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Meaning of Folklore

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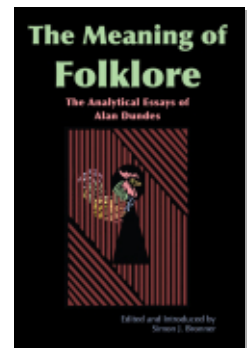
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AS THE CROW FLIES: A STRAIGHTFORWARD STUDY OF LINEAL WORLDVIEW IN AMERICAN FOLK SPEECH

Introduction

Dundes cited Dorothy Lee's "Codifications of Reality: Lineal and Nonlinear" ([1950] 1968) as the inspiration for his rhetorical analysis of American speech, in which he sought evidence of a lineal worldview. Introducing Lee's essay in his anthology *Every Man His Way*, Dundes praised it as a work in "comparative cognition," pointing out that "the perception and classification of 'objective reality' is not culture-free, no matter how ardently a scientist wishes it were. However, by studying the nature of individual cultural cognitive systems, we may be able to see the arbitrariness and the normally unperceived biases of such systems, including our own" (1968a).

Writing in 2004 to honor his close friend and colleague Wolfgang Mieder, a world-renowned specialist in proverb scholarship, Dundes expanded on his thesis of the "linearity of American life," outlined in two paragraphs of "Folk Ideas as Units of Worldview" (1971a, and reprinted in this volume). After Dundes's death, Mieder speculated on Dundes's reason for writing on linearity: "I do recall both of us as basically non-religious individuals speaking on occasion about life having a beginning and an end, progressing along with steps and mutations along the way. We both felt that as two 'odd birds' we could do no more than to move along with our scholarly work and teaching in a lineal fashion 'as the crow flies' before our short life span would straightforwardly come to its end forever" (2006b, 239).

In his focus on lineality, published a year before his death, Dundes especially brought out examples of folk speech to demonstrate the analytical method of extrapolating, from the rhetoric of folkloric examples, a common theme as an expression of an individual cultural cognitive system. It is important to remember his point, though, that such analyses should not be limited by conventional genre categories, because the theme cuts across genres; in Dundes's own rhetoric, it "underlies" expressions as "unstated postulates" or "cultural axioms." The resulting huge stack of examples of lineal references in American culture led him to question how distinctive the lineal cognitive system was in the world, and from where it may have arisen historically, socially, and psychologically. What set his analysis of linearity apart from other worldview principles—such as future-orientation (evident as a

faith in success and progress), abundance (also stated as “unlimited good”), and the infallibility of science—is the oppositional rhetorical position of linearity against circularity within the same society.

As with other cognitive binaries expressed rhetorically, Dundes found that one pole tended to dominate over the other, and argued that the American experience, especially, had a legacy of linearity. There were confrontational moments that drew attention to the tension of the binary. In 1971, he found significance in a countercultural protest of “groovy and broad” against a “straight” and “square” establishment. In the midst of the Civil Rights movement, he also pointed to racial implications of cognitive dissonance between “the straight world of the dominant white culture” and the cyclicity and angularity (a term used by black folklorist-writer Zora Neale Hurston) of African-American culture in dance, music, craft, and dress (hair). See, for example, the readings on African-American aesthetic forms in *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore*, which he edited ([1973] 1990). Citing his friend and folklorist colleague Roger Abrahams, he also viewed the binary of city and country as representative of linear and circular worldviews, respectively. He commented on the domination of the city in the binary: “One is tempted to see urban life as insisting upon the more efficient line as in square city blocks and actual efforts to eliminate curves in well-travelled roads.”

More balanced, in Dundes’s view, was the unresolved tension between individualism (expressed as a single line) and groupness (often represented as a circle), which led to an especially American vacillation between wanting strong leadership and egalitarian democracy. Perhaps Dundes’s view showed his folkloristic grounding in the social group as the basis of identity, since much of American Studies scholarship, based on popular sources, tends to emphasize American individualism as a dominant worldview. A folkloristic argument for a European-American “individual orientation” was made, however, by Barre Toelken (1996, 266–72). Another active binary, according to Dundes, was between a sight-oriented world, popularly associated with literacy and modernity, and the oral/aural channels of folk society. Using the visual worldview principle underlying sayings on the theme of “Seeing in Believing,” emblematic of a “deep seated penchant for the visual sense” among Americans (in a title with the saying in *Interpreting Folklore* [1980b]), Dundes nonetheless wondered if electronic media created a postliterate society, which was once more primarily oral/aural because Americans heard their news more than they read it. This was one reason why the media had not displaced folklore, he mused, because the media enabled narrative communication. Reliance on “reading, ’riting, and ’rithmetic” was a sign of lineal thinking, because it privileged the plot line, signature line, and bottom line, respectively, in fixed, and therefore permanently certain, forms. Dundes *insightfully* remarked, “Americans still prefer to get agreements in writing rather than to trust a gentleman’s handshake (a tactile sign) or take someone’s word or say-so (oral sign) for a contract. Once an agreement is down in black and white, Americans watch out for, and read, the small print, with an ‘eye’ toward avoiding an unfavorable set of conditions” (1980h, 90).

In the present essay, more than in earlier essays, Dundes emphasized the gendered nature of line and circle as male and female representations, respectively. It is telling that of the many examples he gave in the essay, he chose “As the Crow Flies” for its title. Perhaps this was a self-reference to his argument for the prevalence of male chauvinism in American folklore, in an essay entitled “The Crowing Hen and the Easter Bunny” (1980a). This latter essay alluded to variations of the rhyme “Whistling maids and crowing hens, Never come to no good ends,” in which crowing was rhetorically connected to male behavior. Besides

the idea that a woman who whistled was acting like a man (i.e., the suggestion that whistling was intrusive, even an omen of storms, therefore going against the “expected passive, docile, sex-stereotyped behavior norm,” according to Dundes), it was a rooster that was supposed to crow (see “Gallus as Phallus” in this volume for further symbolic associations of the rooster to hypermasculine display), and a crow that flew (flying being especially direct and pointed).

Dundes offered a sobering implication for worldview theory in the cognition of “natural association,” whereby violent actions were taken to remove a disruption of natural order. Reading the rhetoric of the English verse, “I know not which live more unnatural lives, Obeying husbands or commanding wives,” he warned of the resulting attitude: “By implication, a woman who acts like a man is unnatural and should be eliminated.” Noting evidence of lore that Dundes neglected (from women particularly) which stigmatizes men, especially in the context of what historians have called the feminization or domestication of American culture, some folklorists countered that Dundes overstated his case, and should have analyzed more of the dialogic practices of everyday life in which male and female control are negotiated through expressive exchanges in mixed, as well as all-male, contexts. In some cases, such as adolescent male recitations and initiations, manly bravado may convey insecurity and stigmatization more than dominance and chauvinism. See, for example, various essays in Simon J. Bronner’s *Manly Traditions*, with an afterword by Dundes (2005a).

Another gendered example related to linearity, according to Dundes, was the use of “end” in male games, based on crossing and penetrating lines. In “Into the Endzone for a Touchdown: A Psychoanalytic Consideration of American Football,” Dundes stated: “Evidently there is a kind of structural isomorphism between the line (as opposed to the backfield) and the layout of the field of play. Each line has two ends (left end and right end) with a “center” in the middle. Similarly, each playing field has two ends (endzones) with a midfield line (the fifty-yard line). . . . The object of the game, simply stated, is to get into the opponent’s endzone while preventing the opponent from getting into one’s own endzone” (1979b; also in *Interpreting Folklore* [1980b]). He argued that manliness was demonstrated or “proven” in the frame of play by a linear (i.e., phallic) attack on a male opponent, who was feminized by being penetrated in the rear (see “Gallus as Phallus” [1994] for an *extension* of this argument). In light of Dundes’s argument (and his naval references in “As the Crow Flies”), Bronner explored the importance of line crossing as a male transformative ritual (2006a).

Dundes used less cross-cultural analysis in this essay than in others, referring loosely to lineality as an American or Western worldview, although he intimated that it was becoming dominant globally as a “modern” mode of thought. Lee, in her classic essay, referred to the non-linear thinking of Trobriand Islanders ([1950] 1968); in Dundes’s essay, he gave a Native American tribe as an example of a group with circular-based cognition. Folklorist Barre Toelken, especially, developed the concept of a circular worldview among the Navajo, as a contrast to non-Native linearity, in his widely circulating textbook *The Dynamics of Folklore*. With regard to Dundes’s attention, in the present essay, to architecture as a symbol of worldview, Toelken observed that “the [Navajo] hogan, not surprisingly, is made of a combination of plants (trees and branches used for the internal structure), animal substances (like rawhide) used in the lashing of materials together, dirt from the earth covering the outside, corn pollen rubbed along the main beams inside when the hogan is blessed, and the whole combination created for, and lived by, people *whose concept of their*

position in the world is expressed in terms of circles and interaction with those various aspects of nature" (1996, 289; emphasis added).

Dundes's example of the American perception of the life course as linear, proceeding from birth to death, rather than being viewed cyclically, with a process of reincarnation, invited comparison to Eastern religious systems and group orientations, which suggest circularity. Hajime Nakamura's seminal text, *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples* (1964), did not describe Eastern thinking as monolithic. Yet it did identify associations of nature with the divine, and the importance of a social nexus in a harmonious group, which was often represented by circular cosmological icons in China, Tibet, Korea, and Japan (e.g., the forces of Ying and Yang incorporated into the circular design of the traditional symbol *taijitu*, or the Poem of Reality in Zen Buddhism, consisting of twenty characters arranged in a circle).

If the distinctiveness of linearity as an American worldview within "Western thinking" was left culturally vague in Dundes's essay, other studies have been more forceful in historically viewing an American embrace of linearity as a sign of material expansion, technological progress, and intellectual novelty, characteristic of "modern" American experience. Historian John Demos traced the American evolution from a traditional, colonial world of natural cycles to the Revolutionary environment of architecture and writing, which made a "liberating" break with the past by having a "forward, future-directed outlook . . . [and] the self firmly situated at its center" (2004). Simon J. Bronner observed a dynamic between the intimate, touch orientation of the community circle, which offered Americans a sense of belonging, and the rising, sight-oriented, expansive horizon of urban technological linearity, which gained prominence since the nineteenth century (1986b). Both works avowed Dundes's line of thought.

As the Crow Flies: A Straightforward Study of Lineal Worldview in American Folk Speech

“WE DO NOT SEE THE lens through which we look.” So wrote anthropologist Ruth Benedict (1887–1948) in an essay entitled “The Science of Custom” that appeared in *The Century Magazine* in 1929. Although this essay was later expanded to become the first chapter of her classic *Patterns of Culture*, published in 1934, for some reason, this succinct articulation of the difficulty of perceiving one’s own culturally relative cognitive categories was omitted. From a folklore perspective, it suggests that one of the important potential contributions of folklore with respect to identifying the characteristics of that critical lens may be that native categories of perception are clearly delineated in various genres, including those subsumed under the rubric of folk speech.

In 1950, another outstanding anthropologist, Dorothy Demetracopoulou Lee (1905–75) published her insightful paper “Codifications of Reality: Lineal and Non-Linear” in *Psychosomatic Medicine*. Her main point was to demonstrate that fellow anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942) had misread some of his famous Trobriand Island ethnographic data by seeing lines where the Trobrianders did not. In other words, Malinowski was guilty of imposing Western lineality upon nonlinear phenomena. While she did speak of anthropologists referring to “unilinear” or “multilinear” courses of development and more generally of Westerners following a “line of thought,” she was not particularly concerned with documenting Western lineal worldview. The bulk of her discussion provided instances of Malinowski’s misinterpreting Trobriand culture. She did conclude, however, that “much of our present-day thinking, and much of our evaluation are based on the premise of the line and of the line as good” (Lee 1950, 96).

Lee’s brilliant essay did not receive all the credit it deserved (see Graves 1957). It is my contention that Dorothy Lee was on the right track and American folk speech amply confirms her assertion that the line is absolutely central, if not sacred, in American worldview. But she did not distinguish between drawing parallel lines and concentric circles as a lecturer’s means of making a point. In contrast, I argue it is “straight lines” that are crucial, not curved ones. Moreover, the straight lines are often displayed in the form of a square or box. It is precisely the combination of “line,” “straight,” and “square,” I suggest, that shapes the lens through which Americans (and other Westerners) look. These constituent features that so significantly affect our perception are found repeatedly in dozens of examples from familiar folk speech.

The word “line” or the plural “lines” occurs alone, in combination in various compounds, and often as an affix, e.g., guidelines, deadlines, outlines, bloodlines, hemlines, necklines, hairlines, headlines, bylines, baselines, goal lines, property lines, airlines, ship lines, railroad lines, bus lines, trolley or streetcar lines, chorus lines, battle lines, pipelines, assembly lines, picket lines, time lines, datelines, telephone lines, fishing lines, waterlines, coastlines, shorelines, skylines, and lifelines, among many others.

The *line* functions as a kind of limit. One must “toe the line,” not “cross the line,” “lay it on the line,” or have one’s fate be “on the line.” One may be asked to “hold the line,”

meaning to maintain the status quo at any cost to prevent any unfavorable incursion or development. One can think or be “in line” (with the prevailing code or trend) and by the same token, if an individual’s behavior or suggestion is inappropriate, he may be admonished that he is “(way) out of line.” One may seek to keep a rebellious child “in line,” that is, insist that he or she conform to existing social conventions. The son or daughter of a king is said to be “in line” to occupy the throne. Presumably the heir must belong to the appropriate “lineage.” To reach the Internet or use e-mail, one must go “online.” Runners begin a race at the “starting line” and end at the “finish line.”

A line can be an occupation or profession. Upon an initial meeting, one person may ask another, “What’s your line?” meaning “What do you do for a living?” If one’s vocation is the same as one’s father/mother and grandfather/grandmother, one may boast that he or she comes from “a long line” of doctors, lawyers, educators, etc. If a line can reflect the past, it can also represent a trajectory pointing toward the future. One can look forward to success “down the line.” In business, one speaks of a line of products with the “top of the line” being the best. The “bottom line” refers to the grand total or final figure on a financial balance sheet but more metaphorically, to the final upshot of a contract or deal. If one seeks information about a product or a person, he is said to be trying to “get a line on” it.

A line is also an insincere formulaic ploy (often a well-rehearsed sales pitch) or tactic intended to sway or seduce an addressee, as in trying to persuade a member of the opposite sex to accept an invitation for a date. These are often termed “pickup lines.” Such usage almost certainly relates to the notion of a “line of argument” or “line of reasoning.” Political organizations often have specific agendas or platforms which may be referred to as “party lines.” It may simply be the influence of print, but one tends to refer to poetry, even purely oral poetry, in terms of lines, and the same goes for “learning one’s lines” or “forgetting one’s lines” in a stage play. Clothing has “lining,” and a metaphor speaks of “lining one’s own pockets” (with illegal funds). Even clouds have a “lining,” as in the proverb, “Every cloud has a silver lining,” which in the best tradition of American optimism urges citizens to “always look for the silver lining.”

A line is still a line even if it’s narrow. One speaks of a “fine line” or a “thin line” when making a subtle distinction between two different things. A line is no less a feature for its being intermittent, as in a “dotted line” upon which to sign one’s name, say, to open a “line of credit” at a bank. With telephones, in former times, one could have a “party line” or indulge in a “private line.” A difficult superior may take a “hard line” in dealing with a subordinate, especially if his performance is adjudged “borderline,” and consequently “draw the line” in demanding future improvement. A fired employee, without adequate salary or benefits, may well fall below the “poverty line.” One can also draw a “line in the sand” to indicate that an opponent can approach no farther. The names of famous borders also include the word line, such as the Mason-Dixon Line or the Maginot Line. Banks and insurance companies often “redline” impoverished urban areas where credit is denied residents. The red line in this instance serves as an unofficial and often illegal demarcation of areas that loan officers use to evaluate requests for funds.

It is not just that one is forced to stay “in line” and not “jump the line” by disregarding the folk principle of “first come, first served” in a “checkout line” at a grocery store, but there is an implicit and sometimes explicit understanding that the line must be straight. Lines, of course, can be either straight or curved, but the straight line provides the norm. “As the crow flies” is a traditional response to an inquiry as to how far away a given objective is. “As the crow flies” means the minimum distance from the present point to the

objective as measured in a straight line. There is also the proverb: "The shortest distance between two points is a straight line." Often, however, it is not possible to go directly from point *A* to point *B*. Only crows (and other birds) can do so, flying over obstacles that impede the progress of land-bound creatures.

Straight means direct, honest, and right, among other things. One tries to "get one's facts straight," that is, correct. "Be straight with me" is a request for honesty. "Setting the record straight" is an attempt to eliminate previous errors. "Straight from the horse's mouth" refers to an unimpeachable source of information, presumably deriving from the practice of actually examining a horse's teeth (to determine its age and condition) as opposed to simply taking the word of a horse trader. To speak "straight from the shoulder," a phrase apparently derived from boxing (referring to a direct punch), means being frank and to the point, without exaggeration or embellishment. The "straight dope" is slang for true information. To be a "straight shooter" or a "straight arrow" implies that the individual in question is completely honest and trustworthy. Someone who is not so dependable may be urged to "straighten up and fly right." "Straight talk" is sincere, honest talk. To "see straight" means to discern reality clearly. "To go straight" implies that one may have had a shady past but has now decided to lead a righteous, law-abiding life. If a person "plays it straight," he or she is being totally above board, completely honest.

If a person is successful in a job, he or she may be promoted. The promotion may be gradual, or it may be dramatic so that he goes "straight to the top." In stage comedy, the "straight man" has to keep a "straight face" when he or she delivers a "straight line" to set up the joke's "punch line" uttered by the principal comedian. Straight can also mean unadulterated, as in taking one's whiskey "straight" or "straight up," that is, without any diluting mixer or ice cubes. To do something "straightaway" means doing it right away. A parent may tell a child to "come straight home" after school, meaning to come directly home without meandering or taking any wrong turn or detour. Ideally, one's destination lies "straight ahead." To win seven "straight" games (seven in a row) signifies that one has won an unbroken series or sequence. Straight also designates conventional norms in sexuality. Hence, a "straight" is a heterosexual as opposed to a homosexual, at least in gay slang.

If straight conveys honesty, frankness, forthrightness, then it may be contrasted with "crooked" (cf. the abridged form "crook" for a criminal) or "bent," as in "bent out of shape," or someone who "bends the law" or terms involving circles or the adjective "round." One must not get "out of line" and certainly, as already mentioned, not "cross the line." Incidentally, "cross" implies departing from "straight." An individual may betray another by "crossing up" that person. An even worse betrayal is called a "double cross." In any event, one makes a "beeline" for an objective and does so by going "straight ahead" toward one's goal.

This is very different from taking a "roundabout" way. Someone who "beats around the bush" is not being direct. Someone who gets the "run around" is not being treated in an honest, truthful manner. To "mess (kid, horse) around" is to waste time and not stay on course. Someone who is driven crazy may be said to be "(a)round the bend." There is an old American folk metaphor, "to go 'round Robin Hood's barn," meaning to follow a winding road or be long-winded. "Round Robin Hood's barn makes a tedious yarn" (Whiting 1977, 365; Mieder 1992, 38). The word "around" may also signify inexactness or at best a vague approximation. A friend tells another they should meet "around five o'clock." That is certainly not the same as specifying "five on the dot" (the dot presumably being a point on the line?). Even the use of the Latin "circa" with respect to dates reflects

the same indulgence with approximation. A certain person may be said to have been born circa 1900, circa being, of course, cognate with the English word "circle." A similar nuance of around is found in the common leave-taking formula, "See you around," meaning in no particular place at no particular time. To "round off" a number, say an amount of money owed, is a self-conscious admission that one is willing to be inexact just for the sake of keeping things simple.

The negative associations of round and roundness in contrast to straight are occasionally reversed in American proverbs. We know that proverbs are famous for presenting two completely opposite points of view. "He who hesitates is lost" urges immediate action to ensure success while "Look before you leap" recommends caution. There is even a proverb covering this characteristic of the genre: "The devil can quote scripture," meaning that one can always find a proverb to justify one's position. So in contrast to "The shortest distance between two points is a straight line," we have "The longest way round is the shortest way found." But by the same token, we also have "Don't go round the world for a short cut." So the upshot is, "You pays your money, and you takes your choice." Still the general mistrust of round prevails: "Money is round and rolls away" (Mieder 1992, 416).

The epitome of roundness is, of course, the *circle* (Loeffler-Delachaux 1947; de Alvarez de Toledo 1951). "Circular reasoning" is clearly in opposition to "thinking straight." In terms of logic, if one uses a proposition to lead to a conclusion and then purports to prove the proposition by means of the conclusion, one is guilty of "circular reasoning," the idea being that one has completed a circle so there is no starting point. One has argued or reasoned in a circle (see Walton 1991; Rips 2002). A folk belief also states that when one becomes lost, say in a forest, in the course of trying to find one's path to safety, one will wind up "going around in circles." A bit of military doggerel, which is, however, known generally, confirms the association of being frustrated or lost with going in circles: "When in danger, when in doubt; Run in circles, scream and shout." Perhaps analogous to going in circles as a metaphor for working to no purpose may be the expression "spinning your wheels" that signifies "going nowhere fast." A wheel is, conceptually speaking, a kind of circle (Loeffler-Delachaux 1947, 69), and a "wheeler-dealer" or someone who "wheels and deals" is typically a person who is deceptive or even ruthlessly dishonest. Finally, one of the most striking pieces of evidence revealing the folk perception of circles is that a repeated series of actions that lead to an increasingly negative situation may be termed a "vicious circle." The adjective is surely telling!

If the circle (and roundness) connotes an undesirable state of confusion, the *square* does the opposite. The square is obviously an expanded form of straight lines. "To square" accounts is to settle matters equitably. One tries to treat others "fair and square," for example, by giving them a "square deal." Meals that are substantial and satisfactory are called "square meals." One tries to get "squared away," meaning to get things in order, to be prepared for whatever the future may hold. A "square shooter" is synonymous with "straight shooter," referring to someone who is scrupulously honest. To face an issue "squarely" means to confront it head-on and directly. To stand behind someone or something "four-square" implies being steady, unswerving, and without equivocation. Two opponents will "square off" or "square up," that is, face one another directly, for a fight.

The literal centrality of square in American (and very likely Western) thought is also present in dwellings and city planning. It is no coincidence that major cities typically express their identities in open areas commonly called "squares." This is so even if the shape of the area is not actually a square. Such is the case, for example, with Times Square in New

York City. Some city squares are in that quadrangular shape, but many are not. Other venues such as arenas may reflect the penchant for squares, e.g., Madison Square Garden, also in New York City.

Since the area of a geometric square is the length of one side multiplied by itself—if a side is represented by s , then the area of that square is said to be s “squared”—this principle has been extended so that any number n multiplied by itself is said to be n squared. This leads further to the term “square root.” The square root of nine is therefore three. But there is nothing literally square about either the number nine or threes. Mathematics has other connections with lines and squares. For centuries, mathematicians interested in number theory have been fascinated by what is called the “magic square.” This consists of an arrangement of numbers in the form of a square so that every column, every row, and each of the two diagonals adds up to the same sum, this total being called the “constant” (Meister 1952). A branch of geometry is called “lineal geometry,” and there are “linear algebras.” In addition, there are “linear equations,” and in physics there are “lines of force,” not to mention the “linear accelerator” by means of which particles are propelled in straight paths.

The contrast between the square and the circle is not just a matter of there not being any vicious squares. The fundamental opposition between these two basic metaphors is signaled by the expression about attempting to “put a square peg in a round hole” or the equally apt but perhaps less well known variant “to put a round peg in a square hole.” The phrase may be used to label a misfit, someone deemed not qualified or fit to carry out a particular task. In the present context, the expression states that squareness and circularity are incompatible; they are mutually exclusive. Another traditional articulation of this incompatibility is the mathematical fool’s errand of trying to “square the circle.” The idea of trying to find a circle and square with equal areas is allegedly an insoluble problem, a mathematical impossibility (Hobson 1913; Jesseph 1999; but see Ruthen 1989). Hence, the idiom is a way of suggesting the futility of a given action. Speaking of futility, when some project comes to naught, one may well exclaim that it is “back to square one,” that is, one must return to the very beginning of the enterprise to start all over again (possibly an allusion to a game such as hopscotch). A wastepaper basket may be referred to as “the circular file,” that is, the place to deposit unneeded correspondence. It may be worth noting that both of the binary oppositions straight/crooked and square/round are reported in a single catchphrase once popular in England. Evidently, a humorous hyperbolic way of “setting a man on his word” was to say, “Straight down the crooked lane and all round the square” (Partridge 1961, 818).

Because square signals fairness and honesty, one should not be surprised to see just how much squareness permeates society. Perhaps the most popular traditional folk dance in American culture is called the “Square Dance.” This may be contrasted with round dances such as the waltz, where dancers move or whirl in circular fashion. But for that matter, in social dancing, beginners are frequently taught to do the “box step.” *Boxes*, like squares, are linear in nature. One is obliged to remain in a box in the same sense as toeing the line and not crossing it.

In baseball, for example, the batter steps into the “batter’s box,” where a pitcher from the opposing team throws the ball into what is called the “strike zone,” an imaginary rectangular area above home plate through which a pitch must pass for the umpire behind the plate to call it a strike. If he misses the strike zone (and the batter doesn’t swing), the pitch is labeled a ball, much as a ball hit outside the left- or right-field lines (also called “foul lines”) is called a foul (as opposed to fair) ball. The place where the pitcher stands is

sometimes called the “pitcher’s box,” and if too many batters are successful, thus forcing him to leave (to be replaced by another pitcher), it is said he has been “knocked out of the box.” The final results of a baseball game, often appearing in newspapers and giving the statistics (e.g., runs, hits, errors, etc.), are called the “box score.”

Baseball, America’s national pastime, is just one instance of the way boxes and lines permeate the culture. A “line drive” or “liner” is a sharply hit ball with little or no arc. One of a pitcher’s most effective pitches is a “curve” or “curveball,” that is, a ball that does not go in a straight line toward home plate but rather bends or curves in its flight, the aim being to fool the batter so he fails to hit it. In American slang, to “throw someone a curve,” taken from baseball, means to ask an unfair question or make an unreasonable demand. Again, “curve” like circle and round implies a departure from the “straight and narrow,” from directness and honesty.

Many sports and games have lines. For example, in basketball, one shoots foul shots from a position immediately behind “the foul line” aka “the free-throw line.” In football, there is an “offensive line,” consisting of players who protect their quarterback when the team is on offense, or a “defensive line,” consisting of players who attack the opposing quarterback. When a team is on defense, there may be several of eleven players who are positioned slightly behind the defensive line to shore up the defense, e.g., protect against a short pass by the opposing offense. These players are called “linebackers.” In football, the playing field is divided into ten ten-yard strips. Position on the field is accordingly measured by “yard lines.”

No one likes to “boxed in,” but the fact is that Americans are always “behind enemy lines,” so to speak. Lines are everywhere, it seems, and when they meet, they frequently form rectangles and squares. (One need look no further than to the shape of most windows and window panes, bricks and boards, picture frames, postage stamps, rugs, and hundreds of other mundane objects.) Though businessmen may look for an “angle,” there is always a danger of being “cornered.” It is one thing to be boxed in but even worse to be forced into a small corner of a quadrilateral enclosure. At sporting events or theaters, would-be spectators go to the “box office” to purchase tickets. Typically, the best seats in the house are the “box seats.” At sporting events, spectators are not allowed to enter the actual playing area, e.g., the “boxing ring” (despite its name, a square) or the baseball or football field. They are obliged to remain on the “sidelines.” An injured player may have to be “sidelined” for a period of time. In ice hockey, a player who commits an infraction is punished by being sent to a particular area on the sidelines termed the “penalty box.”

Houses and rooms therein may resemble boxes, and in the bedroom, one sleeps on a rectangular mattress that sits squarely on a “box spring.” Office workers may be forced to occupy small spaces called “cubicles.” (Why are pieces of ice used to chill drinks in the shape of cubes? Round bits of ice surely function equally well.) Early on, children are socialized by such rhymes as “Step on a line, break your father’s (mother’s) spine.” The variant uses terms other than line, but the message is the same: “Step on a crack, break your father’s (mother’s) back.” A line is a limit that must be respected, that is, not stepped on. In tick-tack-toe, the winner is the person who can draw a straight line through either three *x*’s or three *o*’s. In hopscotch, one must step carefully so as not to go outside any of the series of boxes.

Whether it’s the military or show business, individuals are constantly asked to “line up.” Suspected criminals are frequently asked to participate in a “lineup” (to see if eyewitnesses can identify them as perpetrators of a crime). One also speaks of an outstanding “lineup” of talent, either on a sports team or a theatrical stage. Drunk drivers, when stopped by police

officers, may be asked to “walk a straight line” (as a sobriety test to prove that they are sufficiently sober to be permitted to continue driving their vehicles).

It should be noted that despite the ubiquity of lines and squares in American worldview, the semantic associations are not always positive. A square in slang terms is a “strait-laced” person, someone who is excessively conventional and law abiding. There have even been a few proverbial attempts to denigrate squareness, for example, “Be there or be square.” In other words, show up for the event in question unless you are too inhibited or fearful to do so. Other traditional verbal efforts to escape the vise of linearity include the notion of “reading between the lines” and the exhortation to “think outside the box.” But it can be said that these very attempts to escape the boundaries imposed by lines and boxes confirm the existence of such cultural restraints.

If a person is terminally ill in the hospital and the EEG monitor suddenly shows that he or she has “flatlined,” one can safely say that person has reached “the end of the line” and, unless cremated, is very likely to be shortly thereafter buried in a box (coffin).

What can we conclude from this brief demonstration of the apparent American penchant for straight lines and squares as well as a complementary mistrust of round curves and circles? Do we, in fact, have a window on a facet of American worldview? Anthropologist Aidan Southall suggests in a provocative, if admittedly speculative, essay devoted to an evolutionary approach to architecture that original “circularity” has given way to “rectangularity” (1993, 378). Citing the discovery of a dome-shaped construction of arched branches, unearthed in the Ukraine and said to be fifteen thousand years old, perhaps one of the oldest-known examples of human architecture, Southall wonders if this structure in any way symbolized the “dome of heaven.” He might well have also considered such examples as the shape of the Eskimo igloo or the curious beehive-shaped *trulli* in the village of Alberobello in southern Italy. In any event, he remarks that whereas “sticks and stones are naturally round,” they tend to be replaced as building materials by the cultural invention or borrowing of “rectangular bricks and square stones.” He notes further, “Round stools precede square thrones and chairs” and that “humankind as a whole has clearly moved from the universal occupation of the round to an almost universal occupation of the rectangular” (1993, 379).

Here is Southall’s thesis in his own words:

It is more natural (though I use this adjective with great caution), to live in the round than in the square, whether it is a question of dwelling or village, settlement or city. For virtually nothing in nature appears in rectangular form, whereas round, spherical and curved phenomena, both stationary and in motion are both ubiquitous and so impressive as to imprint themselves on the human imagination and consciousness. Is the rectangular city, then, a symbolic statement of human culture triumphing over nature by making an opposite statement? Surprisingly, in all the literature on nature and culture I have not noticed the question raised. With the other pair lurking behind, it becomes a question of whether the rectangular city is a male statement as well.” (1993, 380)

Southall is not the first to suggest an evolutionary sequence from circular to rectangular structures. Robbins, for instance, suggested that dwelling shapes and settlement patterns were related to whether people were nomadic or sedentary: “Considerable archaeological data also indicate that as cultures have moved from shifting to more settled subsistence patterns temporally, there has been a corresponding trend from circular to predominantly rectangular dwellings,” and he hypothesized “that circular ground plans will tend

to be associated with relatively impermanent or mobile settlement patterns, and that rectangular house ground plans will tend to be associated with more permanent or sedentary community settlement patterns" (1966, 7; see also Flannery 1972, 29–30).

One emerging controversial issue is not so much whether there are round or square dwellings, but rather whether or not specific social organizational constellations are associated with either one (see Saidel 1993 and Flannery's response). Of interest in the present context is the possibility there may be a common observable pattern in both house type and the configuration or grouping of multiple dwellings. Whiting and Ayres claim (1968, 126) that societies that build rectangular houses tend to arrange them in a line or square. If this is the case, it indicates that the pattern of circularity or squareness may apply equally to house or dwelling shape and the overall settlement plan. Moreover, the charter, so to speak, for such a pattern may well extend to the cosmos. One explanation for the priority of the circle is that the sun (and moon) are perceived as celestial circles (Peet 1888; Loeffler-Delachaux 1947; Lurker 1966, 523), not to mention the perception of the horizon. Hence, architectural plans might have been intended to mirror the celestial model. One thinks of the circular form of Stonehenge, for example, as a prime example of a likely sacred construction connected with sun worship.

Lest the reader think that the idea that circularity may be manifested in dwelling construction or other social forms is just pure speculation on the part of academics, one should ponder the following testimony given by a talented professional Oglala Sioux storyteller in the early twentieth century:

The Oglala believe the circle to be sacred because the Great Spirit caused everything in nature to be round except stone. . . . The sun and the sky, the earth and the moon are round like a shield. . . . Everything that breathes is round like the body of a man. Everything that grows from the ground is round like the stem of a tree. Since the Great Spirit has caused everything to be round, mankind should look upon the circle as sacred for it is the symbol of all things in nature except stone. It is also the symbol of the circle that marks the edge of the world. . . . The day, the night, and the moon go in a circle above the sky. . . . *For these reasons the Oglala make their tipis circular, their camp circle circular and sit in a circle for all ceremonies.* The circle is also the symbol of the tipi and of the shelter." (Walker 1917, 160; italics added)

It may well be that the distinction between nature and culture is not so much matched by one between the circle and the square as by the presence or absence of the line. Nature does not necessarily come in lines. Rather, humans attempt to impose order by perceiving or drawing lines. In terms of folk speech, there is a desire to "connect the dots," but the connected dots may form circles as well as squares. Lines of latitude and longitude follow the shape of the earth. Still, Southall may be correct in identifying a preference for rectangles, though I suggest that it would be more accurate to say a preference for straight as opposed to curved lines. It is a desideratum to "get all one's ducks in a row," and it is surely no coincidence that one tends to plant crops in straight rows, or that the military obliges soldiers to march in precise line formations, or that seniority and rank are indicated by the number of stripes, which are essentially glorified lines. In the navy, there is a distinction between "line officers" as opposed to staff or supply officers, referring to an old label assigned to warships or "ships of the line." All military units, not just the navy, insist on performing prescribed tasks "in the line of duty."

While the evidence adduced from American folk speech cannot necessarily support the evolutionary aspects of Southall's argument, it seems to corroborate his "delineation" of a critical distinction between the circle and the square. If one accepts and expands upon his suggestion that the "rectangular city" is male—and one can easily cite numerous examples of penile architecture, for example, the Washington Monument or the Empire State Building—then one may go on to propose that roundness and circles belong to the realm of the feminine. In evolutionary terms, the (linear?) progression from circle to square then corresponds to the alleged schema whereby original matriarchy was in time replaced by patriarchy. Certainly in American folk speech, "curvaceous" refers to a woman's well-shaped figure, signifying voluptuousness. It would not be used to refer to a man's physique. Moreover, it is women, according to American male stereotypes, who are accused of not being able to think logically, that is, lineally.

In Shakespeare's day, we have indisputable evidence that circle referred to the female pudendum. In *Romeo and Juliet* (2.1.23–26), we find Mercutio's bawdy remark: "'Twould anger him to raise a spirit in his mistress' circle of some strange nature, letting it there stand till she had laid it, and conjured it down.'" In more recent times, women of easy virtue were called "round heels," presumably because they spent so much time on their backs that their heels became increasingly rounded. (The term is also applied to inferior boxers, who were so frequently knocked out that they consequently suffered a similar fate.) So perhaps one can make a justifiable case that women are round while men are square. It is, after all, women who by nature have menstrual "cycles"; men do not. The stereotypical association of women with roundness and men with squareness (and hence women with vagueness, dissemblance, and dishonesty, as opposed to men with precision, directness, and candor) can easily be construed as part of the larger paradigm that "aligns" women with nature and men with culture (Ortner 1974). For that matter, the proposal that "rectilinear represents the male body image and curvilinear the female" is not new (see Whiting and Ayres 1968, 128).

However, I would argue that both men and women in American culture think in lineal terms. This may be why there is resistance to the notion of reincarnation. Reincarnation implies that a person's being or soul, after death, is recycled. A person is reborn and begins life anew. In some religions, the recycling is repeated ad infinitum. In American worldview, in contrast, the progression from birth through life to death is an irreversible path or line. One may choose to believe (in a culturally sanctioned denial of human mortality) that one continues to live on in heaven, but that belief does not include the possibility of being reborn on earth as a new baby. Americans do observe a certain cyclicity of seasons: spring, summer, fall, winter, a sequence from birth to death and then rebirth, as well as the recurrent series of the days of the week and months of the year, and Eliade credits the phases of the moon: "appearance, increase, wane, disappearance, followed by reappearance after three nights of darkness" as contributing significantly to the belief in cyclical concepts of time (1954, 86). Nevertheless, years, the larger temporal units, are counted serially in an irreversible sequence. One can go back in time only through fiction and fantasy. The point is that Americans, males and females alike, perceive both time and space in lineal terms. It is of some interest that a native Aleut environmentalist from Alaska claims that it is precisely the lineal bias of Western society that causes problems in the repeated failure to understand the cyclical worldview systems of many aboriginal societies (Mercurieff 1994).

We may conclude, therefore, that Dorothy Lee was right when she alluded to the American (and Western) propensity toward codifying reality in lineal terms. In fact, the

straight/circular dichotomy is of some antiquity; it existed in classical Greek literature and philosophy (Bellew 1979). However, we may wish to modify slightly Ruth Benedict's pessimistic dictum that "we do not see the lens through which we look." Inasmuch as folklore does encapsulate native cognitive categories, we may through its analysis indeed be able to see at least some small portion of that lens, as I hope these few lines have succeeded in demonstrating. On the other hand, perhaps I simply assumed what I planned to prove, in which case I am undoubtedly guilty of *circulus probandi*.

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