

Go Up Into the Gaps: Play and Native American Religions – 1

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It was a dark and misty winter afternoon. As I crested the hill east of Zuni the familiar sights of Corn Mountain to the south and Zuni village nestled in the valley below greeted me. I thought of Frank Hamilton Cushing's description of Zuni as it first appeared to him in 1879:

Below and beyond me was suddenly revealed a great red and yellow sandplain. . . . To the left, a mile or two away, crowning numberless red foot-hills, rose a huge rock-mountain, a thousand feet high and at least two miles in length along its flat top, which showed, even in the distance, fanciful chiselings by wind, sand, and weather. . . .

Out from the middle of the rock-wall . . . flowed a little rivulet. Emerging from a succession of low mounds beneath me, it wound, like a long whip-lash or the track of an earth-worm, westward through the middle of the sandy plain and out almost to the horizon, where . . . it was lost in the southern shadows of a terraced hill.

Down behind this hill the sun was sinking, transforming it into a jagged pyramid of silhouette, crowned with a brilliant halo, whence a seeming midnight aurora burst forth through broken clouds, bordering each misty blue island with crimson and gold, then blazing upward in widening lines of light, as if to repeat in the high heavens its earthly splendor.

A banner of smoke, as though fed from a thousand crater-fires, balanced over this seeming volcano, floating off, in many a circle and surge, on the evening breeze. But I did not realize that this hill, so strange and picturesque, was a city of the habitations of men, until I saw, on the topmost terrace, little specks of black and red moving about against the sky. It seemed still a little island of mesas, one upon the other, smaller and smaller, reared from a sea of sand, in mock rivalry of the surrounding grander mesas of Nature's rearing.¹

It is now more than a century later and everything appears the same. Perhaps, I thought, this scene is little different from that seen by Fray Marcos de Niza in May of 1539 when he made the first European contact with native peoples in what we now know as North America. Zuni is on an ancient road traveled by many. Coming here is like traveling back nearly half a millennium. Zuni is fitting to be preserved as did Aldous Huxley in *A Brave New World*. I began to look forward to seeing religious events out of the past.

¹Frank Hamilton Cushing, "My Adventures in Zuni" *Century Illustrated Magazine* 25(1882). Reprinted in Jesse Green, ed. *Zuni: Selected Writings of Frank Hamilton Cushing* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska press, 1979), pp. 47-8.

But wait! I was brought out of this foolish romantic reverie by a traffic jam. Sitting in my car. Waiting. I felt irritated. I was eager to get to the village. What might I be missing? It would be my first time to experience Shalako. I had read so much about Shalako, a grand ceremonial affair, one of Zuni's most important, occurring early each December. What could be holding up traffic in so remote and ancient a place? Seeing the flashing lights of a police car I concluded it must be an accident. Surely traffic would soon move along. The police car moved very slowly parallel to the line of traffic. Why so slow? As it approached me I could finally see. The police car was escorting a small troupe of Zuni figures along the highway. At the head of the group was a Shalako, a twelve-foot tall feather-topped, bird-headed, beautifully costumed figure. Slowly the procession passed and I was able to move along, park, get a quick bowl of chili, and prepare myself for a magical night at Zuni. Well a little has changed since Cushing's day.

Some years before, I sat atop a pueblo in the Hopi village of Hotteville. The occasion was Niman, the home dance. This stately early August event marks the closing of the kachina season that begins in December. Kachinas, messenger spirits, appear as masked dancers for the last time before returning to their homes in the San Francisco Peaks some ninety miles to the west, easily seen on this brilliant hot day. The sounds—clack, jingle, clack, jingle—announced their arrival. As they entered the village plaza I recognized them as my favorite, Angak'china, the long hair kachina. To me, their beauty is somehow in their simplicity. Oh they are elaborate enough with feathers and jewelry, kilts and sashes. But their faces are simple—a small turquoise rectangle with simple markings for mouth and eyes—set against long hair flowing from the crown of the head nearly to the waist in front and back. They brought gifts of food. They brought dolls for the children. Their dancing brought life and happiness to everyone. I could feel their power then. As I remember them I feel that power now.

Then there was the time, I've forgotten the year, I visited the Franciscan Fathers at St. Michael's near Window Rock on the Navajo Reservation. I enjoyed the hospitality of the Fathers, though awestruck by the sheer fact that I was walking the same grounds, sleeping under the same roof, where Father Berard Haile had lived so many years of his life. He was a sensitive and insightful friend to Navajos, a devoted inquirer about their religion, though he never participated in nor even directly observed their rituals. The second or third day I was there, after an appropriate time for us all to get acquainted, I was asked if I wanted to see the Navajo ritual art collection. It was not a public display. I felt honored. Once in the little room burgeoning with shelves, cabinets, and drawers I was enthralled by the marvelous things about me. We talked easily of these things. I was invited to look at a set of Navajo *ye'ii* masks kept in a drawer. As the drawer glided open, suddenly it came to me. I knew these masks. They had been given as a set to Father Berard by the family of a deceased singer, or medicine man, who feared, because of their power, to keep them. Father Berard had studied and photographed these very masks in the preparation of his book *Head and Face Masks of the Navajo* (1947). I gazed on the familiar empty buckskin bag-shaped masks. Compared with masks made by most other Native Americans these seem so crude. They are not beautiful, yet they are haunting. I don't know whether it was because I know how powerful Navajos consider these masks or that Father Berard had been involved with them, but I couldn't bring myself to touch them, or even to look long upon them. These same strangely ambivalent feelings returned when, some years later, I was shown two Navajo masks by an art dealer in Chicago.

Masks worn, masks performed, are captivating. They take hold of us. They mesmerize. Their power is both that of beauty and that of darkness. We are attracted, fascinated by masking, yet somehow they also frighten. What is this power? How might we appreciate it even if we know we'll never be able to understand it?

It may at first seem incompatible, perhaps even inappropriate, but I want to show that the power, indeed the very nature, of masking can be illuminated if seen as a kind of play. It is not theatre that I have centrally in mind, though that too is germane. What I have in mind is a way of structuring things, a kind of vitalizing organization. Play is a complex subject, discussed by many over a long period of time. For the present purposes I will present play as did Friedrich Schiller in his classic philosophy of aesthetics *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* published in 1793. I have elsewhere discussed play across the broader history of its development.²

Schiller's Aesthetic Letters argue for the importance of aesthetic education, proposing that aesthetic education is essential to the realization of human potential. Foundational to his argument is Schiller's description of the two forces or impulses that drive human action, that define the human character. Schiller describes these two opposing forces in various ways. Analyzing the age in which he lived, heavily influenced by the French Revolution, Schiller felt that culture tended to bifurcate the individual placing him or her at odds within himself or herself with detrimental results

either as savage, when feeling predominates over principle; or as barbarian when principle destroys feeling. The savage despises Civilization, and acknowledges Nature as his sovereign mistress. The barbarian derides and dishonors Nature, but, more contemptible than the savage, as often as not continues to be the slave of his slave.(IV.6)³

Schiller felt that his "age is, in fact, moving along both these false roads, and has fallen prey, on the one hand, to coarseness, on the other, to enervation and perversity. From this twofold swaying it [the age] is to be brought back by means of beauty."(X.1)

These forces operate not only within culture, but within the individual in the terms of "person" and "condition," that is, the self and its determination, being and becoming, endurance and change. These forces constitute

two contrary challenges to man, the two fundamental laws of his sensuo-rational nature. The first insists upon absolute reality: he is to turn everything which is mere form into world, and make all his potentialities fully manifest. The second insists upon absolute formality: he is to destroy everything in himself which is mere world, and bring harmony into his changes. In other words, he is to externalize all that is within him, and give form to all that is outside him.(XI.9)

² See Sam Gill, "The Powerful Play Goes On: Friederich Schiller to Jacques Derrida" 2009 www.Sam-Gill.com

³ All references to Schiller's letters will be made in the text referring to Letter and paragraph. The source is *Friedrich Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of man in a Series of Letters*, edited and translated by E. M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1967).

Schiller formalizes these forces in terms of drives or impulses: the sensuous drive (*sinnliche Treib*) and the formal drive (*Formtreib*). The sensuous drive proceeds from the sensual and physical aspect of human existence. It is concerned with physical place in time and space. Whenever this drive acts exclusively, one is but "a unit of quantity, an occupied moment of time"(XII.2). There is no person, no enduring form, only the moment of sensation. The formal drive proceeds from the rational nature and strives to set the human at liberty from the flux of change and sensation. It strives to embrace the wholeness of time and space, seeking eternity to the annulment of temporal change, of determining event. Yet, when this impulse dominates, the human entity loses individuality becoming an idea, a species. Humans are no more in time, they have become time.(XII)

Schiller holds that neither impulse is dispensable, yet both require restriction and moderation.(XIII) Indeed, one reaches perfection through

a reciprocal action between the two drives, reciprocal action of such a kind that the activity of the one both gives rise to, and sets limits to, the activity of the other, and in which each in itself achieves its highest manifestation precisely by reason of the other being active.(XIV.1)

One cannot achieve this fullness so long as only one of these two impulses is exclusively satisfied or both alternately. Schiller argues that one gains a "complete intuition of his human nature," a "vision [that] would serve him as a symbol of his accomplished destiny," when these drives are conjoined in a third drive, that is, an experience in which "he were to be at once conscious of his freedom and sensible of his existence, were, at one and the same time, to feel himself matter and come to know himself as mind."(XIV.2)

Remarkably, in his attempt to give clarity to this combination of impulses, Schiller turns to the language of play, calling "that drive . . . in which both the others work in concert"(XIV.3) the "play drive (*spieltrieb*)," begging his reader patience with the term until he might justify its appropriateness. This third drive is

directed towards annulling time within time, reconciling becoming with absolute being and change with identity. ... The play-drive, in consequence, as the one in which both the others act in concert, will exert upon the psyche at once a moral and a physical constraint; it will, therefore, since it annuls all contingency, annul all constraint too, and set man free both physically and morally.(XIV.3 and 5)

Whereas the object of the sense drive is "life" and the object of the form drive is "form," the object of the play drive, to Schiller's understanding, is "living form," a concept that denotes aesthetic qualities, that is, "Beauty." Living form, beauty in Schiller's reckoning, is the consummation of humanity. He pronounces: "With beauty man shall only play, and it is with beauty only that he shall play. ... Man only plays when he is in the full sense of the word a human being, and he is only fully a human being when he plays."(XV.8 and 9)

Taking inspiration from Schiller, we may suggest that play refers to the principles or grammars that characterize structures, a set of structuring principles, a metastructure. This is, I believe, what Derrida

refers to as "structurality."⁴ Play denotes the principles in which structural oppositions, even structural anomalies, may at once be held together without reconciliation or reduction. It is not the simple alternation of taking turns, but a momentary focus on one structural element that reveals the power and dynamics of the opposing elements. Schiller thought of it in the dynamic terms of reciprocity and oscillation.

A mere game may be thought of as a set of relationships and activities prescribed by a set of rules, often including the designation of a space and the definition of an objective. Games, in general, may be designated as a particular kind of activity. But one may also think of game as the designation of a state of mind, a mental strategy, or an attitude. The word "game" is sometimes even used as a verb, though I think it a remarkably inelegant one, as in such phrases as "to game a situation." The play of a game is a result of a grammar of interaction as specified in the terms of rules and objectives. Common to the rules of a game is a description of "the play." A game "in play" subjugates its goal or objective to the holding together of opposing forces, an oscillation or back and forth movement among them, without resolution. There is no play when this principle fails or ceases to be operative, that is, the play of the game is over. Play is not game; game is not play. Game is played. There is the play of the game.

Considering game in terms of Schiller's form and sense drives, the rules to a game are at one polar position in this continuum. Here there is no play, only the potential for play. At the opposite pole, there are no rules, no boundaries, no definition, and therefore no game. Game play arises in the oscillating interaction between these poles.

A further clarification can be made here of Schiller's formal and sensuous drives. The rules and procedures that define a game may be thought of as their formal dimension while the raw physical actions of the game, its sensual dimension. The play of the game is achieved in the way that the rules both make possible, yet restrict, the sensual aspect of the game, that is, the range of allowable raw physical action, while at the same time, the physical actions (the sensual drive) give life and application to the rules. There is no play of the game if either the formal or sensual dimensions is missing.

While mere games are played; they do not hold play exclusively. This is what Schiller acknowledged in his use of the term play to identify the third drive. We see the characteristics of play echoed in the phrasing by which Schiller elaborated the play impulse.

the play-drive, in consequence, as the one in which both the others act in concert, will exert upon the psyche at once a moral and a physical constraint;(XIV.5)

it is precisely play and play alone, which of all men's states and conditions is the one which makes him whole and unfolds both sides of his nature at once;(XV.7)

the utmost that experience can achieve will consist of an oscillation between the two principles, in which now reality, now form, will predominate. Beauty as Idea, therefore, can never be other

⁴ The word "structurality" is an abstract noun denoting the state, condition, or quality of having the character of structure. Having come to believe that play is not best understood as a thing, experience, state of mind, or kind of activity but rather as a particular kind of condition of a thing, an experience, a state of mind, or activity, it requires this peculiar sort of nondesignation.

than one and indivisible, since there can never be more than one point of equilibrium; whereas beauty in experience will be eternally twofold, because oscillation can disturb the equilibrium in twofold fashion, including it now to the one side, now to the other.(XVI.1)

Schiller argued that when the sense and form impulses are interrelated/integrated in play, at least the idea of human perfection—the aesthetic—may emerge though not as the direct object. The whole series of letters is intent on showing that, through the playful engagement of the conflicting and potentially destructive impulses, human beings achieve their potential. Hence, "With beauty man shall only play, and it is with beauty only that he shall play."