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ABSTRACT

Visual literacy is a culturally-derived strength of Native American students. On a continent with more than 200 languages, Native Americans relied heavily on visual intelligence for trade and communication between tribes. Tribal people interpreted medicine paint, tattoos, and clothing styles to determine the social roles of those with whom they interacted. Color and symbolism could be used to encode a family identity. The graphic designs in Native American painting are often esoteric, charged icons that suggest a unity of culture transcending other factors such as building techniques, use of plants, and architectural layout. The more abstract icons lend themselves to multiple interpretations. As oral language is poeticized so as to be remembered, so graphic design is stylized to suggest analogical thought. In traditional settings, social roles and expectations, cultural history, and esoteric knowledge were built into nonverbal behavior, which could be interpreted on a number of levels. Children could process information on the most concrete, literal level, while more esoteric meanings were available to those who occupied specific roles in the community. Good teachers started with the simple, literal explanation and then proceeded to a more complex level when the learner asked the right questions. Digital technology may be transforming definitions of literacy for the masses, and the shift may indeed favor visual intelligence. Visual vocabulary is undervalued in education, and there is a need for collaboration between those in the visual and verbal arts. (Contains 23 references.) (TD)

**NATIVE AMERICAN VISUAL
VOCABULARY:
WAYS OF THINKING AND LIVING**

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Native American Visual Vocabulary: Ways of Thinking and Living

Visual literacy is a culturally-derived strength of Native American students. Given the assignment to copy the distinctive styles from historic Pueblo pottery, the Navajo and Zuni students enrolled in an Electronic Publishing Technology course at the University of New Mexico-Gallup are remarkable adept. The students intuitively understood how to scale and render the images with accuracy. They had not shown any strong affinity for writing, but they provided interpretations of what they saw in the geometric, non-representational graphics. For these written reflections, the students were asked to think about their relationship to the person who created those images a long time ago, and to spend a long time studying these designs. The success of this project suggests the need for a fuller investigation of the role of visual vocabulary in the history of Native American communities. This visual vocabulary is undervalued in education, and indicates need for collaboration between those in the visual and verbal arts.

As one contemplates the geometrical designs on a Zuni pot, or the intricate flowers on an Ojibwe beaded bag, or the placement of feathers and animal skin on a Crow medicine shield, the aesthetic principles guiding the artist become apparent. In addition to this strong visual design, traditional Native American objects are imbued with a spiritual and symbolic power. Since these works are typically viewed outside their original context, the viewer may not fully appreciate of the multiple levels of meaning inherent in visual metaphors. Skills in the production and interpretation of visual imagery suggest sophisticated intellectual operations. Visually conceived analogies are important to both art and science. Evelyn Payne Hatcher argues that “Visual art is not merely a matter of aesthetics, but one of visually developed ideas, usually conceived in some metaphorical form.”¹ Anthropologists and art historians have studied visual metaphors as windows into understanding cultures and have attempted to arrive at “comparative iconography”. The visual imagery of Native Americans served to support their cultural narratives which were, until recently, transmitted solely through the oral tradition.

¹ Evelyn Payne Hatcher. VISUAL METAPHORS: A METHODOLOGICAL STUDY IN VISUAL COMMUNICATION (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1974), 239.

The research on the connection between visual intelligence and literacy is scant. Visual intelligence, the ability to understand and make statements that enable one to understand the systems of which one is a part, is encouraged in the arts. Analysis of how the public is informed and manipulated through the radio, television, and Internet is offered in Media Literacy courses. A definition of “visual literacy” can be more encompassing: “Visual literacy integrates personal experience, knowledge, and imagination with social experience, technology, and aesthetics.”² Some writing teachers argue that there are parallels between the way students organize and decode visual material and the way others organize words, concepts, and ideas in written language. Written, verbal material is difficult and elusive for some students until they can become more conscious of their organizational processes with more tangible objects. They recommend that teachers work with the potential of those with developed visual intelligence. “By ordering visually,” one researcher concludes, “we learn how to

² Deborah Curtiss. INTRODUCTION TO VISUAL LITERACY: A GUIDE TO THE VISUAL ARTS. (New York: Prentice Hall, 1987), 238.

order verbally.”³ However, Paul Messaris, a critic of visual literacy, disagrees that there is an equivalency between visual “language” and Western alphabetic literacy.

The discourse of Native American people, using the socio-cultural approach to literacy, would include words and images in an “integrated way of thinking, acting, talking, and valuing connected with a particular social identity or role, with its own unique history...”⁴ The artifacts require some cultural and historical knowledge for interpretation. Out of the original context of the discourse, the “props” under discussion are presentational, rather than propositional. In order to engage in analytical thinking, one must be able to make explicit conditional statements about the reality of a particular situation. With language, Messaris argues, comes a precision and set of intellectual operations that cannot be replicated in the decoding of the visual. The conventions of language and mathematics are arbitrary, therefore, “It follows...that visual literacy is unlikely to lead to any broader

³ William W. West, “Parallels in Visual and Verbal Composition,” PROCEEDINGS FROM THE FIRST NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON VISUAL LITERACY, Ed. Clarence M. Williams and John Debes (New York: Pitman, 1970), 271.

⁴ James Gee. “Socio-cultural Approaches to Literacy (Literacies),” ANNUAL REVIEW OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS 12 (1992): 33.

cognitive advantages analogous to those that result from learning a language. Because images REPRODUCE aspects of our direct, unmediated experience rather than encoding it arbitrarily, familiarity with images does not entail the acquisition of a system of conceptual categories or a set of analytical operators for ordering those categories.”⁵ There is no doubt that higher education and many professions still value this precision of thought and the set of intellectual operations associated with literacy. Digital technology may be transforming definitions of literacy for the masses, and the shift may indeed favor visual intelligence. However, the complex feeling states and visionary experiences originating in the right brain that find expression in metaphor, and the subliminal messages communicated through vocal inflection and facial gestalts can only be experienced in the face-to-face interaction fundamental to Native American education and ceremonial life.

Indigenous visual art often appears to be simple and guileless to the untrained eye. The viewer may be able to discern the symbols for birds, mountains, and clouds on a piece of

⁵ Paul Messaris. VISUAL LITERACY: IMAGE, MIND, AND REALITY (Boulder: Westview Press), 176.

Mimbres pottery: the patterns then acquire additional significance. A particular form of adornment such as the Plains feather headdress may be associated with a generalized notion of Native American dress, when in fact the subtleties in tattoos, masks, and the design of garments were important as stylistic markings related to gender and status within a tribe. Such adornments facilitated cross-tribal communication. Indigenous art also provides mnemonic cues for philosophical and historical narratives. These pictorial documents of recorded events and stylized natural forms in simple repetitive shapes are the remnants of sophisticated visual systems of communication. The images referenced were linked to a function in Native American culture: art and life were undifferentiated. A weaving, pot, or basket could serve a utilitarian purpose; a drypainting or a mask could be created by a “specialist” and then returned to nature. The fusion between spirituality and design is palpable, however, in the traditional pieces. Rina Swentzell, a Tewa-Santa Clara scholar, notes that contemporary native work can lose a special quality: “Native American art comes from a deeper place within the soul than any impulse growing out of commercial motives. Yet today we are seeing highly polished, non-utilitarian work coming out of Santa Clara and all the

Pueblos.”⁶ Like their Western counterparts, Native American artists strive to create an identity now and a “name”: immersion in a collective identity is no longer a reality.

Anonymity characterized all early art and early writing. The Sumerian, Phoenician, and Mesoamerican scribes who developed writing, the Egyptian artisans who combined words and images on papyrus manuscripts, Chinese block printers, medieval illuminators and fifteenth-century printers and compositors who designed early European printed books all became part of the rich heritage upon which much of the study of written language is founded. These social and aesthetic accomplishments cannot be linked with the names of individuals: the identity of the “author” has been constructed as literacy has become widespread. The visual thinking that inspired the magnificent cave paintings from Altamira, Spain; Lascaux and Chauvet, France; and the North Americas, the traditional starting point for all introductory-level courses in art history, represents the precursor of literacy. The artist-shaman who created these life-like images of the hunt to invoke magical power suggest the universal ritual uses of art and

⁶ Rina Swentzell, “The Sense of Process,” ALL ROADS ARE GOOD: NATIVE VOICES ON LIFE AND CULTURE (Washington, DC: The Smithsonian Institution Press 1994), 31.

language. Perhaps this is why this imagery and simple symbolism can stir strong reactions that transcend cultural, geographic, and political boundaries.

On a continent where more than two hundred languages were spoken, Native Americans relied heavily on visual intelligence for survival. Pictographic messages on wood and stone were used in trade and communication between the tribes. There is no more pragmatic form of communication than a carving used to delineate territory or provide direction. The well-known solstice marker at Chaco Canyon would have been accessible to Mesoamericans trading in the area. Nearby they would likely see the pictograph that is reputedly a recording of the supernova of the 11th century. Most tribes specialized in the trade of one or more items such as shells, hides, or stones. The Cherokee wampum belts made from whelk and clam shell were used as currency in the 18th Century. Tribal people interpreted medicine paint, tattoos, and clothing styles to determine the social roles of those with whom they interacted. Color and symbolism could be used to encode a family identity. A Chilkat weaver may invest more than a year in a clan robe in order to gather, dye, and spin the mountain goat wool. Ojibwe women invested the same time in the bandolier beaded bag

for a family member. “For the women who made them, it was a labor of love, almost like giving birth to a child.”⁷ The full headdress of the Plains Indian warrior is a familiar American icon. A single feather of a warrior was testimony to the fact that he had counted coup: touched an enemy without hurting him. Some designs were communicated from the spirit world to the wearer. The shirt attributed to Crazy Horse communicates a visionary experience in the painting of the hide; the locks of hair suggest his role as an *akicita*, a warrior and mediator. Medicine pouches are powerful and personal: they contain roots, herbs, stones, and constitute a “cosmic diagram” of a multi-layered universe.” Such necklaces are created after a vision quest, Duban notes, and “commemorate contact with the supernatural and preserve private messages known only to the owner.”⁸ Bags, shields, and clothing can be protective, as eagle feathers can be. The Ghost Dance Shirts worn by the Sioux were thought to be impenetrable by bullets. Adornment also signals transformation: a shaman wears animal

⁷ Earl Nyholm, “The Proper Way,” *ALL ROADS ARE GOOD: NATIVE VOICES ON LIFE AND CULTURE* (Washington, DC: The Smithsonian Institution Press 1994), 50.

⁸ Lois Sherr Dubin. *NORTH AMERICAN INDIAN JEWELRY AND ADORNMENT FROM PREHISTORY TO THE PRESENT* (New York: Harry Abrams, 1999), 247.

skins, feathers, and stones to invoke the help of spirits. When a Zuni dancer puts on the dress of a kachina, or a White Mountain Apache puts on the headdress of a clown, they are transformed and must not be touched by humans. Serious conflict has arisen between Native people and collectors who cannot accept the inherent life in ceremonial items; this has led to the Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990. The conflict reflects fundamental differences in definitions of what is “animate” and “inanimate”, what is community property and what is a cultural artifact.

The graphic designs encoded epic events, migrations, and personal narratives. A buffalo robe might be painted with the exploits of a warrior. The pictorials on the Plains winter counts jarred the memory of the storyteller and he recounted tribal events. These representations can be deciphered even without the oral narratives. Some image-inspired ideographs were shared by tribes; for example, the stylized symbol for corn can be seen in both Hopi and Navajo cultures. Some scholars note the similarities between Navajo dry paintings and Pueblo altars, and argue that the Navajo derived their designs from their neighbors, but favored elaborate

drawings over assemblages over time for practical reasons.⁹ The woven wampum belts of the Cherokee are much more abstract and difficult to decode. Important events concerning peace and war were woven into the belts, and presented such a threat to the colonists, that they destroyed them. The tribe sustained their sacred and historical knowledge by transforming it in acceptable Woodlands flower imagery. “When we worked with flowers, we made the missionaries happy. But hidden in the flowers, as well as other imagery, ideas were kept alive,” an Elder Cherokee recalls. “In the flowers were messages and telegrams...One bead color touching another meant something...the spiritual teachings still circulated.”¹⁰ Dramatic changes were precipitated in the arts by contact with Europeans: hides were replaced by muslin, shells by glass beads. More importantly, visual metaphors had to be protected as ceremonial objects were confiscated by the government authorities, religious fanatics, and anthropologists. The potlaches of the Northwest tribes, intended to redistribute goods in the community, were outlawed. Twenty-six Kiowa and

⁹ Hatcher. The subject of the Navajos “borrowing” cultural practices from the Pueblos remains sensitive in the Four Corners region.

¹⁰ Dubin, 196.

Cheyenne warriors imprisoned at Ft. Marion produced eight hundred ledger drawings to sell to tourists; the distinctive drawings were precursors to contemporary art. Arthur Siberman states: “Native American painting became an ideological concern projecting a threatened way of life.”¹¹ The graphic designs under discussion are often esoteric, “charged icons” that suggest a unity of culture transcending other factors such as building techniques, use of plants, and architectural layout. Patricia Crown makes this case for the Salado polychrome pots of the Southwest. Icons associated with the sun, stars, Venus, the sky, clouds, lightning, and precipitation are apparent in the designs. Fertility and weather control were paramount to these people. Crown provides a convincing argument that the designs are associated with an ideology. She suggests that the pottery had several functions: “Possession of the pottery affirmed that the owner was a participant in the cult and a believer in its tenet. It thus served as an assertion of personal beliefs by the owner and as an indicator to outsiders of the beliefs of the individual—the pottery defined membership in a group of believers...The pottery style not only

¹¹ Arthur Siberman. “100 Years of Native American Painting,” Display at the National Museum of the American Indian (New York: New York).

signaled belief in an ideology, it also signaled access to the power associated with the ideology.”¹² A sustained drought in the Southwest led to relocation of various communities in the late 13th century. The material evidence for the cult is stronger after this point, as the people struggled to sustain their culture. Along the same lines, the parfleche bags created by entitled Lakota women have colorful, symmetrical designs that communicate esoteric knowledge. The creator’s understanding that “what is in the stars is on earth and what is on earth is in the stars” was expressed in the mirroring of designs.¹³ The keeper of Lakota star knowledge possesses a buffalo hide which is passed on from one generation to the next. The ceremonial cycles of the Sioux required that they travel to specific sites in and around the Black Hills, the “heart of everything that is”, in order to receive “Wakan Waste”, the power that comes down to earth at certain times and at appointed places

¹² Patricia L. Crown. CERAMICS AND IDEOLOGY: SALADO POLYCHROME POTTERY (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994), 223.

¹³ Ronald Goodman. LAKOTA STAR KNOWLEDGE: STUDIES IN LAKOTA STELLAR THEOLOGY (Rosebud, SD: Sinte Gleska University Press, 1992), 34.

when the sun is in a particular constellation.¹⁴ This star knowledge is being revived and disseminated by Sinte Gleska University.

The range of symbols in the indigenous visual vocabulary reflect the natural features of the continent: whales, birds, forests, and deserts. While there is an abundance of pictographic images, others are more abstract or stylized and lend themselves to multiple interpretations. As oral language is poeticized so as to be remembered, so graphic design is stylized to suggest analogical thought. From a Dine perspective, the ear of corn is resonant with meaning. Corn is cultivated and it sustains the earth-surface beings. Corn pollen is offered to the “diyinii” in an act of reciprocity. All living beings have a life cycle, as the corn has a cycle. The tassels resemble human hair, the leaves a shawl or blanket. Changing Woman, at the heart of the Origin Story, was found as a corn plant. White corn is associated with the male principle, yellow corn with the female. For the Hopis, the varieties of corn represent the choices that different tribes made as they transitioned into life in the Fourth World. The Hopis chose short, blue corn, which represents a long and lasting life, while the Diné

¹⁴ Goodman, 12.

chose yellow corn and with it a shorter, more enjoyable life.¹⁵ The design of everyday objects, ceremonial items, and housing encode a cosmic order that precede human thought: such imagery can be referenced for complex teachings. The basket and “hooghan” represent a homologue of the Navajo universe, for example. A traditionally educated Navajo may refer to a ceremonial basket as a visual record of Navajo history from the Emergence from the First World through every phase of life in this world. Talking God taught First Man and First Woman how to construct a “hooghan” at the time of emergence. “As in the case of baskets, the living elements moisture, air, substance, heat, and vibration were formulated to “hooghan”, whose structure, process, and use followed the paradigms established in the construction of the world.”¹⁶ Farella refers to the home as one of the “master encodings”: “A complete understanding of the Hogan is complete understanding.”¹⁷ The square and circular mother earth symbols,

¹⁵ Frank Waters. *THE BOOK OF THE HOPI* (New York: Penguin Books, 1963).

¹⁶ Maureen Trudelle Schwarz. *MOLDED IN THE IMAGE OF CHANGING WOMAN: NAVAJO VIEWS OF THE HUMAN BODY AND PERSONHOOD* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1997), 41.

¹⁷ John. R. Farella. *THE MAIN STALK: A SYNTHESIS OF NAVAJO PHILOSOPHY* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1996), 87.

found carved on a rock south of Shipaulovi are found on ceremonial objects and on Hopi jewelry. Humans have lived in three previous lower worlds, the Hopi suggest, and are now living in a Fourth World. These worlds were not literally under the earth, but represent lower forms of consciousness. In the Fourth world, the Creator Masaw instructed every clan to make a migration in all four directions before returning to the center of the world in the Hopi homeland. According to Frank Waters, "All these patterns formed by their four migrations are the basic motifs of the symbols still found today in their pottery and basket ware, or their kachina rattles and altar boards."¹⁸ The circle, for the Sioux, is a fundamental symbol marking the edge of the world and the four directions with specific sets of meanings: north is associated with purification, the west is home of the Thunder Beings, the east is associated with wisdom, and the south with fertility. The sweat lodge, the tipi, and the camp circle are all designed as homologues. The sweat lodge is a small spatial model of the earth and the mother universe. And individual could visualize his or her place in the circles of organization, form a sense of identity, and act appropriately. Where one sat in a tipi was charged with social

¹⁸ Waters, 42.

meaning. When the Sioux camped, the placement of tipis within the circle was determined by family roles and social status. Furthermore, Elaine Jahner argues that Lakota verbs of movement were tied to performance conditions associated with the spatial plans of the camp circle and the migration of the tribe. "Important aspects of the Lakota system of interaction were once mapped out in the spatial plan of the camp circle. As a result, role functions could be communicated non-verbally, and the actual positions of participants in any communication situation could affect the structure and meaning of the verb exchange."¹⁹ Language loss involves not just the loss of words, but the loss of roles and social expectations built into non-verbal behavior. While some of the narrative tradition has been lost, the traditional "hooghan" sits beside the mobile home, and the tipi may be used by Native American church members in any part of the country.

The narratives were accessible to everyone in the community and could be interpreted on a number of levels. Children could process information on the most concrete, literal

¹⁹ Elaine Jahner. "Language Change and Cultural Dynamics: A Study of Lakota Verbs of Movement," *LANGUAGES IN CONFLICT: LINGUISTIC ACCULTURATION ON THE GREAT PLAINS*, Ed. Paul Schach (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), 140.

level, while more esoteric meanings were available to those who occupied specific roles in the community. A Navajo medicine man, Harry Walters, points out that there are four main levels of abstraction in story-rendering and that these can be subdivided into an additional three, so one can say there are twelve levels of meaning. The first is used for children, the fourth is reserved for specialists, such as singers and medicine people, the other two are of intermediate abstraction.²⁰ As the level of abstraction changes, so do the detail of the stories. There are several hundred versions of origin stories. Common to all is the birth of the hero twins to Changing Woman. There follows a period of time when the sexes are separated and sexual misconduct occurs. The *naayee* concept enters Navajo philosophy at this point, and most translators have gone with a literal, concrete translation of “monsters”. John Farella prefers the metaphorical interpretation: “anything that gets in the way of one’s life”, which may include poverty, illness, or unhealthy relationships.²¹ A visual image or an objectification may be essential to young learners. The Hero Twins slay the monsters that come into being as a result of human misconduct. Good

²⁰ Schwarz, 24.

²¹ Farella, 8.

teachers, Walters points out, start with the simple, literal explanation and then proceed to a more complex level when the learner asks the right questions. The trajectory for cognitive and spiritual development is individual and learner-initiated. The concrete and the abstract can be found in native words with multiple meanings. The Navajo word “ama” has a wide range of referents: one’s mother by birth, the earth, the sheep herd, the corn fields, and the mountain soil bundle, as Witherspoon points out. Similarly, the Lakota word “wacekiya” means both to “pray” and “to speak to one’s relative.” The multiple meanings of words and the multiple levels of interpretation indicated field-dependent thought and cooperative learning in the communities. Members of the community related to one another through common metaphors and remained mindful of their inter-connection to all living beings. Teachers and storytellers adapted to the gender and age of their listeners; the appropriateness of narrative to the time of year was also a consideration. The skills of spontaneous adaptation to the mood and knowledge of an audience were part of defined intelligence.

A conceptual model of a sphere encompassing the solar system and visible constellations was used for agricultural,

hunting, and the accompanying ceremonial practices. Acknowledging the interconnection between all living beings, indigenous people made offerings and conducted ceremonies at appropriate times and places. A Navajo Night Chant Singer keeps an eye on the constellations and times his songs accordingly. The Zuni Shalako dance is determined by the position of the moon rather than a calendar date. The individual is also situated within this icon of the cosmic circle or sphere. Dubin observes: “As part of the universal circle, the tribe encircles the family; at the circle’s core stands the individual, who also passes through the life cycle. Tribes link to other tribes through circular trade routes and reciprocal gift-giving practices.”²² Children pass through the circle of learning until they are revered elders, dependent on younger caregivers.

The visual paradigm of the medicine wheel has structured Native American curriculum. One such example derives from a model created by Tex Anderson, Jr. to represent “Dineji ke’ go Hozhoogo iina,” The Navajo Blessing Way of Life; this model is

²² Dubin, 20.

used by Dine College.²³ The Four Sacred Mountains, the seasons, essential elements, and clans are indicated on the Four Directional quadrants. Childhood is a time for the understanding of limits and boundaries; the child begins the process of learning thinking skills. Experimentation and planning are stressed during the adolescent years. Adults become involved with the creation of life and the application of learning. Reflection on learning and action is emphasized in the final quadrant, and wisdom develops from this process. This paradigm is fluid and dynamic; it can and has been used across the curriculum at Dine College. “Praxis” is emphasized: knowledge is converted into practice within a cultural context. This instinct to contextualize knowledge by situating the learners in time and space is observed in informal education in the community. “Navajo people living in the modern world often cope with individual concerns by placing them within the larger cultural context of Navajo philosophy and oral history...To teach one about Navajo life and explain their courses of action in problem-solving, they contextualized each of the topics under consideration

²³ Tex Anderson, Jr. Diagram produced by N. Quagletta, QT Consultants, 1995.

within a broader framework of the origin and creation stories that make up oral history”, Schwarz notes.²⁴

Charles Braithwaite, an ethnographer, has noted a number of ways that the tribal college has promoted the language and culture of the Navajo and motivated students to live consistently with the Protection Way and Blessing Way Teachings.²⁵ Individual “identity” is reinforced by mandatory clan introductions. A “sense of place” is embedded in the design of the college campus. The core of the administration building is a “hooghan” and the creation stories are painted on walls outside the interior. “Duality”, the interconnectedness of male and female principles, is integrated into philosophy classes. The teachings about reproduction and transformation spiral back to the creation story: “The amorphous, primal-gendered beings repeatedly give birth to beings that more and more come to approximate the living things on the earth’s surface today.”²⁶ Male and female qualities are found pervade all beings and must exist in balance, even within the individual. With

²⁴ Schwarz, 32.

²⁵ Charles Braithwaite, “Sa’ah Naaghai Bik’eh Hozhoon: An Ethnography of Navajo Educational Communication Practices,” *COMMUNICATION EDUCATION* 46 (1997).

²⁶ Farella, 71.

“enactment”, finally, speakers draw upon personal experience as to support their claims. Testimony has some value in Western rhetoric, but anecdotal evidence is largely dismissed in most disciplines.

The stability of paradigms is valued in such educational practice, in contrast to the Western preference for paradigm shifts and the “discovery” of new knowledge. Tribal philosophies typically describe an order that existed prior to language and thought. According to Hopi thought, humans and animals understood one another in the First World. It was Lavaihoya, the Talker, who came as a mockingbird, who convinced people of differences between animals and people, and distinctions between people of various races and languages. Navajo children have the capacity to communicate with the Holy Ones in a primary language before they learn the “second” language of the tribe: verbal behavior, rituals, and art functions to restore desirable conditions. The primary intention of the communicator is not aesthetic or individualistic. The compulsive power of [Navajo] ritual, including the songs, paintings, and prayers which are parts

of the whole, brings everything into line, harmonious, under control, and therefore healthy.”²⁷

In contrast, Western discourse has evolved from ritual combat and the properties of the written language. Through the written language, one can provide stable definitions, make assumptions and premises explicit and adhere to a logical order. Given the complexity of some Native American thought systems, such as that of the Dine, one can challenge David Olson’s conclusion that oral language has “limited power to explore abstract ideas”. The role of common sense and the wisdom of elders, so important in oral tradition, are often by-passed in literate societies. “Truth drops its ties to wisdom and to values, becoming a product of the disinterested search of the scientist.”²⁸ Academic culture still has this preference for the stance of the “disinterested search”, even though “alternative” discourses have found some acceptance. There is still a preference of prose to poetry, which can be traced back to Plato’s writing of *THE REPUBLIC*, according to Olson. The primal imagery of the ancient Greek plays was created

²⁷ Hatcher, 25.

²⁸ David Olson, “From Utterance to Text: The Bias of Language in Speech and Writing,” *HARVARD EDUCATIONAL REVIEW* 47.3 (1977) 277-78.

by artists, who dwelled in the shadow world, and public discourse became the domain of philosophers, and later essayists and politicians.

Essayist literacy will remain important as scaffolding in higher education, and students will be expected to rely on digital technology to make visual statements. With computers, literacy requirements are in the process of change, and awareness of how thought can be mediated by the cultural tool of digital technology is intensified. Visual literacy requires a synthesis of the verbal and visual/spatial capacities: popular notions about the erosion of literacy are based on a false dichotomy. Leonard Shlain proposes that the power of the image has been waxing over the last fifty years, and Western culture is experiencing a shift in orientation. He refers to the power of NASA's photograph of the earth floating in space: "The inviting, mute image of the home planet floating in dark space did more to change the consciousness of its residents than the miles of type concerning the subject generated by the world's writers."²⁹ While the printed word dominated for five

²⁹ Leonard Shlain. *THE ALPHABET VERSUS THE GODDESS: THE CONFLICT BETWEEN WORD AND IMAGE* (New York: Penguin): 410.

millennia, the iconic symbol will reemerge along with the values of tolerance and respect for nature.

The predilection for visual learning is encouraged in Native American cultures with a traditional reliance on visual metaphors. Collaborations between those in the visual arts and those in the verbal, as described in the introduction of the essay, make pedagogical sense. Curtiss argues that once students can identify and create interrelated and interlocking whole images and structures, “they may better grasp the idea of unlocking other structures such as language...Visually dominant learners, I suspect, need to learn how to see parts of a whole and the relationship of one part of the whole to the whole to express themselves effectively with words.”³⁰ The physical presence of teachers is important, however, to learning. The affect of the teacher, the paralanguage, the vibration of the voice allow interpretation at an intuitive level. Ceremonies combine song and ritual behavior to reconfigure energies: explanations from the language of the physical do not work. As distance and internet learning are promoted as effective and economical, more students will seek praxis in education through service learning and face-to-

face interaction with human teachers who have a feel for tribal learning.

³⁰ Curtis, 238.

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