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COMMENTARY

White Mischief: Metaphor and Desire in a Misreading of Navajo Culture

THOMAS PATIN

The main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning. If you knew when you began a book what you would say at the end, do you think you would have the courage to write it? The game is worthwhile insofar as we don't know what will be the end.

—Michel Foucault
Technologies of the Self

“Since the first contact between Europeans and Native Americans, their relationship has been characterized by various forms of estrangement.” So begins Gary Witherspoon’s *Language and Art of the Navajo Universe*.¹ This statement is true enough, but it is not at all certain that Witherspoon’s influential representation of the Navajo is not another form of estrangement.

The major motivation of the book was, as he put it, “to bring the Navajo world closer and make it more intelligible to non-Navajos,”² so that Navajo philosophy and art would “take their place alongside other philosophies and art traditions.”³ It should be said at the outset that Witherspoon’s effort, at least in terms of his stated intentions, is successful. This book is a useful and informative account of the Navajo culture, especially language, philosophy,

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and art (e.g., songs, rituals, drypaintings, weavings, jewelry). What is problematic, however, is the manner by which Witherspoon achieves his success. A reading of his writing that is informed by deconstruction will reveal that the means by which he brings the Navajo culture closer and more intelligible to our own are the same devices that simultaneously undermine the persuasive power of his representation of that culture. A number of problems arise from the effect of Witherspoon's extensive use of figurative language—in particular, a metaphor of "depth."⁴ The best example is in his main premise that "[s]urface level phenomena [culture] need to be understood and explicated in subsurface level terms."⁵ From the point of view of poststructuralist theory, Witherspoon's use of this figure unintentionally undermines his explicit claims regarding Navajo art. There also are important implications for the representation of "others," which may indicate something about the history of relations between whites and Indians.

Before I examine the difficulties with Witherspoon's representation of the Navajo, I will qualify some remarks, define some terms, and provide some examples. Deconstruction is one of the most misused terms of late. It is most often confused with analysis or with one of its many effects (such as deferral of conclusions, or confounding interpretation), or it is taken to be anything written by a "deconstructionist" (e.g., Jacques Derrida or Paul de Man). I would characterize deconstruction as more of an event than a method or philosophy. A deconstruction concerns the uses of "self-evident" binary oppositions or conceptual pairs which are used as the basis of an argument or theory. A "deconstructive reading" sees the pairs as written into a particular argument from the very start so as to give one term a privileged or ruling position over the other. The first term is presented as primary and ontologically prior (having existed first and coming first in the presentation of the pair), while the other term is secondary and serves as a supplement to the first.⁶ This opposition would control the meaning of the argument and restrict its possible direction and outcome. A "close reading" locates a crucial point in a text or argument where its logic and rhetoric (or what it says and how it says it) contradict one another. This point is called an *aporia*, an "impassable path," the point beyond which the argument cannot be followed. At this point, the first term announces its own partial complicity with, dependence on, and circumscription by the term it would suppress. The whole argument becomes suspect, de-structured or "de-centered," and loses its power to convince. A

deconstruction is not a search for balance, a middle way, or a third term. If anything, a reversal occurs, whereby the ruling term becomes governed by the other term.⁷

Derrida's most telling example of a deconstruction appears in his essay, "Plato's Pharmacy."⁸ It concerns Plato's dialogue, "Phaedrus," which contains a discussion regarding the nature of speech and writing and the implications they have for epistemology and the search for truth.⁹ In the dialogue, Socrates states that speech is preferred to writing, because speech is the correct vehicle for truth, while writing is coupled with rhetoric and painting, as an "art." Speech, the "living word," has a "soul," while writing is "no more than an image." Since it originates from the body, speech is presented as having a prior existence to writing, which is seen as a mere representation of speech (a supplement). Derrida's concern with "Phaedrus" is the repeated use of metaphor (and analogy) throughout the text. Socrates speaks figuratively of the nature of the soul, for example, as "a pair of winged horses." Even more significant is the generally bifurcated structure given to the dialogue. A four-termed metaphor is constructed between the two topics: Remedy is to poison as dialectic (speech) is to rhetoric (writing). There are other metaphorical oppositions in the dialogue. For example, speech is to writing as form (truth) is to painting (illusion/image/representation). Socrates, in order to convince Phaedrus of the deception inherent in the art of rhetoric, constructs an identity of rhetoric (including writing and metaphor) and "the opposite of truth."

For Derrida, the fabric of Plato's argument unravels precisely at this point. Even though the logic of the dialogue would have us believe that speech is preferable to writing, it uses metaphor extensively to argue the point. Since the Greeks considered metaphor, with writing, to belong to the art of rhetoric, the dialogue contradicts itself at the very crux of its argument. An *aporia* develops. The very structure of the dialogue becomes weakened and suspect.¹⁰ The reader realizes not only that the assertions of the dialogue are unconvincing, but that the reverse of the argument may be true: Writing may have preceded speech, even human existence, and speech/existence supplements writing. Or another possibility is that writing (representation) may be the only means to signify existence, but only as a trace of the absence of that existence.¹¹

A poststructuralist understanding of representation is one that refers to any systematic use of signifying systems to produce an

“understanding” or “picture” of a subject that is not available for presentation. This could include, for example, written and spoken words, iconography and symbology, one- and two-point linear perspective, music and audible codes. In any case, a representation is constructed of conventionalized signs in recognized modes in order to produce an account or “picture” that is convincing to a particular cultural group in a particular historical moment.¹² In his “Language, Truth, and Reason,” Ian Hacking describes *truth* as dependent on a prior historical event, i.e., the emergence of a style of thinking about truth or falsity. As he states it, “[A] style of reasoning is what brings in the possibility of truth or falsehood....”¹³ One consequence of these notions of representation is that one does not necessarily expect the representations of ethnography (as well as art history, artistic practice, or a number of other disciplines) to be products of *mimesis*, or imitation, of the “real.” Another consequence is that representation becomes more obviously a social and historical product, in other words, a political formation.

Witherspoon’s own strategy is generally rather hermetic, which tends to treat the Navajo culture as a whole and pure system, with few possibilities of historical disturbance. Witherspoon’s overall tactic is to isolate and specify “surface phenomena” so as to discover “underlying structures.” In his twelve-page introduction, Witherspoon uses this same metaphor of depth at least thirty-one times (most of those in a five-page section), as well as many other visual/spatial metaphors evoking images of construction, revelation, and reflection.¹⁴ For Witherspoon, no straightforward description of Navajo ceremonial culture, no matter how complex, is an adequate understanding of it. These “surface level” phenomena need to be explained in “subsurface level terms” to be most accurately comprehended.¹⁵ His concern is not with the “surface” of social life but rather with the “permanent underlying foundations” upon which that social life rests. “Just as the surface structure of a given sentence is generated by a set of operations at the deep structural level,” he writes, “concepts of and orientations to the world (that which is described by a world view portrait) emanate from deeper level metaphysical assumptions.”¹⁶ Witherspoon identifies this primary metaphysical assumption upon which the Navajo world is built as “the opposition between active and static phenomena or active and static phases of phenomena.”¹⁷ This dualism is the primary contrast of the metaphysical foundation underlying Navajo language and art. As Witherspoon

puts it, "The premises of Navajo metaphysics...are not those which Navajos can easily articulate without extended reflection. They are so axiomatic in the Navajo scheme of things that *no Navajo ever gives them any thought* [emphasis mine]. This is probably true of all peoples."¹⁸ Witherspoon's is a lengthy articulation of these "subsurface" assumptions of Navajo metaphysics, and a detailed representation of "reflections" of these metaphysical premises on the part of the Navajo (e.g., language use, color and design of weavings). He presents it as a given, however, that the assumption is made in the first place.

I would like to take another interdisciplinary digression: Witherspoon places himself in a similar position to that of Freud. Freud's goal in the treatment of hysterics, for example, was to achieve, through the "talking cure," an intelligible and coherent narrative of each case history.¹⁹ (Of course, he failed in one of his best-known cases, Dora. Recent feminist critics believe that Freud's failure was primarily caused by his inability to create a "master narrative" to supersede Dora's version of her own history.)²⁰ Like Freud, Witherspoon digs deep to find firm foundations for his narrative of Navajo culture.²¹ Witherspoon, for his part, sees similarities between his methods and the practice of archeology: finding artifacts, observing data "from which inferences are made about unobservable systems."²² He is certainly not inconsistent, then, when he writes, "Meanings of [Navajo] acts are not as apparent or transparent as we might initially have thought them to be.... Human actions are also performed within and according to a particular symbolic code and the meanings of such actions are not always apparent...[but] all convey messages about...the people who perform them."²³

It is primarily through an analysis of the formal qualities (color, line, composition) of Navajo ceremonial art, including drypainting and poetry or prayer, that Witherspoon arrives at his conclusions. One example is his treatment of a recurring chant or prayer from Blessingway, the most important of over fifty ceremonies held frequently by the Navajo:

*Earth's feet have become my feet
by means of these I shall live on.
Earth's legs have become my legs
by means of these I shall live on.
Earth's body has become my body
by means of this I shall live on.*

*Earth's mind has become my mind
by means of this I shall live on.
Earth's voice has become my voice
by means of this I shall live on.
Earth's headplume has become my headplume
by means of this I shall live on.
The cord-like extension from the top of its head
is the cord-like extension from the top of my head
as by means of this I shall live on.
There are mountains encircling it and
Hózhó extends up their slopes,
by means of these it will be hózhó as I shall live on.
Sa'ah Naagháii Bik'eh Hózhó I shall be,
Before me it will be hózhó as I live on,
Behind me it will be hózhó as I live on,
Below me it will be hózhó as I live on,
Above me it will be hózhó as I live on.
Hózhó has been restored.
Hózhó has been restored.
Hózhó has been restored.
Hózhó has been restored.²⁴*

According to Witherspoon, the Navajo see *Sa'ah Naagháii* as representing the "inner form" of the earth and also thought, while *Bik'eh Hózhó* represents the "outer form" of the earth and also speech. *Sa'ah Naagháii* and *Bik'eh Hózhó* are the central animating powers of the universe, producing a world described by *hózhó*. All things have inner forms and outer forms which must harmonize and unify with *Sa'ah Naagháii* and *Bik'eh Hózhó* to achieve well-being. Witherspoon sees the first half of the passage as composed of eight lines, each split into two or more parts. The first part of each line is different from pair to pair, the second part remaining the same from pair to pair. The rest of the passage can be divided into two parts, the first set of lines being different from one another, the second set of lines being identical to one another. The first eight lines are an example of a repetitive juxtaposition of active and static phenomena. The last two sections are seen as first active and then static. The whole passage is structured on an active-static-active-static rhythm. According to Witherspoon, this prayer is an example of the external manifestation of the basic Navajo metaphysical assumption of an opposition of inner and outer as well as active and static phenomena. Again, this is the

assumption that Witherspoon believes underlies all Navajo cultural production.

According to Witherspoon, Navajo visual art is also derived from this underlying assumption. "For the Navajo color is the symbolic base for another language," writes Witherspoon.²⁵ Individual colors may be considered the "pigmemes" of the Navajo language of color and light. They do not separately or individually mean or signify anything. They take on meaning in connection with or in contrast to other colors in a pair or in a sequence. Witherspoon claims that this pattern occurs in such a fashion that the "language of color and light" seems to possess a definite "syntax." The Navajo consider color an attribute of light, because by mythological reasoning, the sun combines the colors of the three previous worlds: black or red (static colors), blue (active), and yellow (active), with the daylight of the present world (static).²⁶ Since the ordering of events within a ceremony follows the events in the underworlds, a ceremony can be seen, through the association of each underworld with a color, as a cyclical repetition of the underlying philosophical assumption of the opposition of static-active-active-static phenomena.

Just as with the prayer above, Witherspoon seeks, through formal analyses, "subsurface" terms by which to explain other "surface level phenomena"—Navajo art.²⁷ So pigmemes have their obvious place in Witherspoon's analyses of Navajo drypaintings. Zigzag lines, the colors yellow, blue, and red, and diamond shapes are identified by Witherspoon with movement and activity. Straight and horizontal lines, vertical stripes, squares and rectangles, and the colors white, black, and gray denote static conditions.²⁸

To facilitate his analyses, Witherspoon provides diagrams of the assumptions he sees as underlying Navajo language and art. Figure 1 is a compilation of these diagrams.²⁹ In it the cardinal directions are associated with opposing symbols in the categories of sex, time of day, color, and, most importantly, static and active. Beginning at the east and moving in a sunward (or clockwise) direction, we have static (east), active (south), active (west), and static (north). The initial sequence goes from static (or male) to active (or female), and the concluding sequence, which completes the cycle, goes from active (female) to static (male). (These associations vary, however.) The patterns of classification of sex, direction, color, and qualities of light also "reflect," for Witherspoon the basic Navajo metaphysical distinction between the active and

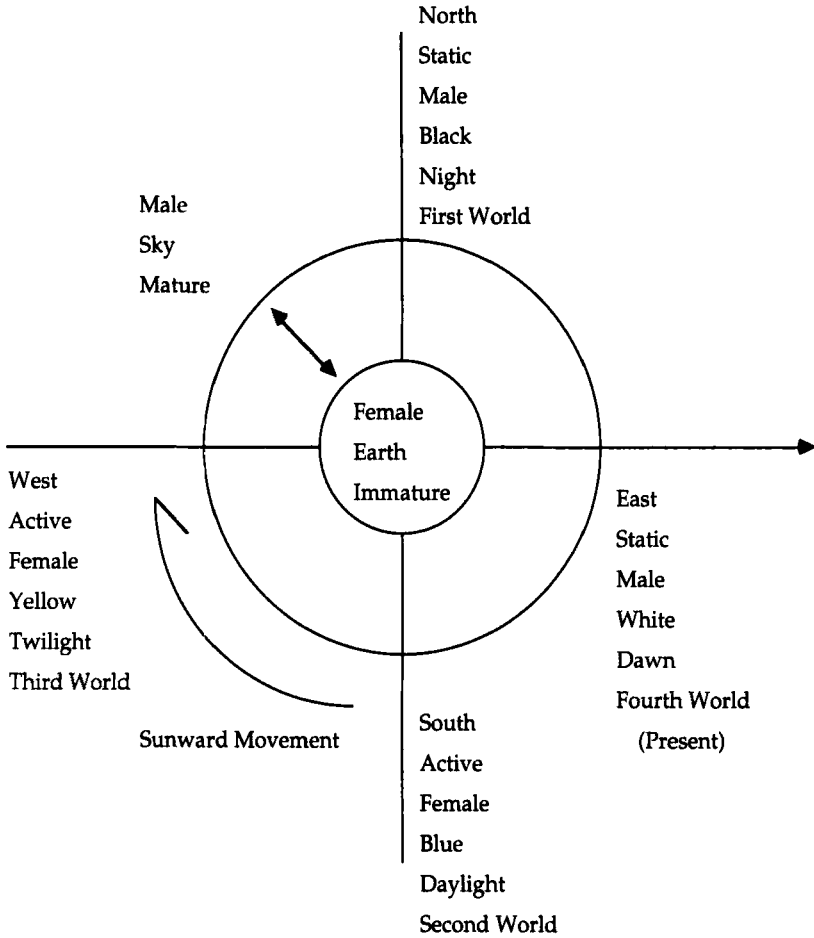


FIGURE 1. Adapted from Witherspoon, 145, 158, 159.

static dimensions of reality. This distinction provides a principle upon which Navajo symbolic classification is built. Regardless of the symbol system, linguistic or nonlinguistic, Witherspoon maintains that this metaphysical assumption is used as its base. "This dualism constitutes the metaphysical and ideological foundation for Navajo ideas concerning the nature of thought and speech, knowledge and language, world and element...[and] provide[s] the ideological concepts behind the Navajo doctrine of the compulsive power of language and ritual."³⁰ All things can be placed in one or the other category of active and static, according to Witherspoon, but it is the synthesis of these modes that leads to the ideal of *hózhó*, or harmony. These patterns are then translated into everyday behavioral patterns and value orientations and are used to order the symbols of the universe.

Like Plato's dialogue, Witherspoon's representation of Navajo culture is composed of an overarching conceptual pair—surface and subsurface. As he states repeatedly in the introductory and concluding passages in his book, surface phenomena are generated by subsurface metaphysical assumptions. This use of figuration does more than help Witherspoon state the idea at hand; it also posits an opposition of surface and subsurface, at the same time creating an overall figurative depth. Other oppositions are posed within both the surface and subsurface categories. On the surface, oppositions run from zigzag lines v. straight lines to disorder v. *hózhó*. Below the surface, the overall opposition is one of active v. static, but there are also other resulting oppositions on the surface, e.g., male v. female, mature v. immature, yellow v. white (see figure 1). Since "surface level" phenomena are generated by "subsurface level" metaphysical assumptions, surface level entities, like culture, are determined by lower level categories. Cultural possibilities are limited by primordial assumptions. The surface is controlled by the subsurface. The surface serves as a supplement to the subsurface, coming after it, excessive and unessential. Culture supplements philosophy. The subsurface acts as a firmament for "foundations."³¹

The logic of Witherspoon's argument is the logic of depth. It tells us that operations at the deep structural level generate culture. But Witherspoon's method of argument concerning Navajo art—his rhetoric—is an analysis of visual surface. Witherspoon's extensive analyses of form to evidence the "subsurface" create an aporia, or an obstacle to persuasion. It is very much like Plato's creation of an aporia through the repeated use of metaphor (with

writing, part of the art of rhetoric) to argue the primacy of speech over writing. On the one hand, it seems reasonable to expect Witherspoon's argument to develop in such a fashion. On the other hand, since Witherspoon positions Navajo art as surface phenomena and analyzes it neither iconographically nor historically, a contradiction emerges between the logic of his argument (generative operations, which include "depth") and his rhetoric or method of argument (horizontal surface analysis). His metaphors rupture his ostensibly "scientific" or systematic representation of the Navajo. Seeing tropes as tropes makes a reader suspect the rational order they promise.³²

Witherspoon presents Navajo culture (on the surface) as being derived from "lower level assumptions," with culture, coming after philosophical assumptions, serving as its supplement. But there is a reversal which advances itself within the aporia: Assertions of a structure can come only after the appearance of a surface, as a supplement to the surface. There are other possibilities: Subsurface is generated by surface, depth is flattened or erased by surface, "Navajo" culture precedes and defines "Navajo,"³³ *hózhó* appears only after disorder, Witherspoon's analyses supplement Navajo culture (rather than vice versa, as it stands in his book). Witherspoon's desire—for a center and a grounding upon which to build his representation of Navajo culture, a grounding that would rule all possibilities of meaning of Navajo cultural objects—is not only defeated by its own devices, but eventually suggests possibilities that are contrary to his arguments.

This is to be expected. As Derrida writes in "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy,"³⁴ metaphors defer outwards from themselves, so philosophy and science have sought overarching metaphors to settle the playful possibilities of meaning in their texts. But one metaphor does not reduce meaning; instead, through a substitution without the limits of a *logos*, or structure, "it gets carried away with itself, indefinitely constructing its own destruction or dilution. Thus can be seen the epistemological ambivalence of the metaphor. The authority of a text depends on unambiguous proper meanings for words, unequivocal meanings, which can be guaranteed by *logos*, a point at which knowledge and language attain an identity that serves as the source of authority over the meaning of a text or representation. The entire "logocentric" history of Western modes of signification is a search for the manifestation of truth. Metaphor has been excluded. Witherspoon's writing now appears more fully as a

representation in the sense discussed at the beginning of this paper. His conclusions seem more likely to be the outcome of a particular use of figuration than of Navajo unconscious assumptions. Witherspoon's book is, after all, a representation, not the full presence of the Navajo world itself. Language does not represent reality but signifies something so complex and unstable (here, Navajo) that it cannot be straightforwardly presented. The Navajo culture can be taken as exemplary of Roland Barthes's idea of a "healthy sign." A healthy sign is "infinitely fertile in suggestions," he writes. "Every object...can pass from a closed and silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation by society."³⁵

Ethnographers cannot control the meanings—readings—provoked by their accounts. They are bound to be misunderstood, and no single reading could possibly be held up as an understanding more convincing than all others. If we take the Navajo culture as a text, it, too, is bound to be misread. Because a text can eliminate neither ambiguity nor the subjectivity of its authors and readers, it is bound to be misread to the extent that the meaning of the text is, to a great degree, the sum of its misreadings, as critic Harold Bloom would have us recognize.³⁶ Also, the Navajo text is continually incomplete, differing (from other cultures) and deferring (to other cultures and to history), a sign that the system is being extended. Any search for grounding, completeness, and conclusions becomes problematic (but not necessarily impossible). Without firm groundings for the structures of their arguments, the traditional Western modes of representation no longer can control the meaning produced by the cultures of others. The significance of cultures is now conditional, determined through intrapersonal, sociopolitical, intracultural processes.

In a slightly different context, art theorist and critic Craig Owens writes, "The person who represents the world is transformed, through the act of representation, from a subjective being enmeshed in space and time...into a transcendent, objective Mind that appropriates reality for himself, and, by appropriating it, dominates it."³⁷ Witherspoon's work, despite its good intentions, turns out to be another form of estrangement of Native Americans, of the "primitive," of anything "Other," produced by white culture. Jimmie Durham, a Cherokee artist whose ideas are influenced by Michel Foucault and Edward Said, has commented that "Western culture's knowledge of the radically different Other is more than a body of potentially correctable lies and myths; it is more properly a sign of the relations of power."³⁸ For Durham,

(mis)representations—like Witherspoon's—of Others are signs of the problems of translating one set of cultural terms by another and are indicative of the history of relations between whites and Indians. It seems that Western culture has been unable to apprehend radical cultural difference without first circumscribing it with its own desires.

Edward Said has written recently of the growing awareness of the role played by Western colonialism in the study and representation of "primitive" or Third World cultures. For Said, what distinguishes anthropological writing, what makes it possible, is the imperial setting. He writes,

There is no way I know of apprehending the world from within our culture...without also apprehending the imperial contest itself. And this I would say is a cultural fact of extraordinary political as well as interpretive importance, because it is the true defining horizon...the enabling condition of such otherwise abstract and groundless concepts like "otherness" and "difference." The real problem remains to haunt us: the relationship between anthropology [and art history] as an ongoing enterprise and...empire as an ongoing concern.³⁹

Representations of the Other, then, are inextricably linked to issues of power.

NOTES

1. Gary Witherspoon, *Language and Art in the Navajo Universe* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1977), 1.

2. *Ibid.*, 11.

3. *Ibid.*, 12.

4. Metaphor has been an important topic in recent theory. I will use the term rather loosely to refer to the metaphoric use of language, to figuration. In general, I use metaphor to refer to substitution or analogy of language (signs) and something other than itself. This can include analogy, simile, figures of speech, tropes, as well as metaphors in the strict sense. For a poststructuralist discussion of metaphor, see Jacques Derrida, "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy," in Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 216.

5. Witherspoon, 4.

6. Derrida has cited many prominent examples of this idea of the supplement: Claude Levi-Strauss's opposition of Nature and Culture (and the Raw and the Cooked), as well as Jean-Jacques Rousseau's evaluation of writing as a

"dangerous supplement" to speech. See Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *The Structuralist Controversy*, ed. Eugene Donato and Richard Macksey (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970); *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

7. "Deconstructive writing" also often concerns itself with *différance*, logocentrism, supplementarity, free-play, etc.—the "results" of a deconstruction. This summary of "classic" deconstruction is gathered from several sources, most notably Christopher Norris, "Jacques Derrida in Discussion with Christopher Norris," and Andrew Benjamin, "Derrida, Architecture and Philosophy," *Architectural Design: Deconstruction II* (1989):59. See also Jacques Derrida, *Positions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 40-44. Other sources by Derrida are *Dissemination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 95-119; "White Mythology," 209-229; "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences"; *Of Grammatology*. Secondary sources abound, but an excellent one is Vincent B. Leitch, *Deconstructive Criticism: An Advanced Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

8. Discussion of Plato's "Phaedrus" from Derrida's *Dissemination*, 65-156. See also "Phaedrus" in *The Works of Plato*, ed. Edmund Irwin (New York: The Modern Library, 1956), 286-324. I evoke Derrida's reading of Plato here for two reasons. First, I wish to give an example of deconstruction. Derrida's example is important due to the tradition that resulted from that dialogue and other descendent philosophical texts, i.e., the Western tradition of "logocentric" philosophical discourse. "Logocentrism" can be defined as the desire for a "center" or "grounding" or original guarantee of all meaning. Derrida's critique of logocentric thinking shows how it represses difference and free thinking. Second, this particular example includes the use of metaphor against itself, which is part of my own reading, below, of Witherspoon's text.

9. There are also discussions on art, medicine, and love. In fact, it is easily read that Socrates is attempting to seduce young Phaedrus. This is not to point to evidence that Socrates was "corrupting the youth" of Athens. It is instead to point out the extent to which philosophy and knowledge were/are used as tools—not only in the search for truth but in the exercise of will, desire, and power.

10. Another important example, relevant to contemporary visual art, is the deconstruction of the notion of aesthetic autonomy. Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried prescribed that art progress toward total autonomy, as opposed to literature and theater, for example. With the advent of minimalism, however, it became obvious that this goal had been accomplished at the cost of that autonomy. It was through the institutionalized "theater" of criticism and theory that the autonomy of art was asserted (art should/could no longer signify anything itself). In other words, autonomous art was conditional, i.e., contingent upon criticism and theory. See Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum* (June 1967). See also Howard Singerman, "In the Text," in Arn Goldstein and Mary Ann Jacob, *A Forest of Signs: Art in the Crisis of Representation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989); Stephen W. Melville, *Philosophy Beside Itself: On Deconstruction and Modernism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 3-33.

11. In fact, it may be the case that Socrates himself exists only in written form. Recent scholarship suggests that there is more primary evidence of Socrates's existence as a literary "type" in Plato's dialogues and in Aristophanes's *Clouds*.

12. See discussions on poststructuralist ideas about representation by Stephen

Tyler, "Post-Modern Ethnography"; George Marcus, "Ethnography in the Modern World System"; and James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Allegory," in James Clifford and George Marcus, *Writing Culture: The Politics and Poetics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981). In contemporary art theory and practice, there is also an ongoing critique of representation. See Hal Foster, "Re: Post," and Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984). See also Howard Singerman, "In the Text," in *A Forest of Signs: Art in the Crisis of Representation*; Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), especially "Las Merinas" and "Representing"; John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).

13. Ian Hacking, quoted in Paul Rabinow, "Representations are Social Facts," in *Writing Culture*, 237.

14. Witherspoon uses metaphor and other devices of figuration rather liberally throughout his text. He uses them so frequently that it would seem that he does so uncritically, without an eye to their effects. In fact, metaphors are so common throughout the text that they draw attention to themselves and distract the reader from the ostensible message of the book. The reader is instead drawn to the impact and the implications of this extensive use of figuration.

15. Witherspoon, 1-12, introduction.

16. *Ibid.*, 4.

17. *Ibid.*, 179.

18. *Ibid.*, 10-11.

19. See Sigmund Freud, *Dora: An Analysis of a Case Study in Hysteria* (New York: Collier Books, 1963), 32.

20. Susan Rubin Suleiman gives an interesting accounting of ideas concerning women and psychoanalysis in chapter 5, "Love Stories: Women, Madness, and Narrative," of *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics and the Avant-garde* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 88-118.

21. I do not wish to imply that Witherspoon is approaching the Navajo from a psychoanalytic viewpoint. I do wish to imply that Witherspoon's approach has some general methodological similarities with psychoanalysis. This should not be surprising, considering that both Witherspoon and Freud make the Platonic assumption that there is a world of appearance and another, elusive, and more primary realm of existence. Both men make extensive use of a "depth model" in their work.

22. Witherspoon, 10.

23. *Ibid.*, 3.

24. Prayer and analysis from Witherspoon, 25-28.

25. Discussion on color from Witherspoon, 144-49.

26. Darkness is seen by the Navajo as a kind of noncommunicative silence, since all sense or perception of color is destroyed or eliminated. Night becomes chaotic because there is an absence of light, but the return of the sun every morning is seen as a return to order. Navajo ceremonies are thus organized on the occurrences in the three previous underworlds plus the present world. Appropriately, the traditional Blessingway ends at dawn following the fourth night of ceremonies, with the patient now harmonious with the world, greeting the ordering light of day. When read within Witherspoon's schema, the whole structure of the Blessingway ceremony exemplifies the Navajo structure of the

oppositions between active and static.

27. Witherspoon's analyses are formal and not iconographical. Witherspoon does lengthy formal analyses, then equates form to active/static without providing a history, an iconology. The relation of form to Navajo philosophy seems arbitrary.

28. Analysis from Witherspoon, 162. Witherspoon correlates zigzag and straight lines to active and static, respectively, due to the repetitive characteristics of the former and the uninterrupted qualities of the latter.

29. Adapted from Witherspoon, 146, 158, 159.

30. Witherspoon, 179.

31. The title of Witherspoon's book positions language before art, granting ontological priority to the word *language*, implying a supplementary position of art to language. Derrida writes at length about supplementarity, especially as it is found in the Western tradition of philosophy and science. See note 7.

32. For excellent discussions on "tropes," see Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978). There is no point in his book where Witherspoon explicitly declares he is doing "science." However, the foreword by Clifford Geertz compares Witherspoon's work favorably to other famous anthropologists like Benedict, Mauss, Radin, and Reichard. In his introduction, Witherspoon writes about the aims of anthropology, his fieldwork among the Navajos, and so on.

33. This could be a literal, not merely rhetorical, possibility. The Navajo are known to have arrived relatively late to the southwestern United States (shortly before Spanish colonization). According to many sources, they have extensively "borrowed" important aspects of their culture from neighboring groups like the Hopi.

34. Much of the following discussion on metaphor and philosophy is from Derrida, "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy."

35. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 109.

36. Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 83-105.

37. Craig Owens, "Representation, Appropriation, and Power," *Art in America* (May 1982): 20.

38. For these comments I am indebted to Jimmie Durham and Jean Fisher, "The Ground Has Been Covered," *Artforum* (Summer 1988): 101-102.

39. Edward Said, "Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors," *Critical Inquiry* 15 (Winter 1989): 217.