful; but only when performed in the dedication ceremony of the battlefield did the words have the power to sanctify and transform the place into a sacred site.

5. Circularity as a World Ordering Principle

Before continuing, this constructivist point deserves an explicit statement: We create patterns in experience rather than discover them—as anyone familiar with constellations in the night sky knows. But there are, as well, different ways we can order temporal experiences.

Now, contrary to the popular view that the Western tradition regards events in time as the most significant while American Indians regard places in space as the most meaningful, I propose that there are equally significant conceptions of both time and space—and both event and place—in each tradition. What is importantly different, however, is the most “natural” ordering principle each tradition uses to pattern both temporal and spatial experiences. And it is here where a stereotype may hold a grain of truth: The Western tradition is fond of a linear ordering principle, while Natives tend to employ a circular ordering principle. (Fixico 2003: 42)
In American Indian traditions, circularity orders both temporal and spatial sense experiences, and so virtually all facets of Native life. Indeed, it is sometimes hard to distinguish the temporal from the spatial in an Indian circular ordering of experiences. Notice, for example, that it is universally acknowledged that indigenous peoples are very close observers of the natural world and all of the cycles in its workings—seasonal cycles, lunar phases, animal migrations and the growth of various plants. Indeed, they had to observe, create and operate in accordance with seasonal patterns, with cyclical patterns imposed on *temporal* experiences—the ripening of berries in spring, late summer corn harvests, autumn migrations and winter hunts—in order to survive. But such seasonal circular orderings are also *spatial* orderings—harvests and hunts are events in both time *and* space. As a result, American Indian traditions came to regard cycles and circles as the primary temporal *and* spatial ordering principle, to develop “tribal philosophies based on the circle,” as Fixico puts it (49).

Circularity as a principle that orders temporal and spatial experiences shapes and patterns all other facets of American Indian life, especially social life and practice—well beyond the more obvious circular orientation of Native camps, towns and stomp grounds (Fixico 2003: 43). The cycle of the seasons determined most important tribal activities—foraging or planting, harvests or hunts—and in so doing assigned seasonal responsibilities to various tribal members; women are responsible for cultivation and it falls to men to hunt. As well, ceremonies and rituals, like the Shawnee spring and fall Bread Dances, are occasioned by the seasons. This means that Shawnee sacred places, where the People are obligated to return again and again at specific times to perform ceremonies of gratitude and renewal for the good of human and nonhuman persons alike,
are imbued with both temporal and spatial circularities—and significance. Gifting practices, wherein one is obligated to give, receive and reciprocate a gift—and a performance which itself orders the American Indian world version—also embodies the circular pattern (53).

6. The Dance of Person and Place

Persons dancing at particular places and times literally make and remake the American Indian world, as when the Shawnee dance the Bread Dance. In a world that is neither mechanistic nor material, neither fixed nor finished, but is, rather, animate and aware, dynamic and unfolding, where creativity is the moving force and where “all things are related,” persons participating in their required dances at the specified times and places return balance to and gratefully reaffirm their place—and the places of all other human and nonhuman persons—in that world.

More importantly, the dance of person and place serves as a metaphor for the way an American Indian world is made. Dance and all sorts of procedures, practices and performances can identify, categorize and order sense experiences; we have called this the semantic potency of performance. Persons are animate “spirit beings” standing in a nexus of relationships—relationships grounded in and sustained by respect—with all sorts of human and nonhuman persons, including powerful spirit persons embodied as places, physical forces and cardinal directions, passed ancestors, nonhuman animals and plants—even the Earth itself. We have called this the expansive conception of persons.

I agree with the common observation that sacred places are central to Native religious traditions, but I do not agree that this evidenced the supposed dichotomy
between Indian space, place and nature and Western time, event and history. Instead, I maintained that the real distinction between the two traditions is in the most natural ordering principles each uses to order experiences, with Native traditions naturally ordering using a circular ordering principle. Finally, and perhaps the most important for understanding the American Indian worldview, is relatedness as a world ordering principle. There are connections and interconnections, dependencies and interdependencies between dances and persons and places because “we are all related.”

Bibliography


