

13. I was prompted to think about this by a recent conversation with Lydia Patton about Lewis's conception of analyticity. See Robert Sinclair (2012), Thomas Baldwin (2013), and Sean Morris (2017) for more on Lewis, Quine, and the analyticity debate.

14. See Olen and Sachs (2017, 6–7) for a brief discussion of Lewis's waning influence. Heney (2017, 54–9) insightfully addresses the question about reasons for the neglect of Lewis.



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American Indian Thought: Philosophical Essays

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American Indian Thought is a contemporary collection of twenty-two essays written by Indigenous persons with Western philosophical training, all attempting to formulate, and/or contribute to a sub-discipline of, a Native American Philosophy.¹ The contributors come from diverse tribal, educational, philosophical, methodological, etc., backgrounds, and there is some tension among aspects of the collection, but what is more striking is the harmony and the singularity of the collection's intent. Part of this singularity may derive from the solidarity among its authors. In addition to the fact that all belong to Indigenous tribes, there is also a striking sensitivity to the interconnection between distinct Western disciplines—particularly between philosophy and poetry. I take the latter to be a thread which can be strategically woven into the center of the anthology's weave.

In this book discussion, I aim to draw out the poetic aspects of five of the anthology's essays, which deal with philosophy, metaphysics, epistemology, ethics and aesthetics, respectively. In this way, I hope to illuminate a poetic quality at the heart of the collection, and thus also of the burgeoning field of Native American or Indigenous philosophy in general. In the process, I will also consider ways in which Indigenous philosophy resonates with the Western philosophical traditions of phenomenology and American pragmatism. With the latter tradition in particular this connection has become more fully appreciated, especially through the work of Bruce Wilshire and Scott Pratt.²

Before I begin my discussion of selected chapters from the anthology, I will first introduce it using the third chapter, V. F. Cordova's "Approaches to Native American Philosophy." An excellent preface to the subject of poetry and philosophy in Indigenous thought can be

found in her essay's closing metaphor. It is modification of Ludwig Wittgenstein's metaphor for philosophy as therapy, namely philosophy as a means to "help the fly to escape from the bottle." Reacting to Wittgenstein's quote, Cordova notes that an Indigenous person who lives in the contemporary U.S., insofar as they are functionally a member of two distinct worlds, is a fly trapped in not one, but two, bottles. Thus, their challenge becomes—not how to escape from one bottle—but how to travel successfully between two.³ The Indigenous person, writes Cordova, "has become expert, in order to survive, at flying in and out of two bottles" (30). While in Wittgenstein's original metaphor, the bottle is a system of philosophy, in Cordova's revision it is a philosophically-structured world. The exact relationship between the two bottles is unclear; perhaps they are united at their open ends, or perhaps the Indigenous bottle is currently nested inside the Western bottle. In any event, the Indigenous philosopher-fly is what María Lugones calls a "world-traveler" among worlds.

Compared to Indigenous persons in general, Indigenous philosophers are, as a result of their extensive Western education, particularly problematic beings, as they cannot sustain themselves in any static and permanent way due to the cognitive dissonance created by the two incommensurable worldviews. While this is true for everyone to some degree, for Indigenous philosophers it is true to a much greater degree, because the philosophical systems of their formal education are those of the same colonizers who marginalized and almost eradicated them, along with their Indigenous philosophies. This in turn necessitates the constant shifting/relocating motion poetically rendered as the fly flying in and out of two bottles. In other words, the impossibility of the Native American philosopher (and thereby of Native American philosophy) necessitates a constant spatial and poetic redistribution.

Overall, Cordova's essay can be understood as a preface to Indigenous philosophy which demonstrates (or creates) the impossibility of Indigenous philosophy, and thus suggests that only a process of prefacing of philosophy is possible, at least for anyone in the position of the Indigenous philosopher. Put differently, Indigenous philosophy can be described as prefacing, the poetic motion of always "approaching" but never fully arriving at Western philosophy, and vice versa. In short, all philosophy, for Cordova, is pre-philosophy, all philosophy is a prefacing—a prefacing of the secular by the religious, of the Platonic by the Homeric, of the philosophical by the poetic. Put in terms of the bottle metaphor, one can only play glassblower while standing inside another glass, creating transparent art within an encompassing transparency (though the latter is invisible to those born into the outermost bottle). One can only begin to philosophize within a given philosophy, itself shaped in part by the religion and poetry of its own origins.

With this in mind, I now turn to five essays that discuss philosophy, metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and aesthetics, respectively. In each case, my focus will be on the role of poetry.

I. Deloria on Poetic Indigenous Philosophy

As noted by Robert J. Conley, in his *The Cherokee Nation: A History*, “Vine Deloria, Jr., a Sioux from the Standing Rock Reservation in South Dakota, published *Custer Died for Your Sins: an Indian Manifesto* in 1969 and became an instant celebrity” (216).⁴ And by the end of his long career, he had become for the last 100 years, in the words of Charles F. Wilkinson, “the most important person in Indian affairs, period.”⁵ Deloria’s chapter is structured around a “Them v. Us” dichotomy, in which the “Us” is Westerners, the “Them” is Indigenous persons, and the “v” (of “versus”) is a conflict perpetrated by the West. Deloria first identifies the origin of this dichotomy, then explores why it is still in force, and concludes by delineating the content of the Indigenous “Them” paradigm.

Deloria opens his essay by remarking that philosophy, “this last bastion of white male supremacy does not admit members easily and the roadblocks ahead are of such magnitude that it is doubtful that very much will be accomplished” (3). He then adds that the Indigenous people who have been essentially excluded from the bastion of philosophy are part of a larger group (i.e., all non-Westerners) that makes the bastion possible. For example, the Africana enslaved peoples have been banned from the very same ivory tower that only their forced labor could have constructed—or, in the larger context of the “West,” the European Ivory Tower was made possible and remains sustained by colonialism, having been facilitated before that by the labor of serfs during medieval scholasticism, from its origins in Greek and Roman slavery.⁶ In Deloria’s words, “the stereotype of primitive peoples anchors the whole edifice of Western social thought” (3).

Deloria then notes the considerable lack of consensus as to what an “American Indian Philosophy” should even look like:

When we speak of American Indian philosophy today, we are probably talking about several generations of Indian people who have popular notions of what Indian philosophy might have been or might become within the Western philosophical enterprise. (4)

Though there are significant differences among the various Native American philosophies, they nevertheless share important family resemblances vis-à-vis the dominant traditions of European philosophy. Moreover, many of those differences have been effaced and lost as a result of European conquest and genocide. Returning to the “Us vs. Them” dichotomy, Deloria argues that there are reasons that explain

this dichotomy on a theoretical level. First, the “doctrinal exclusion of certain kinds of phenomena by the West has no basis except the superstition that certain things cannot exist” (7). The West is not nearly as open, for Deloria, as Indigenous cultures are: “Tribal peoples include all forms of life in their body of evidence from the very beginning, so their concepts must be more precise and involve considerably more evidence” (8).

The remainder of Deloria’s essay is devoted to explicating elements of Indigenous philosophy that differentiate it from its Western counterpart. Briefly put, the West poetically (creatively, strategically, deceptively) produces a fictitious “savage Indian”—keeping in mind that, based on Deloria’s explicit philosophical commitment to contextualism, the philosophy of the West is for him inextricable from its conquest and genocide of Indigenous peoples, along with the continuing aftermath—and uses that fiction to justify a false dichotomy between the West and the “Indians,” which dichotomy the Indigenous peoples nevertheless validate in their (thus far) ineffectual counterattack against it, insofar as they utilize the philosophical weapons of the West, while simultaneously rejecting experienced Western allies.

Put differently, the West poetically creates the West-Native distinction, but Indigenous poeticity problematizes its own attempts to be more Westernly philosophical, not recognizing that it can best contribute to Western philosophy by loudly proclaiming its own (Indigenous) poetry. In this way, the sound of the poetry in Indigenous philosophy can help Western philosophers hear the poetry that is often hushed or drowned out within Western philosophy. To use a different metaphor, Indigenous philosophy’s poetic colors can draw the Western eye to its own spectrum, subdued though the latter has become in its poetry-denying history.

II. Verney on Poetic Indigenous Metaphysics

Marilyn Notah Verney defines Indigenous philosophy as, simply, “the beliefs and teachings of my people” (133). (Note the use of the first person in making an academic claim.) She then defines Indigenous metaphysics as “the metaphysics of respect (interdependency)” which sustains “our fundamental relations with Mother Earth,” adding that these are “relations of equality” (135).

More specifically, Indigenous metaphysics, for Verney, consists of the following three elements: (1) Respect, (2) Interdependency, and (3) Equality. If these were principles of an ethics, they would make an uncontroversial addition to a Western system of ethics. But in a Western metaphysical system, they would be entirely out of place. This incompatibility results principally from the fact that a worldview in which the principles of ethics can be appropriately extended to metaphysics is a worldview that regards all of reality as having the structure

of personhood, whereas the West does not tend to view reality, the universe, the cosmos as a person.

For Indigenous philosophy, the entire universe has the kind of being which makes it a fitting recipient of our respect, and an equal partner in our mutual interdependency. In this view, reality is a multiplicity, the parts of which relate to each other as ethical beings, treating each other with respect, depending on each other, and relating to each other as equals. Therefore, although Indigenous metaphysics offers an ethics of considerable depth, attributing personhood to all aspects of reality, as a metaphysical “system” it remains on the surface of reality, refusing to descend to the depths of matter, mind, first principles, etc., which are so highly regarded in traditional Western metaphysics.

To summarize Verney’s chapter, Indigenous metaphysics is not “deep” philosophy, but “shallow” communal beliefs and teachings. It might be characterized, therefore, as a poetically anti-metaphysical metaphysics, staying on the level of interdependency and respect among equals. Put differently, Indigenous metaphysics is a two-dimensional metaphysics, a poetic horizontality. In short, it is a “surface” or “horizontal” metaphysics, the structure of which problematizes the alleged “depth” of Western metaphysics.

III. Burkhart on Poetic Indigenous Epistemology

Brian Yazzie Burkhart’s chapter in the anthology begins by enumerating four principles of Indigenous epistemology: (1) the principle of relatedness, (2) the principle of the limits of questioning, (3) the meaning-shaping principle of action, and (4) the moral universal principle. Burkhart then dramatizes all four using the Southwestern Trickster figure, Coyote, who is described as a philosopher in many American Indian stories. The reasons for this, Burkhart elaborates, is “because Coyote wonders about things, about how they really work. Often in doing so, however, he forgets his place in the world; he does not remember how he is related” (15). Two things are worthy of note for my purposes. First, as with Aristotle, for Burkhart Indigenous philosophy begins in wonder. And second, Coyote’s comical predicaments poetically show us the critical importance of relatedness. Burkhart clarifies the latter point with reference to the first named Greek philosopher, Thales, who allegedly fell into a well while gazing thoughtfully heavenward. Coyote, “like Thales,” Burkhart writes, “is made fun of for his actions, actions that arise from his dislocation *vis-à-vis* the world around him” (15).

This point is buttressed by analyses drawing on other Native American tribes. As J. T. Garrett notes,

The rabbit in early Cherokee stories is like the coyote of some West and Southwest tribes. He is always getting himself into trouble but

he always seems to get out of things all right. Ironically, the rabbit always surprises himself that he manages to get himself free of his own bolstering and tricks...The rabbit always got caught in his lies and deception. (78 [quoting an Elder])⁷

Like Aristotle, the trickster rabbit is admired for his intelligence. But like Thales, the rabbit is also mocked for his (at least sometimes) self-undermining ways of being in the world.

Returning to Burkhart's analysis of Coyote, this figure "also shows us that the questions we choose to ask are more important than any truths we might hope to discover in asking such questions" (16). In this light, Burkhart defines the second principle, "the limits of questioning principle," as follows: "The way in which we ask questions (the way in which we act toward our relations) guides us then, to the right answers, rather than the other way around wherein what is true directs the method of questioning and the question itself" (16). As is the case with the philosophical method of phenomenology, the subject of the inquiry guides us to its truth, not the truth to the right subject. Unlike much of phenomenology, however, the subject matter guiding the questioning in Indigenous philosophy is not an isolated object, but rather an embodied, enmeshed network of relations.

In regard to this second principle, Burkhart further observes that questions are often seen as symptomatic of self-created problems (rather than as neutral vehicles for seeking truth):

American Indian philosophy has a very different relationship to questions and question-formation than does its Western counterpart. It is generally thought by Native philosophers that questions are most often a sign of confusion and misunderstanding. The answer to a question often lies in the question itself rather than in some solution outside of the question. (17)

This "limits-of-questioning" principles also includes what I will term "poetic agnosticism," defined as the claim that there is a proper boundary to our knowledge, not merely in terms of our ability to know, but also in terms of what it is right, appropriate, beneficial to know. "From the American Indian perspective," Burkhart writes, "our knowledge is not limited since we have as much as we should" (18). Put in terms of Hume's is/ought distinction, "ought" rather than "is" determines the boundaries of human knowledge—or, more precisely, the "ought" makes what Western philosophy would call epistemological "limits" unnecessary or unreal. To illustrate this point with a non-epistemological example, the inability to fly is not a limitation of our human powers; on the contrary, it is simply not part of what it is to be human.

The third principle, “the meaning-making principle of action,” Burkhart defines as follows: “We participate in the meaning-making of our world. . . what we do, how we act, is as important as any truth and any fact” (16–17). Note the prioritization, central to the Western tradition of American pragmatism, of *praxis*. Meanings and truths are not static, objective, and permanent; they are dynamic, temporal, and sociocultural creations, bound up with traditions which can also fail.

Finally, Burkhart fleshes out his fourth principle, which holds that everything in the universe has an ethical, or moral dimension. “Facts, truth, meaning, even our existence,” he writes, “are normative” (17). There are, for Indigenous epistemology, no value-free “observation sentences” or “eternal sentences” of science. Rather, “all investigation is moral investigation. The guiding question for the entire philosophical enterprise is consequently: what is the right road for humans to walk?” (17). With Levinas, then, the Indigenous philosopher affirms that “Ethics is indeed first philosophy.” This fourth principle also resonates strongly with American pragmatism, particularly Dewey’s views on the inseparability of facts and values.

In all of this it is Coyote’s misbehavior, and the sticky ramifications thereof, that are most relevant. “[W]e are supposed to learn,” Burkhart writes, “from Coyote’s mistake, which is not letting what is right. . . guide his actions, but rather acting solely on the basis of his own wants and desires (16). What is crucial is that Coyote’s immoral (amoral) self-interest is fundamentally at odds with our pervasively moral cosmos. That is why his schemes fail, not to punish him, but because that’s how the cosmos works—morally.

The rest of Burkhart’s essay is devoted to the nature of knowledge, the consequences that follow from it, and the relationship of this view of the nature of knowledge to the Western tradition of phenomenology. The four primary characteristics of the nature of knowledge for Indigenous philosophies are that it is (1) lacking in principles, (2) non-propositional, (3) experiential, and (4) embodied. Skipping over Burkhart’s elaboration of these four points, I note the most relevant consequences that he derives therefrom. To wit, in Indigenous philosophy, the distinction between philosophy and poetry shows itself to be fundamentally arbitrary and unnecessary. “And just as American Indian medicine is best described in Western terms as magic, philosophy is, perhaps, best described as poetry” (23). The magic native to medicine is restored, and the poetry that lies hidden at the heart of language emerges. As a result, the boundaries between specific Western disciplines and broader discursive worlds also become significantly blurred. “Because philosophy, literature, science, and religion are one in American Indian thought,” writes Burkhart, “we cannot truly separate

the medicine from the magic nor the philosophy from the poem” (23). Put differently, in a lived, embodied, practical, evolving relationship of inquiry with the world, and with no political reasons to introduce arbitrary divisions of labor between disciplines, such divisions never even appear in the first place.

In the final section of his chapter, Burkhart observes that, “American Indian philosophy finds a camaraderie with the tradition of phenomenology” (23). Specifically, for Burkhart, Indigenous philosophy resonates with the work of Edmund Husserl, and especially his conception of the lifeworld. “According to Husserl,” Burkhart explains, and contra static scientific materialism, “all science and knowledge come first from the lifeworld and must always return to it” (24). This forgetting by Western philosophy of the lifeworld, of the very ground of philosophy, Husserl labels a “crisis,” and “In many ways, this very crisis that Husserl describes also facilitates a loss of American Indian philosophy.” With the departure of the lifeworld, with the forgetting and denying of it, goes also the possibility for Western philosophy to recognize and valorize Indigenous philosophies. But with the historical emergence of phenomenology, such a possibility reopens.

In summary, for Burkhart Indigenous epistemology is a phenomenological enterprise that affirms Husserl’s lifeworld and the natural attitude (which affirmation is affirmed from within the phenomenological attitude), resists Descartes’ individualistic bias (according to the claims of the individual author), does not stop for theories or questions, and yet somehow generates the four principles of relatedness (poetic contextuality), limits of questioning (poetic agnosticism), meaning-shaping of action (poetic praxis), and moral universe (poetic holism), despite claiming that there are no principles in Indigenous epistemology. In short, Indigenous epistemology views knowledge as being of/in/by a poetically bound and integrated world.

IV. DuFour on Poetic Indigenous Ethics

John DuFour’s chapter begins with a clear and simple affirmation. “The central philosophical issue, as I understand it,” he writes, “concerns what morally responsible believing involves” (33). DuFour then introduces a distinction which he elaborates for the remainder of his text, namely that

between a truth-relevant merit that the content of a belief (or understanding) may have and an ethical merit that the *state* of believing (or understanding) may have. Let us name the first kind of merit *content merit* and the second *state merit*. (35, emphasis original)

DuFour then clarifies these two italicized concepts as follows:

State merit, for the purposes of this essay, concerns the ethical acceptability of the way one came to understand or believe, the basis upon which one formed a belief, or the process by which one came to believe something and by which one claims that understanding has been furthered. In short, “state merit” will refer to the *ethical* acceptability of how one came to understand, know, or believe something and “content merit” will refer to the *epistemic* acceptability of the content. (36)

The critical point, from an Indigenous perspective, is that one can be right for the wrong reason, or right through the wrong channels. In other words, to be “Indigenously right” is a broader concept than its Western equivalent, in the sense of being more demanding than the latter. To be Indigenously right, one must have both the epistemologically appropriate belief content and a content that was acquired in an ethically appropriate manner. Put in terms of Plato’s classical distinction between true belief and justified true belief, Indigenous true belief is true belief that is justified ethically as well as epistemologically.

One vital aspect of “the appropriate manner” is the social context in which the belief was formed. DuFour explains that “state merit can be systematically associated with certain social practices that embody an amalgamation of ethical and epistemic concerns” (36). The proper state in which to form a belief is usually a certain social practice, especially a ceremony or ritual. “The sort of social practice embodying ethical and epistemic concerns,” DuFour elaborates, “and which is the basis for determining state merit of beliefs or understanding, is what I call a ‘belief practice’” (36). There are three distinct “dimensions” to DuFour’s concept of a “belief practice”:

- (1) an understanding of what acts belong to the practice and how to perform and respond to those acts themselves; (2) explicit principles, rules, customs, considerations, or instructions; and (3) particular goals, projects, tasks, or appropriate emotions, feelings, and dispositions. (36–7)

In other words, every element of a ceremony or ritual—such as what costume to wear when performing a specific dance, what moves to make, when to make one’s entrance, etc.—is involved in the belief practice. To be ethical is for one’s beliefs to have both content and state merit, and ethical state merit must be constituted by a perfectly informed experience of a given belief practice.

To summarize DuFour’s ethical analysis, the acquisition state of beliefs, the poetic *how* behind the prose *what* is central, and

found in social practices. Ethics is more *how* than *what*, and more social (especially ritual) practice than individual position. In short, Indigenous ethics consists of *hows* that are rooted in a poetics of social practice.

V. Cordova on Poetic Indigenous Aesthetics

Consider the following chant from Cordova's essay, entitled "Ethics: From an Artist's Point of View":

In beauty (happily) I walk
 With beauty before me I walk
 With beauty behind me I walk
 With beauty below me I walk
 With beauty above me I walk
 It is finished (again) in beauty
 It is finished in beauty (254)⁸

Cordova interprets the above chant (or poem) for the reader, in regard to what she calls its "dual purpose." Its first purpose is that "it reminds one that the world is a place of beauty" (254). And its second purpose is the reminder that the world is not merely beautiful, but also an ordered whole. This duality has important consequences for the place and role of the artist in Indigenous societies: "The artist as scientist, even as healer," she writes, "is the Native American artist; he it is that occupies the ordered and measured universe" (252). The Indigenous artist is thus not primarily, as is their Western counterpart, a rebel, critic, outcast, or reformer—but a scientist and a healer. "In Native America," Cordova writes, "the artist is a scientist showing what others have not previously seen. The artist is a healer—bringing us into harmony when we might have fallen away" (254–255).

Further departing from Western artist stereotypes, for Indigenous cultures, according to Cordova, "the talented individual is not seen as a 'self-made' person. The talents are more likely the result of genetic chance" (253). Thus, if the artist is special, it is not in way that can be attributed to the person—the artist is not an independent hero. Cordova notes that, "'Being' as an artist is not a matter of learning a few techniques—it is a way of being" (253). Thus, an artist is not what they are able to do, but *how* they are.

Cordova then complicates this straightforward picture of the cosmos:

The Native American world is a world in constant transition—the world, in other words, is not a thing made once and finished. It is always in the process of *being*. "Being," for the Native American, is not a static state but one of motion and change. (253)

Thus, the world's order is a dynamic order, an order dominated by change and motion.

This brings the reader to the second purpose of the chant that opens Cordova's chapter: to remind us "also to add to that beauty" (254). Since the world is always changing and in motion, the artist also creates new beauty. "The artist, in bringing forth new creations," Cordova writes, "in effect is assisting in the creation of the world" (253). This is because, she explains, in the Indigenous view, "What is said is brought into being" (254). Here again one finds an affinity with the Western philosophical school of pragmatism, in this case in regard to the process metaphysics at pragmatism's heart, which affirms the world to be dynamic and changing, ever creating and created.

Also consonant with pragmatism, in Indigenous philosophy neither this creative power in general nor the human imagination in particular is completely wild or boundless. "In the Native American view," Cordova writes, "imagination is also subject to discipline" (254). Unlike the dominant Western view, the artist is not some free radical, but a controlled and responsible element of the evolving structured whole of the cosmos.

Then, just as this picture seems to resolve itself, Cordova makes an intriguingly different claim. "There is no distinction made in Native American societies," she writes, "between those who are called artists and those who are not" (253). In this light, it is difficult to say what the reader should make of Cordova's preceding commentary on the role and nature of the artist. Perhaps the most feasible interpretation would be that those commentaries are applicable to all persons, in a kind of early-Marxian, pan-artistic view of human nature (with the caveat that, as Cordova reminds the reader, "Many Native American groups do not consider children under the age of 5 as 'real persons'") (252). If so, then for Indigenous philosophy, all persons are scientists, healers, have a certain way of being, and are genetically gifted with certain talents.

Support for this interpretation can be found in another surprising claim from Cordova, appearing shortly after the preceding quote. "For the Native American," she writes, "there is not, nor can there be, a distinction between esthetics and ethics" (254). In terms of my pan-artistic interpretation, given the standard assumption that ethics' scope is universal to all human beings, and given that Cordova is affirming ethics as coextensive with aesthetics, perhaps it makes more sense for all humans to be artists, too. In further support of this interpretation is Cordova's closing of her chapter, with the following intriguing, personal metaphor:

My father described life as like constantly shifting sand. On that shifting sand I lay down a barrel and on that barrel I place a board. My duty is to stand astride that plank and maintain my balance as the sand shifts. (254)

One is tempted to apply this metaphor to Cordova's entire chapter as well, seeing it as a text of shifting sand, with a barrel of inherited languages, underneath a plank of concepts, on which Cordova, as ethical artist, dances. From this perspective, our duty as readers would be to maintain our interpretive balance, and to listen to our bodies as we struggle in our own responsive dances to remain astride. What we would seem to learn would be that boundaries between different concepts—Western/Indigenous, artist/scientist, artist/non-artist, aesthetics/ethics—are constantly being transgressed within Indigenous philosophy. All the while, the necessary scaffolding of order is maintained, albeit primarily by the flow of words rather than their rigid conceptual denotations.

To summarize Cordova's chapter, the world is ordered, and the artist is a scientific healer maintaining that order, but the world is also a dynamic process, and thus the artist also co-creates the world. But the creative imagination of the artist is also ordered, but there is no artist (as opposed to non-artists), and there is no distinction between aesthetics and ethics. Therefore, we are left with a metaphor of poetic order (chaotic cosmos), dancingly balancing on a board balanced on a barrel shifting in the disordered sand. Put differently, the world, the artist, the individual, and aesthetics are all caught up in a poetic transgression of boundaries. In short, Indigenous aesthetics is constituted by a spectrum of artist-to-worldwide poetic boundary-transgression.

VI. Conclusion: Indigenous Absence

To unify the above analysis, I offer a new term, "indigenous absence." Developed in my larger project on Cherokee philosophical history, "indigenous absence" means that, just as the indigenous Cherokee people (and many other Native American tribes) are the slandered, disenfranchised, suppressed and covered-over Indigenous peoples of the North American continent, poetry writ large (including Indigenous philosophy) is the slandered, disenfranchised, suppressed and covered-over *arche* of Western philosophy. That is, both Indigenous philosophy and culture, and poetry in general (by Westerners and the Indigenous), are indigenously absent. Put differently, just as there is an absence today in North America of most of the people indigenous to this continent, so there is an absence today in philosophy of most of the poetry that is indigenous to it; both are based on what was there first and yet continued to be denied.

To elaborate on the latter point, formality is indigenously absent from Indigenous philosophy vis-à-vis traditional Western philosophy. Indigenous philosophy, as represented within *American Indian Thought*, essentially lacks a set of abstract, purely formal principles that operate independently of embodied beings, concrete human practices, and the richness of nested contexts. Indigenous philosophy is therefore both

non-formal, and also informal, being closer to practical wisdom and concrete practices, and resisting the hierarchy and insulation that have marked academic philosophy at least since medieval scholasticism, and which dominates its current incarnation as a purportedly secular academic discipline.

In other words, ever since the Platonic Theory of Forms, there has been a tendency in (politically dominant forms of) Western philosophy to privilege form over content, and to assume that any sufficiently perfected form can be used to organize any content whatsoever, even when that organization takes the top-down form of the conquest of novel content by a colonizing form (such as the religious beliefs of Native American peoples by Western colonizers). Whereas in Indigenous philosophy there is a tendency to see forms and contents as inherently related, and to affirm a bottom-up method whereby a given content dynamically organizes itself in creative and singular ways. This is not to say, however, that there are not marginalized traditions in Western philosophy that resonate with Amerindian thought, including phenomenology and American pragmatism, drawing on pre-Platonic conceptions of *physis* and post-Platonic theorists of the *hyle* that (in Aristotle's memorable phrase) "yearns for and stretches out toward form."⁹

To summarize, that which is indigenous is essentially somewhere. Perhaps it has been there forever. It has, at the very least, been there for as long as anyone who is talking about the subject can remember. That which is absent is always already fixed in relation to a lost presence. That which is absent can never be a simple lack or without-ness. Frogs lack wings, but their wings are not absent. A woman does not merely lack her spouse one evening; her spouse is absent from their home. That which is indigenously absent has a place to which it is essential that it belongs, but from which place it is also essential that it has been absent for as long as anyone who is talking about it can remember, and perhaps for forever. From the perspective of the contemporary West, the Indigenous peoples of this continent, in relation to this continent (though many remain here)—and poetry, in relation to philosophy (though much of it remains here)—remain indigenously absent.

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NOTES

1. See also Donald Grind's enthusiastic and positive review in *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 41(4): 2005, 863–864.
2. Bruce Wilshire, *The Primal Roots of American Pragmatism: Phenomenology, and Native American Thought* (University Park: PA, Penn State University Press,

2000); Scott Pratt, *Native Pragmatism: Rethinking the Roots of American Philosophy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002).

3. María Lugones, "Playfulness, 'World'-Traveling, and Loving Perception," *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition against Multiple Oppressions* (Baltimore, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

4. Robert J. Conley, *The Cherokee Nation: A History* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008).

5. Quoted in Kirk Johnson's "Vine Deloria Jr., Champion of Indian Rights, Dies at 72," obituary in *The New York Times* (November 15, 2005).

6. See John Dewey, "Changing human nature," *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology* (New York: Modern Library, 1922), 119.

7. J. T. Garrett, *The Cherokee Full Circle: A Practical Guide to Sacred Ceremonies and Traditions* (Rochester, VT: Bear & Company, 2002).

8. Washington Matthews, translated form *The Night Chant* [circa 1900s], quoted by Ruth M. Underhill in *The Navajos*. Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1956, 212.

9. See Joe Sachs, "Introduction," *Aristotle's Physics: A Guided Study* (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 2004), 21.

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