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Book Review

Trevor Schoonmaker, *Spirit in the Land* (Durham: Nasher Museum of Art, Duke University Press, 2023), 136 pp, $29.95 (pbk), ISBN: 9780938989455.

In 2023 the Nasher Art Museum at North Carolina's Duke University hosted an exhibition and published a corresponding book titled *Spirit in the Land*.[1] The museum's director, Trevor Schoonmaker, gathered the works and words of thirty artists. The majority of the artists were from minority communities – including especially those with indigenous and African ancestries – working in North America (especially the Southeast) and several Caribbean nations (Barbados, the Dominican Republic, and the Bahamas). The work of these artists exemplifies the explosion of exhibitions that express what I have long called 'spiritualities of belonging and connection to nature' (Taylor 2001a; 2001b), and kinship toward non-human organisms (Van Horn et al. 2021), that increasingly take place at art and science museums around the world (Taylor 2010; 2023). More explicitly than most other such exhibitions, many of the artists in this exhibition explained how their art grew out of histories of enslavement and displacement, and how they found their way home to the Earth through the habitats with which they have become most familiar, and within which they have felt their deepest belongings.

Renée Stout, for example, wrote that she seeks through her work to 'pay respect to my African ancestors, who, in their ancient wisdom, worshiped and honored the land that sustains them physically and spiritually' (p. 99). Several other artists also made explicit their reverence for nature. The rest did not use terminology that was so obviously religion-tinged but seemed, nevertheless, to share such reverence.

Such subtlety might lead observers who consider belief in immaterial divine spiritual beings to be religion's *sine qua non* to conclude that the exhibition is not really about religion. The volume is full of religion-resembling phrases and mystical images, however, which in various ways stress the profound connections and interdependences among human beings and the rest of the living world. Carrie Mae Weems, the African-American artist well known for her Kitchen Table Series, put it this way, 'I am nature imagining the natural world: try as we might, we cannot separate ourselves from the very thing we are' (p. 115). Monique Verdin of the Houma Nation in Bvlbancha (the region with New Orleans at its epicenter) wrote of this region and her connection to it, 'The Mississippi is the life force that gives spirit to the land here in south Louisiana' (p. 101).

The title of the exhibition, as well as Curator Schoonmaker's words describing its focus, also made clear the spiritual thread that united the collective effort. The exhibition, he wrote, is 'about finding oneself in nature and identifying as part of that ecosystem' and it is through the 'personal perspectives and culturally diverse

1. Exhibition website: https://nasher.duke.edu/exhibitions/spirit-in-the-land/

voices' of these artists 'that we may reconnect with and remember to give back to the Earth' (p. 9). Moreover, he continued, these artist's 'works reflect the restorative potential of our connection to nature and exemplify how essential both biodiversity and cultural diversity are to our survival' (p. 13). Schoonmaker concluded with his belief in the ability of the exhibition (and thus the arts) to precipitate 'transformation and … our desire to live in harmony with nature [which]… will determine our future' (p. 13).

Scores of cultural creatives labor in similar ways to this curator and these artists, assuming, or at least hoping, that their work can promote such harmony. They exemplify the spiritual connections to nature shared by many. They may even significantly contribute to it, although scholars have yet to show significant correlations, let alone a causal link, between such artistry and the kind of spiritualities and values that promote healthy socioecological systems.

The purpose of the exhibition and its published form, of course, is not to answer such questions. Nor did it seek to illuminate the cultural connections between religion and nature. But if, as Claude Lévi-Strauss once famously asserted, non-human animals are 'good to think with' when it comes to human consciousness (Lévi-Strauss 1969 [1963]: 89), then the same can be said when considering the entanglements between humankind and the reciprocal influences among Earth's living things and systems, and human perceptions, sentiments, and their arts.

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