Sensational Religion
Sensory Cultures in Material Practice

EDITED BY
SALLY M. PROMEY

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For the past several decades, scholars in religious studies have struggled to overcome the conceptual limitations that—for want of a better shorthand—Cartesian dualisms of body/spirit and profane/sacred have built into the bones of almost every scholarly approach to the study of religion. The prosaic idea that “the spiritual” is something other than “the material” stems from this conceptual bias. The turn to materiality and sensation in contemporary religious studies, theology, and philosophy constitutes an important corrective. If spiritual matters can be fully engaged and, even better, understood in and through bodily practices, perhaps what counts as spiritual cannot be conceptually divided from what counts as material. And once this corrective is in place, our capacity to apprehend spiritual matters, especially in those religious traditions that have been most misunderstood by the dualistic constructs of academic religious studies, may be blown wide open.

For example, sensuality or the category of the material over against the spiritual is simply not an issue in numerous North American indigenous traditions, especially in conceptualizations and practices of engagement with other-than-human realities. What religious scholars laboring under the spirit/body dualism call the material (or the body or sensation) is a taken-for-granted, a priori element of most traditional Native North American engagement with other-than-human persons. This is so not only because it is in and through the material and sensory practices that such engagement occurs but also because across many of the indigenous cultures of the North American continent, especially those of the eastern and southeastern woodlands, the world’s conceptual divisions do not dismember bodies that way. The general point is not that eastern Native North American religious traditions tend to eschew the ethereal practices of contemplation, imagination, and conceptualization in favor of more material practices and ideas (a distinction that already gets us into trouble). Quite the con-
trary. Dreams, visions, and the hermeneutical practices that accompany them, for example, hold particular sway in the reality structure of religious understanding across many eastern and southeastern North American cultures. Dreams and visions, however, are not fictional, nor are they separable from the bodies and places in which they occur. These practices are often understood to be of the same material realm as the bodies that undergo them. Spirit, whatever it may be (and the languages differ so much that we are often on shaky ground with such words), cannot be cordoned off in understanding from the realm of bodies, food, animals, plants, and the stuff of living. The prosaic and often romanticized lack of a split between spirit and, to put it another way, the prosaic and usually romanticized aliveness and agency of matter in many Native North American cultural traditions makes the rediscovery of the senses in contemporary academic theological discourse long overdue and amusing, to say the least.

Although many books are yet to be written on the complexity of sensation and contemplation across the vast diversity of Native North American cultural and religious traditions, I want to touch on only one aspect of it in both traditional theory and practice shared across a number of tribes traditionally located in the eastern and southeastern, mostly wooded, half of the continent. Let me be clear; I am generalizing across a wide region of the very different and sovereign cultures of the eastern continent, most of which have kept their traditions alive against overwhelming odds of genocide and cultural erasure. But in their vibrant practices of survival, many of these nations share a few aspects of what we might call religious sensibilities that can be summarized together and can be critically illuminating of academic presuppositions and proclivities when it comes to talking about matterality in religion and religious practice. It is always risky to make generalizations about any religious tradition, so my own attempt to think about the difference that matterality makes in some Native American traditions should be taken with a grain of scholarly salt. This is a reflection based on long-term study of the work that Native scholars have produced for public understanding and on personal communication through the years with friends and elders of a few eastern and southeastern Native traditions. I have come to the conclusion that there are differences that have a significant effect here relating to questions of materiality and spirit in religious studies, but this is a conclusion that assumes the validity of taking some general cautionary lessons from the growing body of Native American scholarship.

So the specific material sensibility that I seek to lift up here for reflection, which seems to recur in various ways across a number of Native eastern and southeastern nations, could fall under the rubric of what the Muscogee (Creek) elder Philip Deer called “the Good Mind.” The Good Mind is both a status and an objective, and it encompasses the whole range of personal and communal relations with human and other-than-human persons. It is much more than an attitude (which is a common
misunderstanding when non-Native persons encounter the term) and cannot be achieved by individuals alone.

The aspect of the Good Mind that relates specifically to the question of materiality and sensation I shall call, for now, bodily attentiveness. By this I mean an active presupposition that the animating powers of life—and so the specific other-than-human persons who inhabit the world and whose activities and attitudes directly affect the life of the community—are available to the body’s many senses because they inhabit the physical world in specific and complex ways, much as individual human persons inhabit the world in specific and complex ways. These other-than-human persons (often, traditionally, masters of particular animal or plant communities) may not all be present at the same moment, just as every human friend of mine is not present at the same moment in the same room. The point is that they could be present if schedules and travel allowed. The material dimensions of space and presence include the “spirits” in all of their bodily complexity and shifty abilities.

Here is another way to think about this, according to Arnie Neptune, an elder in the Penobscot Nation: “How would you know if your friends were here?” he once asked me, and then answered his own question. “You’d see them. Or you’d know that they could be present. You wouldn’t normally say, ‘My friends are invisible’ or ‘They can’t communicate.’” Gesturing out the window, he said, “That’s how it is for everyone who belongs to the River.” By “everyone,” Neptune did not mean just the human beings who live on Indian Island in the middle of the Penobscot River. He was referring to a specific and complex reality—the possibility of one’s friends showing up wherever one is—but it is an utterly prosaic and unromantic possibility at the same time. Would your friends come if called? Probably. It depends. They are busy; the roads are crowded. You are important to them, but they might be delayed or unable to afford the ticket. But if you were in trouble, and felt they could help, you’d certainly hope that they would come. This is the world we live in. “What’s the big deal?” Neptune asked me with a smile.

The point here is that the other-than-human people with whom many eastern Native American religious practices deal—from cultures as divergent as the Mississippian heritage of the Muscogee to the Abenaki heritage of the Penobscot—also inhabit the world in specific and complex ways. They are seldom identical to human people—just as oak people or eagle people are not the same as human people—and so cannot be expected to behave in the same ways or to obey the same conventions, though they can be expected to have agency of their own and to behave unpredictably, as do human people. The critical question for the community is how to deal, religiously, with the unpredictability, agency, and autonomy of powerful other-than-human persons. In the face of unpredictability and power, relationship is everything—if we are related to someone (so the reasoning goes), we can expect more from them—or at the very least know more what to expect, and that is all to the good in an
ecology of power. Religious practice is therefore always a negotiation among free agents, which means that there is a large dose of what Anishinaabe literary critic and novelist Gerald Vizenor calls chanciness in every encounter.4

The world is heavily populated with other-than-human persons, and it is easy to miss them right in our midst. Attention to the senses, to chance encounters with persons of all species and morphologies, is essential. Religious practice is therefore imbued with a concern for bodily attention, which plays out as a concern for right and courteous practice toward all persons who might turn into friends (or who might harm if offended), and it is this concern for right attention that undergirds the Muskogeans notion of the Good Mind. How to be in the world is, for many Native traditionalists, a practice in embodied attention to community building that far exceeds the narrow limits of the human.

Some—but by no means all—of the ritual ways that the Good Mind is taught and practiced among Muscogee traditionalists are through sound (drums, rattles, song) and movement in, for example, the Stomp Dances. In addition to the sensory intensity and relationship with other than human persons that these practices involve, they are aspects of a larger narrative understanding of reality; most songs and dances invoke important stories, and important stories construct the relational world in which human beings live. Variations on this understanding also occur among the culturally distinct tribes of the Wabanaki Federation, the Anishinaabe, and the Haudenosaunee Confederacy (among others). It is impossible in such a brief reflection to do justice to the complexity of narrative in even one eastern North American nation, let alone all of them, so suffice it to say here that an emphasis in many of them is on the world-creating dimension of narrative. As Native scholars have pointed out for years, some powerful stories literally matter—bring into being—worlds. This is a fact that Western observers have few tools to comprehend, and missing this point can easily result in a summative mistake that Native epistemologies are only analogically constructed. Traditional Native communities, under this assumption, use stories simply to orient themselves in an objectively independent world. This narrow view of narrative completely misses the common Native fact that the stories create the world as well (hence the caution ritual elders often issue to others to tell stories carefully and in the right seasons). Vizenor, along with a growing number of Native American writers and poets, points out that the issue for the Native person is how to handle the ontic—and very chancy—productivity that stories inevitably carry. Furthermore, the challenge in Native American philosophies is not ontology’s totalizing tendencies, as it is in European thought. Rather the challenge in this mode of reasoning is ontology’s slipperiness—the porous and promiscuous material excesses that narrative produces beyond the tissue of grammar.

One example of such ontic slipperiness occurs in the scams that the trickster pulls—the cons that this ancestor often unselfconsciously and sometimes without malice masterminds. These scams and misdemeanors do actually help to create the world
that human and other animals inhabit. People lose or gain speech, appendages, skills, and any number of relations due to the trickster’s mistakes. Mountains become animate heroes, and trees become rivers in response to his or her indecent creativity. It is not necessary to assume a narrow realism here to glimpse possibilities inherent in these accounts, although it reasonable to borrow D. A. Grinde’s observation, referring in this case westward to the trickster of the Plains traditions, that “when Jesus Christ walks on water this is treated as ‘religious’ but when Coyote steals fire . . . it is invariably characterized by the dominant society’s discourse as ‘legend.’”

The trickster narratives illuminate a deeper logic in Native North American ontological appraisals of the way things are and ought to be. That logic resides in the vatic quality of humor that any serious accounting of physical and sensory experience requires. Vizenor’s argument allows for honesty about chance and error even long after the fact and recognizes its material effects in the world that is created, for better or worse, as a result of relational engagement in the world with all of the chancy persons who inhabit it. Here humor, in other words, is not without horror, and it is more than a mere coping strategy. It is an element of a mode of reasoning that recognizes long-term consequences in actions, words, and bodies, even when those consequences can be sketched only in caricature and put metaphorically into stories of possibility. Some things are so serious, in other words, that only humor can touch them.

One could say that trickster deceit and greed undergird the misanthropic economic structures and the physical spaces of Euro-American religious modernity that is also a globalized colonial modernity, all the while creating a new material reality in which matter and spirit must despair of each other or find each other in new ways. In other words, stories of conquest have created the (modern) world we live in. This view is integral to the philosophy that runs through much contemporary transnational Native writing and teaching. Thomas King has worked with this idea in *The Truth about Stories* and *Green Grass, Running Water*, as have Louise Erdrich in her various novels on Native subjects and Joy Harjo, especially in her later poetry. This tragicomic approach to philosophy (this “sense” of thinking) follows Vizenor in that it recognizes a fundamental liveliness in creation and in narrative, a constitutive trickiness and subterfuge to living and to understanding that cannot be contained or colonized in systems of thought that are too comprehensive, settled, or confident. As a philosophical “sense” of humor, furthermore, Vizenor understands such Native reasoning—and ironic wisdom—to be a force of life. This grants to humor a deceptively heavy weight in which it is possible for attention to the chanciness of religious practices in relation to other-than-human inhabitants of this world to “remind Native Americans and non-Native [peoples] alike that ‘there is no final, ultimate answer, no infallibility that we can blindly accept and follow. Power, like life, is in motion.’”

Materiality and religious sensibility in Native North American reasoning and practice mean, therefore, that the world itself, its stony bones and vast green and blue
skins, is a process of relations, a product and a condition of those relations. The Muscogee notion of the Good Mind means, at least in part, attending wholly to these relations, to their bodily reality and to the obligations that such reality engenders. Other-than-human persons are capable of flesh; they coexist with human persons and demand relational courtesies in much the same way that human persons do of one another. But, though persons with all of the meaning, obligation, and legal weight of the term, other-than-human persons are not always human. The world itself is alive and messy with relationships between persons of all sorts. This embodied sacred world is not, at least for some traditionalist Native North Americans, a projection of human imaginative exercises. But the embodied, sacred world is not independent of imaginative embellishments, either. That is the challenge that the particular sense and sensibility I am discussing here poses to Western philosophy and religious studies. The very terms for the structure of physical reality disavow the dualisms that dog “materi-ality,” “sensation,” and “spirit” in the West, constituting a real alternative to Western thought about these “matters,” and very easy misunderstanding, too. Which brings us back, at least in Muscogee thinking (and that of some of their traditional regional neighbors), to the embodied corrective of what they call the Good Mind.

NOTES

1. It is important to note that geographic designations like eastern and southeastern are politically volatile in relation to many Native American tribes. The Muscogee (Creek) nation, for example, is governmentally located in what is now Oklahoma, but prior to the infamous “trail of tears” was (and its descendants still are) spread across regions of what are now Alabama, Georgia, Florida, and South Carolina. In this chapter I refer to a few cultural associations that are shared across a wide pre-Columbian geographic range in the eastern North American continent. These generalizations should not confuse other significant cultural and historical distinctions between those sovereign nations, cultures, and histories.


