

Introduction

HEATHER A. LAPHAM

Thanks to Irving Hallowell's classic 1926 comparative ethnography on the special mythic status of bears in Subarctic cultures, anthropologists are generally aware that peoples throughout the northern hemisphere have treated bears as far more than a subsistence resource, something more akin to another kind of human or, to use Hallowell's (1960) phrase, other-than-human persons. Upon concluding his extensive cross-cultural survey, Hallowell stated decisively, "No other animal was found to attain such universal prominence as the bear, nor to have associated with it, over such a wide geographical area, such a large series of customs. . . . Of all the game animals hunted in the north," he stressed, "the bear is the most constant recipient of special attention" (Hallowell 1926: 148). While Hallowell provided ample evidence of bear ceremonialism in northern latitudes, he found little evidence for the special treatment of bears elsewhere in Native North America. Archaeological and historical research over the last nine decades, however, has produced a vast amount of unsynthesized information about the roles of bears in Native American beliefs, rituals, and subsistence. This book is the first collective effort since Hallowell's formative publication to consider how Native peoples viewed, treated, and used black bears (*Ursus americanus*) through time across eastern North America.

Archaeologists' attitudes about human-animal relationships have shifted substantially over the past few decades, from viewing animals principally as subsistence resources to increasingly recognizing the complexity, depth, and diversity manifest in human-animal interactions around the world (Arbuckle and

McCarty 2014a; Betts et al. 2012, 2015; Brown and Emery 2008; Hill 2011, 2013; Losey et al. 2013; Martin 2013; O'Day et al. 2004; Russell 2012; Ryan and Crabtree 1995; Sykes 2014). Hunter-gatherer societies understood relationships with nonhuman animals in very different ways from modern Western notions that situate humans as categorically distinct from animals and therefore separated from our surrounding “natural” environments. Recent theoretical advances have shattered these conceptually limiting narratives to illuminate the inter-relatedness of humans, other beings (both earthly and otherworldly), meteorological and planetary phenomena, and things (Bird-David 1999, 2018; Descola 1992, 2005, 2013a; Ingold 1986, 1994, 2000, 2006; Nadasdy 2007; Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2004, 2015). At the core of these conceptual shifts lies a general belief, which Hallowell articulated well in his 1968 reconsideration of bear ceremonialism: “Animals by their essential nature are not so different from human beings” (Hallowell 1968: 12). From these advances emerged perspectivism and a new kind of animism that respects Indigenous practices and worldviews, concepts that continue to spur new conversations and theoretical explorations among anthropologists seeking to understand lived experiences in their various forms.

Perspectivism, as conceived by Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998), offers multiple vantage points from which to reconsider relationships between human and other-than-human persons in Indigenous societies. Its core tenet, developed from research on Amazonian cosmologies, maintains that all beings, both human and nonhuman, have an identical internal essence, call it a spirit or soul, with an active consciousness, intentionality, and social agency differentiated by external forms, outer coverings or “clothing” of skin, fur, feathers, or scales. Many Indigenous peoples conceptualize their worlds as defined by “a spiritual unity and a corporeal diversity” (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 470–471; see also Descola 2005: 141–143). Bodies, however, are not fixed in form, but rather are an “assemblage of affects,” a conglomeration of physical characteristics, mental abilities, ways of being and moving through the world that together create person-specific bodily attributes. Nonhuman animals see the world as humans do, but what they see is different because each being views the world from a perspective unique to their physical form. “What we [humans] see as a muddy waterhole,” Viveiros de Castro explains, “the tapirs see as a great ceremonial house” (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 478). When Indigenous peoples engage with animal bodies through adornment or use of their bodily parts, they do so to enhance their own capacities by activating aspects of the animal-

person's specific bodily characteristics. Wearing and using animal parts allows humans to enter into new relationships with the world around them, to transform human bodies into new, fundamentally different bodies imbued with the physical characteristics of that specific animal and its unique way of perceiving and acting in the world (for example, Betts 2012, 2015; Conneller 2004; Hill 2011; Losey et al. 2013).

Viewing animals as persons is not unique to Viveiros de Castro's perspectivism or reformulated animism (Descola 1992, 2005, 2013a). Hallowell, in his groundbreaking 1960 study of Ojibwe ontology, recognized "the concept of 'person' is not, in fact, synonymous with human being but transcends it," leading him to coin the term other-than-human persons for select animals and other animate entities that behave like humans. All persons (human and other-than-human) are therefore "unified conceptually . . . because they have a similar structure—an inner vital part that is enduring and an outward form which can change. Vital personal attributes such as sentience, volition, memory, speech are not dependent upon outward appearance but upon the inner vital essence of being" (Hallowell 1960: 42). Nurit Bird-David (2018) further questions this use of "persons," suggesting instead "relatives" as a more appropriate and analytically productive term that allows for the existence of "intimate worlds of interrelated human and nonhuman beings." "Multispecies communities" may co-exist in Indigenous worldviews within more traditional societies (that is, ones where human and nonhuman persons interact but live apart from one another), and are therefore valid interpretive perspectives when seeking to understand Indigenous understandings of their worlds (Bird-David 2018: 32–33).

Bears have often been considered other-than-human persons, or relatives (*sensu* Bird-David). Ethnographic studies of hunting peoples, especially those who resided or reside still in the Northeast and Great Lakes regions, are replete with stories about such other-than-human persons and their special relationships with humans. Bears are often portrayed as powerful spirit beings, capable of understanding human thoughts, of giving and taking life. With proper preparation, grounded in respectful intentions and actions, a bear would voluntarily give up its life so hunters might feed their community and humans would continue to survive. To maintain this reciprocal relationship, people have cultivated reverence for bears, both in thoughts and behaviors—from thinking about killing a bear, to hunting it, processing, cooking, eating its flesh, fat, and organs, and disposing of its remains. Addressing bears using kin terms, such as grandfather, brother, and cousin, has further cemented this intimate relation-

ship between bears and humans in Native cosmology (Berres et al. 2004; Ciani 2014; Hallowell 1926; Kassabaum and Nelson 2016; Laugrand and Oosten 2007; Pomedli 2014; Rockwell 1991; Scott 2006, 2007; Skinner 1914a; Wallace 1949; see Mather, Berres, Koziarski, Gates St-Pierre et al., Altman et al., Peles and Kassabaum, Waselkov and Funkhouser, this volume).

As Colin Scott has eloquently stated, “The bear personifies a giving world in which, assuming reciprocal generosity, humility, industry, and ecological responsibility, humans continue to receive what they need to live” (Scott 2007: 397). Native myths describe a bear’s ability to reincarnate after death; humans will never perish from hunger because bears will always exist. Bears are said to have the ability to transform into humans, and vice versa, perhaps a mythic manifestation of the long-acknowledged fact that bears and humans share some remarkably similar traits. Bears demonstrate human-like postures, dexterity, diet, and emotions, among other characteristics (fig. 0.1; see frontispiece image) (Bacon 1980; Berres et al. 2004; Hallowell 1926, 1960; Rockwell 1991; Scott 2007; see Waselkov, Gates St-Pierre et al., Altman et al., Peles and Kassabaum, Waselkov and Funkhouser, this volume). When skinned, bears show a startling resemblance to human beings. The similarity of bear paws to human hands and feet, which caught the attention of early colonial travelers more than 300 years ago (Lawson 1967: 122; Wright 1966: 232), continues to be a topic of conversation among forensic scientists and wildlife specialists today (Dogăroiu 2012; Hoffman 1984; Sims 2007). As a symbol of individual and clan identity, bears and bear body parts embody strength, courage, and intelligence, bestowing these characteristics upon Bear clan members or persons who carry bear emblems, such as bear tooth pendants or tools crafted from bear bones (Gates St-Pierre et al., this volume; Betts et al. 2015; Oberholtzer 1989). A bear who gives itself willingly to the hunter’s arrow, according to legends, provides humans with a wealth of subsistence resources to enhance their lives—from meat and fat for nourishment, to fur for warmth and protection, to rawhide, tendons, and bones for raw materials with all sorts of utilitarian and ceremonial uses.

The chapters in this book draw on zooarchaeological, ethnohistorical, ethnographic, and other evidence of black bear hunting, consumption, and use, while contemplating the range of relationships that existed between bears and humans across the millennia in Native eastern North American societies. Our interpretations consider ecological variables of black bear demography, reproductive rate, habitat use, seasonal availability, and trophic level. The authors have reviewed thousands of pages of ethnohistorical and ethnographic docu-



Figure 0.1. A curious young bear peering into a car in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Tennessee (photograph taken by William F. Alston, 1957; courtesy of Open Parks Network).

ments, and they summarize and interpret data on bear remains from nearly 300 archaeological sites from Quebec to the Gulf of Mexico. Native peoples perceived and related to bears in remarkably diverse ways. Our authors explore the religious and economic significance of bears and bear products (meat, fat, oil, bones, pelts, and so forth), bear imagery in Native art and artifacts, and bears in Native worldviews, kinship systems, and cosmologies, along with their role as exported commodities in a trans-Atlantic trade that began in some regions as early as the sixteenth century.

Despite covering so much ground, geographically and temporally, several common themes do, in fact, emerge from the chapters. Many authors note that bear remains are seldom found in mundane archaeological contexts, particularly far less often in household refuse, than one might imagine should be the case based on their frequent mention as food resources in ethnohistorical texts. Across time and space, sites with large numbers or high proportions of bear remains are the exceptions, rather than the rule, as noted by nearly all the authors in this volume. Ceremonial contexts, in contrast, may contain bear remains in