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Rhythm as Logos in Native World-Ordering

Sierra Druley

In his book, *The Dance of Person and Place*, philosopher and scholar Thomas M. Norton-Smith defines a world-ordering process as one that creates patterns in sense experience through space and time. He posits two major world-ordering principles within the Native American worldview, relatedness and circularity. In this essay I argue that rhythm and its role in Native life serves as the impetus for both of Norton-Smith's world-ordering principles. I will show how rhythm, as presented initially by Lakota philosopher Robert Bunge, orders not only time but space as well and so can be understood as the logos that underpins the world-ordering principles of relatedness and circularity.

The indigenous peoples of North America had and continue to have many diverse cultures that emerged in response to varied social and ecological contexts. For the purposes of this essay I will speak of a "Native" worldview, but it is important to note that this worldview is a construct based on generalities made about a collection of distinct and autonomous nations. These

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generalities will be just as flawed and circumspect as those made about “European” or “Asian” cultures, but they do serve to illustrate some of the common themes in American Indian philosophy. The authors that I draw from write about particular tribes but they also address American Indian thought in general. What we find to be important, here, are the common philosophical and cultural threads between many tribes that, when taken together, constitute what we will call the “Native” worldview.

Part I: Norton-Smith and World-Ordering Principles

Thomas M. Norton-Smith introduces world-ordering principles as part of the larger process of world-organizing, which includes construction, deconstruction, weighting and ordering. Together, these processes are the mechanisms for world-creation through which cultures develop a functional understanding of how the world works, and their place within it. For the purposes of this study we will focus specifically on the process of ordering: the sorting of spatial and temporal sensory data so as to create patterns in the world that make it livable and intelligible for human beings. Norton-Smith proposes two world-ordering principles that he sees to be fundamental to a Native American worldview: relatedness and circularity.

The world-ordering principle of relatedness is illustrated in a phrase familiar to many American Indian tribes, “We are all relatives.” This statement does not apply simply to the members of one’s family, or to all of humanity. Rather, it implies that all living things--all of the elements and organisms on Earth--are inextricably woven together, related, as a family is. In this view, finding new information about the world involves seeking new patterns of relatedness within it. Instead of investigating the nature of a thing itself, a native person, Norton-Smith claims, would look for the connections that thing has with the others that surround it, thereby gaining some functional knowledge about how that thing operates in the world.

The statement “We are all relatives” implies reverence for the world that encompasses us. Norton-Smith writes, “In the Native

world version, everything is related and we are all relatives, so all entities and beings are interconnected, valuable by virtue of those interconnections, and due respect.”¹ Here we see that the indigenous world view that Norton-Smith describes is a fundamentally ethical one--a perspective wherein all things have intrinsic worth because of their relatedness to each-other and to the whole. So, an investigation must respect the relatedness of things by considering the impact that investigation has on other members of the human and non-human world. In this view, when we seek to gain information about the nature of things, we must do so carefully and thoughtfully--never imagining that we are detached, objective observers, but remembering that we are in fact deeply embedded in the world of experience, and accountable to it.

The second world-ordering principal that Norton-Smith gives us is circularity; while creating patterns of relatedness in sense experience, the Native worldview is one that generates circular patterns as well. Norton-Smith writes, “...Hunter-gatherer societies 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.”² Here, we see that in the circular ordering of experience, spatial and temporal spheres coincide. For Native peoples, the natural cycles that order life have time frames and locations (even in July, you won't find strawberries at the top of Mt. Hood). Spatio-temporal circular patterns diffuse through many areas of native life--as Norton-Smith describes, tribes like the Lakota associate seasonal changes with the cardinal directions, merging the categories of time and space within one circular context with a distinct tribal center. So, the indigenous concept of circularity is one that extends through time and space to bring coherence to sensory phenomena.

There is something that underpins the two world-ordering principals that Norton-Smith gives us--a driving force that animates and solidifies them. If, indeed, we are dealing with a worldview wherein relatedness and circularity order sensory experience, then rhythm and its role in native life can serve as a functional logos for understanding these two principles--rhythm can demonstrate how these ordering processes shape the Native worldview. For an initial account of rhythm in indigenous life, we will look at the work of Lakota scholar Robert Bunge in his book, *An American Urphilosophie*.

Part II: Rhythm in Time and Space

Robert Bunge explicates a "Sioux Cosmology and Cosmogony" that involves a view of humanity as a single participant in a multi-faceted and animate natural world. In it, he includes a description of rhythm as an ordering mechanism for temporal experience, and a grounding force in Native life. He writes that rhythm, for the Lakota, reflects "the 'pulse' or 'heartbeat' of all that is."³ Since Native people view themselves as part of a living biotic world, the beat of the drum can be seen as a connection to the pulse that animates the entire universe. Bunge writes that "Time and rhythm are inexorably bound together"⁴ in the Native worldview, and describes how the pattern of the seasons and the cycles of the moon and sun are reflected in the rhythms of Lakota music. In this way, rhythm connects Lakota people to the larger "natural" order of time in the universe--it connects them temporally to the world around them.

An implication of this understanding of rhythm that Bunge leaves out, and which I find essential, is the role of rhythm in ordering spatial experience. If rhythm, as Bunge claims, orients the Lakota people to the living world around them, then it has spatial qualities as well as temporal ones. And certainly, as we have seen through Norton-Smith, the categories may not be clearly parsed. So, though rhythm occurs in time, one beat following the previous one, it serves a spatial function by placing the Lakota in an outward-looking position to the whole of the pulsing world.

A Lakota person listening and moving to rhythm, Bunge writes, is akin to “a kitten huddled close to the breast of its mother.”⁵ Just as a child is part of (and comes from) its mother, the Lakota emerge as part of the animate universe through rhythm.

In his Sioux cosmology, Bunge describes how humans, and indeed all life, are participants in creation. The making of the world, for the Lakota, is a continuous process wherein all of the creatures of the Earth must participate in an active and continuous process that maintains the balance and rightness of creation. Bunge writes, “In a very real sense the universe of the tribe was personally upheld by the participation of every member in recreating and sustaining [the] universe.”⁶ Rhythm, here, can be seen as one such participatory process wherein humanity helps sustain the healthy heartbeat of the world. This notion accounts for the perceived “monotony” of Native drum beats, as Bunge puts it, “If it is even, regular, and monotonous, as the healthy pulse of a living organism should be, then the drum in rhythm with this pulse helps maintain this healthy state.”⁷ So, we see that Native drumming, insofar as it regulates and reinforces the people’s relationship to the breathing biosphere, can be seen as a kind of care for or maintenance of the universe. In this way, rhythm solidifies the place of Native people as a demonstrative participant in the greater spatial universe to which they belong.

So, rhythm in the Lakota tradition represents an ontology ultimately rooted in a kind of fractal logic. Which is to say, just as the form of a fractal pattern is mirrored in the form of one of its parts (picture broccoli, where the larger “tree” is made of many tiny “trees”), the shape and pattern of Lakota rhythms mirror the heartbeat of the whole living world. Put differently, the people’s drum beat represents one musical line that is ultimately the same, though smaller and less complicated, as the greater melody of the universe itself. This process orients the Lakota in space--it places them as an interior part of a surrounding whole, a whole that is reflective of each of its parts. Thus, the fractal relationship between Native rhythm and the rhythm of the biosphere underpins a Native cosmology. As the early twen-

tieth Century anthropologist Alice Fletcher writes, “the natives of America thought of the cosmos as a unit that was throbbing with the same life-force of which they were conscious within themselves.”⁸ This “life-force” operates in the same way on the level of the whole as it does in Native drum rhythms on the level of a part. This is how, as Bunge writes, that through rhythm humans can access a “feeling of harmony or of moving in accord with the universe and, conversely, feeling the universe move within oneself.”⁹

So, we can see that Rhythm facilitates a reflective connectivity between part and whole that constitutes a spatial ordering in the Native worldview that Bunge presents. And, as we established before, it also serves a temporal ordering function through the biological patterns of native life. From this point, we can begin to understand how rhythm can serve as an impetus for and connection between Norton-Smith’s world-ordering principles, relatedness and circularity.

Part III: Rhythm as the logos in Relatedness and Circularity

The first of Thomas M. Norton-Smith’s Native world-ordering principles, relatedness, places human beings in intimate connection to the world around them. But relatedness by its nature also implies a kind of separation. If two entities are said to be related, they must in fact be distinct from each-other in some way. For example, if object A and object B have a relationship, C, then A and B cannot be the same--they are related to each-other through C, which connects them as it holds them apart. A relationship, then, is something that occurs between distinct entities. We can see now how this is a rhythmic principle; each note in a musical line is related to the next, and it is the spaces or pauses between beats that serve as the connective tissue. A breath between notes sets them in relation to each-other and helps shape the form of the musical whole. So, as much as beats in a sequence are related, they are also set apart by a pause or breath. This creates a tension between beats that pushes and pulls at the same time, initiating a dynamic relationship--rhythm.

In describing his principle of relatedness, Norton-Smith claims that our relationship to other beings in the sensorial world requires respect and reverence for the rest of the universe. Because our actions have implications for the entities we are connected to, we must consider those implications during our investigations into the world. Relatedness, for Norton-Smith, is the source of our desire to know and care for the world. As an interplay between connection and separation, between sound and pregnant silence, rhythm can help us understand the desirous nature of relatedness. We have established that rhythm is a force that lives in the anticipatory spaces between beats, as much as in the beats themselves. This necessary and incommensurable tension between the beats of a melody form a rhythm that is always seeking to consummate the relationship between notes, just as we seek to consummate the relationship between ourselves and the world. To illustrate this concept, we can take Bunge's example of the kitten and her mother; the kitten wishes to be close to her mother, but she can never be close enough so as to become one with her mother and so the connection remains perpetually incomplete. As rhythm brings us closer to the greater heartbeat of the world, it also reminds us that we are distinct from it as the part is distinct from the whole. It is our desire to be closer than we can ever really be to the world that drives the need to find ourselves within it, and to find the world within ourselves. It is the resounding gap between notes, and between ourselves and the elusive other, that shapes the rhythm of our unrequited love for the world.

Finally, the world-ordering principle of relatedness implies that in seeking knowledge about the world, we will look for patterns that connect things to each-other instead of properties of the things themselves. The advantage of this investigative strategy can be demonstrated through rhythm: in a rhythmic line or a melody, it is the relationship of the beats and notes to each-other that gives the line its meaning and tone. A single note, taken out of the context of its melody, is relatively meaningless and uninformative. The beats only mean something as part of the phrase.

Similarly, a sea otter taken out of its habitat and studied in a lab will not demonstrate its role as a keystone species. The animal must be considered in the context of its complex marine ecosystem before its essential role in that ecosystem can be understood.

Norton-Smith's second world-ordering principle, circularity, posits that the Native world is organized by natural cyclical patterns--the turn of the seasons, the phases of the moon, animal migrations, and so on. These natural patterns provide the framework for circularity as a temporal ordering mechanism. We can see the temporal role of circularity at play in native drum rhythms: these rhythms contain repetitious phrases that move through time like the steady heartbeat of a healthy organism. As a phrase is completed, it circles back on itself, creating a rhythmic spiral that echoes the cyclical patterns of the natural world. But unlike the seasons that change throughout the year, or the monthly cycles of the moon, the rhythm of drumming happens in the present--in a tangible, concentrated time frame in which it is easy to decipher patterns of repetition. Rhythm, then, provides the initial context from which other cyclical patterns in the world can be understood. The beat of the drum can serve as a perspective on time that situates Native peoples within a universe of natural refrains.

Circularity also functions as a spatial ordering principal in the Native worldview that Norton-Smith illustrates. It serves to orient phenomena in the world around spatial centers from which radiate spheres of meaning. These centers are points of spiritual and practical significance that serve to orient Native people within their life-world. Norton-Smith writes, "almost all tribal religions have a sacred place or geographic feature at its center--a mountain, plateau, or river among them. This religious center--this sacred place--helps the people to locate themselves with respect to their lands, the cardinal directions, and other non-human relations."¹⁰ Rhythm, as Robert Bunge describes it, provides a centering or grounding force in Native life that pulls people toward such a center. He writes, "As long as the drum beats and singers sing...conditions cannot become truly intolerable be-

cause men are, at that time, at the source of Being Itself.”¹¹ Here, we can see that rhythm orients people toward the ultimate center of the “hoop of the world” as it is commonly described in Native America. Insofar as rhythm connects us to the pulse of the animate biosphere, it focuses our physical attention toward the source of life from which meaning emerges in the world. It places us in a spatial position with the living world--as a part within its whole. In this way, rhythm orients spatial, as well as temporal phenomena through circularity. Spatial, because it serves as motion toward a spiritual center that is located in the context of the land, and temporal because it constructs a basis from which to understand the passage of time through the natural cycles.

Rhythm, as we have applied it here, can be seen as a revelatory, or magical entity. It helps produce tangible versions of systems and patterns in the world that are unseen. It is an ontological tool that helps us know the nature of things, a kind of learning that is not explicit, literate, or visual, but visceral and real. Rhythm is a didactic demonstration of humanity’s circular intertwining with the world, and as such it serves as the fundamental ordering principle--the functional logos--on the basis of which we can understand the principles of relatedness and circularity. Rhythm, in the Native worldview, provides a subtle scaffolding for the flow of sensory experience--a temporal and spatial structure that places humanity in nuanced communion with the whole of the pulsing world.

Notes

1. Norton-Smith 59
2. *Ibid.*, p. 125
3. Bunge 53
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, p. 54
6. *Ibid.*, p. 53
7. *Ibid.*, p. 54
8. Fletcher 1
9. Bunge 54
10. Norton-Smith 121
11. Bunge 54

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