
In *Spirits of Blood, Spirits of Breath: The Twinned Cosmos of Indigenous America*, Barbara Alice Mann contributes to discussions of Indigenous worldviews, mapping what she describes as the “twinned cosmos” comprised of complementary blood and breath energies throughout Turtle Island or North America. Taking a comparative approach, Mann examines the interconnection between blood and breath spirits and energies as they have manifested in multiple communities. Mann, whose training is in literature and who has written on a variety of topics related to Native American literature, culture, and history, begins by describing her long interest in producing a book on “spirituality.” This volume is the result of her efforts. Her intent with the book was to “untangle a record that had been very warped, twisted, and undermined by generations’ worth of missionary and governmental interference in Indian cultures” (ix). Throughout the text, she seeks to identify and weave together examples from many Native nations of these twinned blood and breath energies in an effort to construct a larger theory of Indigenous North American spirituality

The book’s five substantive chapters explore different arenas of Mann’s blood/breath theory. In chapter 1, she discusses the historical efforts of non-Natives, including agents of the U.S. government, missionaries, and anthropologists, to document (and subsequently challenge) Native beliefs and practices, distorting worldviews in the process. In chapter 2, Mann provides the general overview of her blood/breath theory. She writes that “the Indigenous approach assumes everything happens by matched sets” (45), like day and night, that together create a balance. The most important pairing, she writes, is that between blood (or water) and breath (or air). Mann describes blood energy as within the realm of women, who in many nations have historically overseen farming. It is connected to water(s) and the moon. Men are associated with breath energy, which is connected to the sun, air, and speech. Drums, often played by men, are connected to breath energy. These energies are connected
and complementary. An example of this, discussed throughout the chapter, is the balance between serpents and great birds (and their respective energies) that exist in many Native cultures.

After discussing intricacies of the twinship principle in the second chapter, subsequent chapters discuss how these energies show up in important rituals and sacred stories. Mann’s primary documents generally consist of historical stories; when possible, she analyzes multiple versions of single stories. In addition, she draws on insight from historical and contemporary Native practitioners and leaders. Chapter 4, “Visions and Dreams,” describes dreams and rituals that create dream-like states, which contain aspects of blood and breath energies. Chapter 5, “Giants and Dwarfs,” describes stories about powerful other-than-human beings that can be found in many communities. Mann recounts tales of the Abenaki windigo and the cannibalistic Choctaw figure of the Nalúllo, represented by Euro-Americans as monsters. In addition, she describes stories from multiple traditions of small beings or “dwarves.” Western theorists, she writes, have ridiculed these stories as tall tales; Mann encourages readers to resist this skeptical interpretation. In chapter 6, “Afterlife, Resuscitation, and Reincarnation,” Mann describes stories of death, rebirth and reincarnation, the afterlife, ghosts, and realms beyond that of the living. In each chapter, Mann discusses how earlier non-Native documentation of stories missed important aspects of the twinship structure she describes.

One noteworthy feature that readers will notice is the tone of the book, which is different than most academic texts. Mann explicitly discusses conventional academic styles in her introduction, noting that she will not follow those conventions. She cites Indigenous rhetorical forms of clowning, using jokes, irony, and hyperbole. Her use of these gives her prose a more conversational tone than what one would usually expect when reading an academic text. Like the work of Vine Deloria, an important Lakota scholar she cites, Mann’s authorial voice is wry and sarcastic. Throughout the text, she is highly critical of Western anthropologists, whose work, she argues, has not accurately represented Indigenous worldviews. Indeed, there is a long history of bias in historical anthropological texts. Her tone itself is meant to upset given standards. However, at times this approach seems dismissive without offering a complete and full discussion of the issues at hand. For decades there have been discussions within anthropology about the colonial origins of the field. Today, there are important perspectives from Indigenous and
non-Indigenous anthropologists who are working to shape the field from within. Devoting some additional attention to the intricacies of more recent developments in anthropological theory would have helped to make this argument stronger and more precise.

Overall, Mann’s book raises some interesting and valuable contributions about forms of balance that are central to many Native North American religious traditions. As someone whose area of expertise lies outside the field of Native American religious studies itself, she offers a unique way of analyzing primary source material. At the same time, readers in Pagan studies who are interested in Native American and Indigenous religions should be aware that some recent scholarship on Native American religions—that is firmly rooted in Indigenous histories, methods, and theories—would challenge the universalizing tendencies of Mann’s larger claims. I would recommend reading this book alongside work by scholars in the field of Native American religious traditions who focus on particular religious histories and communities, including (but not limited to) Natalie Avalos, Mary Churchill, Suzanne Crawford-O’Brien, Abel Gomez, Tiffany Hale, Greg Johnson, Dennis Kelley, Michael McNally, Michelene Pesantubbee, Seth Schermerhorn, Inés Talamantez, and David Walsh.

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