



Matter, Magic, and Spirit: Representing Indian and African American Belief

David Murray

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The spiritual and religious beliefs and practices of Native Americans and African Americans have long been sources of fascination and curiosity, owing to their marked difference from the religious traditions of white writers and researchers. *Matter, Magic, and Spirit* explores the ways religious and magical beliefs of Native Americans and African Americans have been represented in a range of discourses including anthropology, comparative religion, and literature. Though these beliefs were widely dismissed as primitive superstition and inferior to "higher" religions like Christianity, distinctions were still made between the supposed spiritual capacities of the different groups.

David Murray's analysis is unique in bringing together Indian and African beliefs and their representations. First tracing the development of European ideas about both African fetishism and Native American "primitive belief," he goes on to explore the ways in which the hierarchies of race created by white Europeans coincided with hierarchies of religion as expressed in the developing study of comparative religion and folklore through the nineteenth century. Crucially this comparative approach to practices that were dismissed as conjure or black magic or Indian "medicine" points as well to the importance of their cultural and political roles in their own communities at times of destructive change.

Murray also explores the ways in which Indian and African writers later reformulated the models developed by white observers, as demonstrated through the work of Charles Chesnutt and Simon Pokagon and then in the later conjunctions of modernism and ethnography in the 1920s and 1930s, through the work of Zora Neale Hurston, Zitkala Sa, and others. Later sections demonstrate how contemporary writers including Ishmael Reed and Leslie Silko deal with the revaluation of traditional beliefs as spiritual resources against a background of New Age spirituality and postmodern conceptions of racial and ethnic identity.

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