What Goes Around Comes Around
Winick, Stephen, Tokofsky, Peter, Lau, Kimberly

Published by Utah State University Press

Winick, Stephen, et al.
What Goes Around Comes Around.
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As the Crow Flies

A Straightforward Study of Lineal Worldview in American Folk Speech

Alan Dundes

(For Wolfgang Mieder, *Magister Proverbium*, paremiologist without peer)

"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-Lineal” 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 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 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 “foursquare” implies being steady, unwavering, 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.
comes around what goes around

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, man attempts 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 man tends to plant his crops in straight rows, or that the military obliges men 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, linearly.

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 (Merculieff 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.
References


