Atlantic Aesthesis

Books and *Sensus Communis*

in the New World

I take the aesthetic to concern the formation of communities of sense—communities in which consensus about the value of sensory information (such as judgments regarding beauty) binds people together. This definition of the aesthetic draws on but departs from the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, who describes the aesthetic in terms of “sensus communis” or common sense. By “sensus communis” Kant does not mean common sense in its vernacular meaning so much as sensing in common—or shared sensation and, importantly, shared judgment regarding that sensation. For Kant, such judgments have universal validity: on my reading, however, the shared terrain of aesthetic value is one that *creates* community (as well as exclusions from it) rather than one that emerges from it.¹ For this reason, the formation of a sensus communis should be understood as an ongoing *process* (rather than a singular event) and aesthetic judgment, in turn, must be understood as far from universal.

This account of the procedural force of the aesthetic is one that leads me to choose the term *aesthesis* over *aesthetic* in my title: I use the term *aesthesis* to signal an activity (of judgment, of shared sensation and meaning making, of community formation) rather than to remark upon the quality of an object or experience. With respect to the early Atlantic world, this emphasis (on process) has particular relevance: from 1492 forward, the Atlantic world was a scene of violent encounter and contested community formation among indigenous Americans, Europeans, and enslaved Africans. The genocidal history of European settler colonialism in the Americas and the development of an Atlantic economy based on the stolen and coerced labor of enslaved Africans form the signal scenes of Atlantic history. But in the mix with the violence of imperial domination is a complex and varied history of material negotiations between peoples that took
place at the ragged edges of language and culture. In this history we find not just a “middle ground” (to draw on Richard White’s valuable account of temporary shared sovereignty between European settler colonials and native peoples), but something more robust and sustaining—the aesthesis of survivance, and the generative and creative force of aesthetic in the shadow of imperial violence.³

In what follows, I explore instances of what I describe as “aesthesis from below” in the Americas—aesthesis grounded in the material and sensate conditions of living in shared terrain—rather than aesthetics from above, or the imposition of a set of tastes that colonize subjects by way of bodily sentience and norms of civility.³ More complexly, I mean to suggest that the aesthetic is never wholly distinct from aesthesis—from the process by which sensation becomes a site of shared meaning and, conversely, the process by which sensation shears away from the constraints of collective sense into materiality as well. And thus aesthetics from above necessarily trades in aesthetic from below, despite claims (or allegations) to the contrary. What interests me, then, is the tipping point that the aesthetic names, or better put, the tipping itself involved in the process of aesthetic—an oscillation between the material and the formal, the ontic and the mimetic, the subjective and the collective.

The stakes of this argument with respect to critical discussions of aesthetics and Atlantic literary studies are worth spelling out. The critical turn in the past three decades toward cultural and historicist studies largely set aside evaluative aesthetic modes of literary analysis. The “greatness” of a literary work (an evaluation that, in turn, defined a constrained canon of works judged to partake in such greatness) ceased to determine the worthiness of an object of study; rather, the cultural currency of literary texts and objects was itself the subject of attention. Two corollary developments were associated with this turn: first, a vastly expanded canon of texts became legitimate objects of study and second, aesthetic evaluation was cast as ideologically suspect—the servant of an elitist agenda aimed at abstraction from and obfuscation of the historical and political realities of the world.⁴

In the field of literary criticism, then, aesthetics are not infrequently associated with depoliticization—with a divorce from the lived, material conditions of the social world and a movement toward the formal feeling of the beautiful or the sublime. But at its historical and etymological
core, the aesthetic concerns sensation and sense making: the association between the aesthetic and the material is evident in the term’s derivation from the Greek aesthetikos, which refers to “things perceptible to the senses, things material.” And as critics including Susan Buck-Morss and Terry Eagleton emphasize, the aesthetic thus has an insistently material dimension: “The original field of aesthetics is not art but reality—corporeal, material nature. . . . It is a form of cognition, achieved through taste, touch, hearing, seeing, smell—the whole corporeal sensorium” (Buck-Morss 6). However, rather than privilege either the sensate or the formalizing dimensions of the aesthetic—given that both are central to the play of aesthetic judgment—my own focus is, as I suggest above, on the movement back and forth between the materiality of the aesthetic object (its ontic force or sheer material being) and the representational power of such an object (its mimetic force or capacity to engender shared meaning).

To be clear, when I refer to the mimetic force of the aesthetic or the “shared meaning” in which the aesthetic participates, I do not mean to indicate a representational concept so much as the sensus communis described above—that is, a shared judgment of value. Crucial in the sensus communis as Kant describes it and as I use the term is the collective sharing of value judgments about taste, as distinct from the sharing of concepts or ideas. Kant emphasizes precisely this distinction, in his assertion “that taste can with more justice be called a sensus communis than can sound understanding; and that the aesthetic, rather than the intellectual, judgement can bear the name of a public sense.” Notably, then, the collectivity formed by way of aesthetic judgment is quite distinct from a Habermasian public sphere that is grounded in ratiocination or shared reason. As Kant concludes: “Taste may be designated a sensus communicus aestheticus, common human understanding a sensus communis logicus” (153). In short, Kant’s “public sense” is not Habermas’s “public sphere”; nonetheless the aesthetic is most surely at work in forming a collectivity—in binding individuals together in the sharing of value, meaning, and mutual recognition.

With respect to early American and Atlantic world studies, the model of a sensus communis formed in relation to aesthesis offers a significant alternative to the accounts of the print public sphere that have largely dominated recent critical work in the field. Briefly put, the model of aesthesis I describe here is one that does not limit our understanding of community
formation and meaning making to individuals who read and write in English and have access to printing presses.6 Perversely, perhaps, my particular concern in what follows is with the printed book, but I am not interested solely in books as they are read (in traditional terms), but rather in books as they change hands between and among Europeans, Native Americans, and enslaved Africans. Rather than attending to the line between literacy and illiteracy, then, my concern is with the aesthetic dimensions of the book as both text and object. My return to the materiality of the book—and attention to the oscillation between the force of matter and sense (from ontic to mimetic, from mimetic to ontic)—offers an account of the aesthetic in which community formation (sensus communis) is open for contestation, revision, and engagement. In the Atlantic world—at the scene of sustained violent encounter enacted across a history of settlement, unsettlement, dispossession, and enslavement—attention to aesthesis, and particularly the dimensions of sensation and sense making as haptic, aural, and performative, enables a different story of community and humanity to emerge—one in which the textbook history of European colonial domination by way of Enlightenment technology is rewritten from below.

In 1764, a captain in the British Seventeenth Regiment of Foot serving in North America at the close of the French and Indian War, a man by the name of Thomas Morris, was dispatched up the Miami River from what is now Toledo, Ohio, in order to make peace with Native American tribes whose ancestral homelands had been ceded (without their knowledge or engagement) from the French to the British upon the signing of the 1763 Treaty of Paris. Morris was charged with pacifying the tribes in the area of what is now Michigan and Ohio—with acquainting them with the information that they had been ceded, according to the Treaty of Paris, and were now under the sovereign control of the English. Escorted up the Miami River by a French translator, and a cohort of “friendly Indians,” Morris quickly found himself captured and seemingly on the verge of execution at the hands of the Ottawa leader, Pontiac. “On approaching [a village],” writes Morris in his journal, “I heard a yell, and found myself surrounded by Pontiac’s army, consisting of six hundred savages, with tomahawks in their hands. . . . By their malicious smiles, it was easy for me to guess their intention of putting me to death” (Miscellanies 5–6). However, upon the presentation of wampum belts from the Native Americans traveling with
him, Morris was evidently ordered by Pontiac to be spared, given that he was serving as an ambassador rather than a soldier. As Morris was sent on his way, though, he reports that he received an unusual gift. He writes in his journal, “An Indian, called the little chief, [said] that he would send his son with me, and made me a present of a volume of Shakespear’s plays; a singular gift from a savage. He however begged a little gunpowder in return, a commodity to him much more precious than diamonds” (Miscellanies 12).7

In the scene described in Morris’s journal, many things change hands: land, sovereignty, military orders, tomahawk blows, wampum belts, a little chief’s son, and a print codex of plays written in English. In this series of exchanges, Morris himself points out the singularity of the volume of Shakespeare—a book given by an Ottawa leader to a British military soldier on the banks of the Miami River in Ohio in 1764. The “gift” is striking for a number of reasons, including the totemic status of Shakespeare for Morris at the time as well as for Anglophone colonial and US culture from the eighteenth century to today. The scene is arresting, too, because the book of Shakespeare is not passed from English to native hands, but the reverse—from native to English ones. This is a scene, then, that upends some deeply held assumptions about the frontier and its wildness as well as the premodern status of Native Americans—a presumptive status that erases from view the historic embeddedness of Native Americans in systems of networking, trading, exchange, and meaning making, as well as habitation in America.8 What does it mean, then, for a European to discover Shakespeare in the hands of Native Americans rather than to discover America?

The signal importance that Morris and Little Chief (mutually) assign to the volume of Shakespeare is indexed in its exchange value: the “precious” item demanded in recompense for Shakespeare is gunpowder, an item whose value is likened by Morris to diamonds. In the version of the journal that Morris did not edit for publication in his literary memoir, the passage—and the specific terms of exchange—appears somewhat differently. Morris writes, “The little chief made me a present of some melons, & offered to sell me a volume of Shakespear, wch I bought for a very little powder. He told [the translator] that he would send his son along with him” (Peckham 6).9 Notably, in the revised version, the present of the melon disappears and the gift exchange revolves around the volume
of Shakespeare instead—a volume which is sold rather than gifted in the original rendition of the passage. In the edited version, Morris foregrounds the strangeness of coming upon Shakespeare in the hands of an Ohio Indian and does so by way of a highly wrought equation linking Shakespeare, gunpowder, and diamonds. The transmutation of the book into a gift rather than a sale renders the exchange in quite different terms—terms that point away from commodification and toward a staging of mutual recognition of subjectivity and sovereignty as well as value.10 The added reference to diamonds—an object in which aesthetic and monetary value are condensed and confounded—further heightens the aesthetic dimensions of the exchange.

The association of books, gunpowder, and diamonds in Morris’s rhetorically revised version of the incident further brings to mind the oft-repeated claim, issued from the lips of the philosophes of Europe, that a specific trifecta of inventions—namely, the compass, the printing press, and the gun—formed, together, the signal emblem and evidence of European modernity. As David Boruchoff has argued, this triumvirate of innovations was hailed with ritual genuflection by one major European thinker after another from the sixteenth century through the eighteenth, despite the fact that it is patently inaccurate to argue that Europeans invented gunpowder, printing, or the compass. “Why,” asks Boruchoff, does this image of a trio of European inventions “transcend political, linguistic, and religious divisions, and appeal to so many great minds?” According to Boruchoff, these three inventions signaled “the idea of being modern itself.” Collectively, they “not only signaled a break from the hegemony of classical and ecclesiastical culture . . . but also afforded a practical means to search out, reach, subdue, communicate with, and assimilate the New World beyond the physical and mental boundaries of the Old” (157). Boruchoff thus emphasizes that being “modern,” for Europeans, was directly tied to the space of the New World and to the imperial acts committed there. Guns, books, and compasses were deployed to “search out, reach, subdue, communicate with, and assimilate” the peoples and land of the New World. Importantly, each of the three inventions that form the emblem of European modernity—the maritime compass, the printing press, and firearms—operates at a distance; each is a technology that exerts power, knowledge, and violence from afar, without the need for immediate presence. And it is the use of knowledge and power at a distance (in abstracted terms, as it were) and the
systematization of that knowledge (in formalized terms) exercised in acts of settler colonialism in the New World that might be seen to define and authorize, for Europeans, the condition of modernity.

Morris’s (redacted) account of Shakespeare and gunpowder, each more valuable than diamonds, thus adorns his account of the military workings of settler colonialism in North America and invokes the power-knowledge nexus of European modernity and its appropriated technologies. In fact, later in his account of the same mission, Morris credits the Shakespeare volume with saving his life:

\[
\text{[O]n the seventh of September, in the morning we got into easy water, and arrived at the meadow near the Miamis fort, pretty early in the day. We were met at the bottom of the meadow by almost the whole village, who had brought spears and tommahawks, in order to despatch me; even little children had bows and arrows to shoot at the Englishman who was come among them; but I had the good fortune to stay in the canoe, reading the tragedy of Anthony and Cleopatra, in the volume of Shakespear which the little chief had given me, when the rest went on shore. (Miscellanies 16–17)}
\]

Here, the aesthetic quality of Shakespeare places Morris at a remove from the material realities of warfare and territorial sovereignty in the Americas. And in juxtaposing his own readerly delights with the murderous energies of the “savage” Miami village—whose very children look forward to shooting him—Morris performs his civility by recourse to the trope of the aesthetic. It is the very nonutilitarian—that is, aesthetic—nature of his engagement in reading *Anthony and Cleopatra* that, Morris suggests, saves his life in the face of an attack of unmitigated savagery (a suggestion reiterated by later commentators, including the nineteenth-century historian Francis Parkman).\(^{11}\)

In a subsequent essay in his literary memoir, Morris sketches yet another version of this scene, speculating as to whether “the world ever afforded me a pleasure equal to that of reading Shakespeare at the foot of a water-fall in an American desert” (*Miscellanies* 63). While it may seem difficult to imagine an object more imbued with aesthetic value than a volume of Shakespeare, the *combination* of reading Shakespeare and observing a waterfall is perhaps even more keyed to aesthetic value given that the latter constituted a canonical form of aesthetic pleasure in the late
eighteenth century. Well-known accounts by Peter Kalm of Niagara Falls, Jonathan Carver of St. Anthony Falls, and Thomas Pownall of Cohoes Falls had transformed the American waterfall into an oft-heralded scene of aesthetic beauty. Setting his sights simultaneously on an American waterfall and the words of Shakespeare allows Morris to transform the appropriative violence of settler colonialism into the transcendence of aesthetic delight.\textsuperscript{12} But as much as Shakespeare and waterfalls enable Morris to remove himself from incivility and his own implication in scenes of violence, we might also ask what function a volume of Shakespeare performed in the hands of Little Chief, given that those are the hands in whose possession the volume first appears. Even Morris's aestheticization of the exchange of the volume seems to introduce recognition, rather than division, between Little Chief and Morris. Did the volume of Shakespeare have aesthetic value for Little Chief? What would it mean to assert that it did?

In his introduction to the reprint of Morris's diary, editor R. G. Thwaites notes “the contrast between [Morris's] situation and his calm enjoyment of Shakespeare’s tragedy, so curiously preserved for him from the loot of some English officer’s baggage” (295). And in related terms, Parkman describes the volume of Shakespeare proffered to Morris by Little Chief as “the spoil of some slaughtered officer” (409). Both writers assume that the book had meaning to Little Chief primarily as an object valued by Europeans, rather than as one that he valued himself. Described as “loot” or “plunder,” the book is, in these depictions, stolen from one British officer in order to be sold to another. Did Little Chief filch the volume of Shakespeare from an English captive solely for its resale value, or did he acquire it in a different manner or have a different sense of its value? The presumption on the part of both Parkman and Thwaites that the book held no aesthetic value for Little Chief partakes of a long-standing trope that represents Native Americans as incapable of exercising proper judgment with respect to matters of value. Indeed, Shakespeare himself invokes this figure in the play \textit{Othello}, in which Othello laments that he, “Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away” (5.2.347), in murdering his wife, Desdemona. As one twentieth-century gloss on this passage from \textit{Othello} observes, “the American Indian was almost proverbial even at this date for his ignorance of precious metals and objects prized in Europe” (Horwood and Houghton 5.2. 346n., qtd. by Poisson 462).\textsuperscript{13} In the European literature of encounter, the trope occurs early and often: Christopher Columbus describes trad-
ing glass beads and trinkets with Native Americans and Amerigo Vespucci comments that “[t]he wealth that we enjoy in this our Europe and elsewhere, such as gold, jewels, pearls, and other riches, [Native Americans] hold as nothing, and although they have them in their own lands, they do not labour to obtain them, nor do they value them” (22). In *The Generall History of Virginia, New-England and the Summer Isles* (1624), Captain John Smith reports that “white beads . . . occasion as much disson as among the Salvages, as gold and siluer amongst Christians” (58). Morris’s passage itself, which describes gunpowder as “more precious than diamonds” in the eyes of Little Chief, leans on this trope as well, albeit perhaps less unkindly than the proverbial account of the Dutch purchasing the island of Manhattan for a handful of beads and trinkets.

Just as the base Indian of a written European tradition is unable to distinguish worthless trinkets and glass from priceless pearls and gold, so too does the same Indian ritually stand amazed by the power of European modernity in the form of books, guns, and compasses. Thomas Hariot, for instance, writes:

Most thinges [the natives] sawe with vs, as Mathematicall instruments, sea compasses, the vertue of the loadstone in drawing yron, a perspectie glasse whereby was shewed manie strange sightes, burning glasses, wildefire woorkes, gunnes, bookes, writing and reading, spring clocks that seeme to goe of themselues, and manie other things that wee had, were so strange vnto them, and so farre exceeded their capacities to comprehend the reason and means how they should be made and done, that they thought they were rather the works of gods then of men, or at the leastwise they had bin giuen and taught vs of the gods. (39)

The technological triumvirate—compass, printing, guns—that signals European modernity and conquest of the New World, interestingly, then, is testified to by way of the European witness (in print), of acts of Native American shock, awe, and submission. And yet the precision with which the historical emblem of guns, books, and compasses (as traced extensively by Boruchoff across the corpus of European philosophy) is literalized in Hariot’s firsthand account of the Algonquian awe of English power should help to alert us to the constructed nature of this seemingly empiricist account of the way in which books were regarded by Native Americans.

Among contemporary historians and literary critics, however, there
has been a tendency to accept at face value, and indeed, to reproduce, the European claim that both Native Americans and Africans in the New World were instantly astonished by the power and authority of writing and the printed book. The historian James Axtell, for instance, relates multiple scenes from European-authored texts in which Native Americans register wonder and awe upon laying eyes on the technology of writing and the printed book and concludes that for Native Americans, “Books were less amazing as objects than for what they enabled the Europeans to do. The ability to read and write was awe-inspiring to the Indians largely because it duplicated a spiritual feat that only the greatest shamans could perform, namely, that of reading the mind of a person at a distance and thereby, in an oral context, foretelling the future. . . . Small wonder that the natives who first witnessed this amazing feat regarded the literate Europeans as ‘greater than all mankind’” (“Power of Print” 304–05). According to Axtell (as well as Hariot and others), the self-evident power of writing led Native Americans to ascribe godlike and shamanistic power to Europeans. Yet as the historian Peter Wogan points out, in direct response to Axtell, the desire to witness the stunning impact of the written word on Native Americans may originate less from this impact than from the importance of literacy to European conceptions of selfhood and authority. In the case of New France, for instance, Wogan concludes that “[L]ittle evidence [exists] to support the view that Native North Americans in the seventeenth century perceived French missionary writing as especially powerful, suggesting that such early modern reports should be viewed with skepticism” (407).

Further, we might note that Axtell’s analysis relies on a number of binar- ies to describe a stark gap between European and native technologies—namely, the division between oral and written cultures, as well as (implicitly) a sharp divide between literacy and illiteracy. Recent scholarship has done a great deal to challenge the binary construction of both these oppositions. Scholars including Elizabeth Hill Boone, Gordon Brotherston, Matt Cohen, Jeffrey Glover, Michael Harbsmeier, Walter Mignolo, Germaine Warkentin, and Wogan have demonstrated that the stadial theory of a transition from oral to literate cultures is keyed primarily to European definitions of cultural superiority: “[O]nly modern European civilisation came to make. . . its own . . . proper literacy, into the very definition of its own identity as against the rest of the world” (Harbsmeier 72). Further, a range of signifying practices—from pictographs to wampum,
to *quipu*—might be seen as constituting forms of literacy among Native Americans. As Warkentin concludes, “too easily classified as ‘oral’ cultures, the Native peoples of North America possess a rich legacy of material sign-making, attested to in the archeological record, in the linguistic evidence, and in early North American history as Europeans have recorded it” (“In Search” 4).

Accounts of astonishment in the face of the technology of the book extend to African Americans as well as Native Americans. In the field of African American literature, the moment of wonder in the first encounter with the book has taken on a foundational status as the “talking book” trope analyzed by Henry Louis Gates—namely, the literary account of a book that will not “speak” to its unlettered black would-be reader. Gates traces the origins of this trope to the 1772 autobiography *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw*—and specifically to the moment in that text when Gronniosaw describes seeing his master read a book, and seeks later to listen, himself to the voice of the book. Gronniosaw writes, “I open’d it, and put my ear down close upon it, in great hope that it wou’d say something to me; but I was very sorry and greatly disappointed, when I found it would not speak” (38). Gates, with respect to this passage, concludes that “[t]he book had no voice for Gronniosaw; it simply refused to speak to him, or with him. For Gronniosaw, the book—or, perhaps I should say, the very concept of ‘book’—constituted a silent primary text, a text, however, in which the black man found no echo of his own voice” (136). The scene of encounter with the talking book, which Gates subsequently traces in the work of Gronniosaw, John Marrant, Ottobah Cuguano, Olaudah Equiano, and John Je, is, Gates argues, a spur to Western literacy and authorship for black writers: “The text refuses to speak to Gronniosaw, so some forty-five years later Gronniosaw writes a text that speaks his face into existence among the authors and texts of the Western tradition” (137–38). Gates argues, then, that in reaction to encountering books whose quasi-magical powers will not address them, black authors learn to read and then write books themselves: in short, they speak themselves into existence through entering into print.

Foundational as Gates’s reading has been to understanding the significance of literacy for early African American writers, I nonetheless suggest that this reading participates in the Enlightenment veneration of the technology of print that so frequently appears in European accounts of Native
American encounters with the book. In the case of both Axtell and Gates, what is presumed is the priority of the referential meaning of the book: for nonreaders, the book seemingly remains closed and unspeaking and thus magical in its capacity to speak to literate readers. But in contrast to (European-authored) accounts that ritually speak of the awe of nonliterate peoples in the face of the written word, other evidence indicates that books in early America were speaking to non-Europeans, including slaves and native peoples, but speaking in ways that we have perhaps failed to hear. That is, books encountered by non-Europeans in the Americas were not seen as having no meaning, or as having a meaning only of the denied access to meaning (as Gates's account suggests). Consider, for instance, the account of Thomas Hariot, who describes Native Americans engaging with the Bible in Virginia in 1585. Hariot describes preaching to Native Americans who are as interested in the physical presence of the Bible as its contents. He writes, “Although I told them the booke materially & of it self was not of anie such vertue as I thought they did conceiue, but onely the doctrine therein contained; yet would many be glad to touch it, to embrace it, to kisse it, to hold it to their brests and heades, and stroke over all their bodie with it; to shewe their hungrie desire of that knowledge which was spoken of” (27). We might note that Hariot makes it clear that this is a misuse of the Bible, and one that demonstrates a vexed desire to read the contents of the Bible rather than an act of taking pleasure in its material dimensions. Hariot discounts the engagement of the Algonquians with the materiality of the book, even as he relates it: nonetheless, the Indians he describes clearly establish a relationship with the Bible as a material and meaningful object without reading it as a text.

In his Histoire du Canada (1636), the Catholic missionary priest Gabriel Sagard reports, in similar terms, that the Hurons are eager to engage with books, but have little interest in learning to read them. Sagard writes:

In truth one does not know how to praise the invention and utility of writing enough, because God was the first author and the principal sciences of man depend upon it. But because they learn only with difficulty and slowness, few of the Hurons wished to engage in reading and contented themselves with counting the pages of our books and admiring the images in them with so much attention that they lost all other cares and would have spent whole days and nights over them if we had allowed it. But such frequent handling of our books, which they asked
to see all the time, one after another—especially the Bible for its size and pictures—ruined them and left them in tatters. (vol. 2, chapt. 21, n.pag.; my translation)

Like Hariot, Sagard frames his account of the Hurons’ handling of the books as a kind of misuse—in this case, one that literally destroys the books as well as evades the meaning of books as Sagard defines it, namely, to bear the word of God and to support the sciences of man. Nonetheless, the engagement of the Hurons with the books is profound and prolonged—certainly not one of immediate awe and melancholic withdrawal in the face of an inability to read.

Both Hariot and Sagard describe an engagement with books by native peoples that is deeply material and sensual; but both authors also cast aspersions on this form of engagement with books. Rather than decoding the text within the book, in a movement of abstraction from the materiality of the book that we might characterize as of a piece with the “modern” technological use of guns, printing presses, and compasses, the Indians encounter the books as resonant things, and in terms that I would characterize as aesthetic. This encounter with the thingness of books, then, is one that withdraws the book, as object, from its use as a text and foregrounds its sensate nature as a site of shared pleasure. This mode of encounter with the book, particularly by non-Europeans, is often described as “totemic” or “fetishistic”—terms that implicitly oppose a modern calculus of abstraction and formalization to a premodern or primitive inability to cleanly separate out subject and object, nature and culture. In much the same fashion, accounts of African American engagement with the materiality of texts frame this encounter as premodern—of a piece with superstition, conjuring, and witchcraft. In a book titled Antigua and the Antiguans (1844), for instance, the European author describes the use of the Bible by slaves in the West Indies in the practice of bibliomancy:

Another trial by ordeal (which, I believe, has formerly been practised in England, and has probably been taught them by the whites) is thus performed:—A door-key is placed between the leaves of the Bible, upon the 18th and 19th verses of the 50th Psalm, and the book is then bound tightly round so that the key cannot fall out. . . . Two persons, the accused and accuser, balance the bound book by placing the first finger of the right hand under the bole of the key, and in this situation
make use of the following incantation, (as I suppose I must call it:) ‘By
St. Peter, by St. Paul, you tief me hog,’ (or whatever else it may be that
is stolen;) the accused answers, ‘By St. Peter, by St. Paul, me no tief you
hog;’ this is repeated thrice by both parties. If the accused is guilty, the
key immediately turns, but if not, the charm is tried upon all who are
suspected, until the event takes place. What St. Peter or St. Paul have to
do with this, I could never learn, but to me it seems very shocking to
make a conjuring book of the Bible. (55–56)

Despite the fact that the author of the passage cites the European prove-
nance of the practice of bibliomancy, the scene, in its evocation of “incan-
tations” and “conjuring,” ascribes to the enslaved handlers of the Bible a
premodern sensibility associated with their use of the book as a material
rather than textual source of meaning.17

In relation to the New World, moreover, the premodernity attached
to the material use of books assumes racialized dimensions. Thus, for in-
stance, Leitch Ritchie, in a redacted English version of a novel by Victor
Hugo about the Haitian Revolution, describes an evil mixed-race dwarf
who engages in a bastardized version of the Catholic Mass—one that in-
volves burning pages of the Catholic missal, mixing them with wine, and
serving the concoction to a wounded man as a form of medicine. Ritchie
concludes, “The deluded patient . . . drank, and was cured: the conviction
that he was so, forming perhaps, in itself, the means of cure” (101). The
delusional faith in the totemic power of the Bible rather than in the words
within it is presented as an indication of racialized illiteracy, a point under-
scored by a (somewhat snide) footnote attached to the passage above, ref-
erring similar behavior in Africa: “This remedy is still often enough
practiced in Africa, particularly by the Moors of Tripoli, who threw into
their draughts the ashes of a page of the book of Mahomet, and thus com-
pose a philter, to which they attach a sovereign virtue. An English traveller
calls this ‘the infusion of the Koran’” (101).

Nonetheless, in each of these instances described above, the material
qualities of the book are taken to hold transmissible meaning—the ontic,
rather than mimetic, force of the book comes into play in new ways, to
generate the creation of a community of sense (sensus communis)—a
community of pleasure, a community of justice, or a community of heal-
ing. Moreover, while such accounts are generally proposed as evidence of
primitivism found among the nonwhite peoples of the New World, fairly
exact analogues of the engagement with books described above also occur in European contexts. Thus, for instance, the practice of “kissing the book,” is of long-standing provenance in Europe; indeed, in seventeenth-century England witnesses in court were required to both swear on the Bible and to kiss it. An account of Elizabeth I, processing to her coronation in 1559, reports her engagement with the Bible in a manner not dissimilar to that of the Algonquians described by Hariot: “A Bible in English, richly covered, was let down to her by a silk lace from a child that represented Truth. She kissed both her hands, with both her hands she received it, then she kissed it, afterwards applied it to her breast, and lastly held it up, thanking the City especially for that gift, and promising to be a diligent reader thereof” (qtd. in Cressy 97). The queen’s behavior was not regarded as inexplicable: David Cressy comments that “[w]hen the book was proffered, the queen evidently knew exactly what to do, and the crowd and chronicler knew just what to observe” (98). In this case, the physicality of the book, and its relation to the body of its beholder, clearly matters a great deal—far more so than the capacity to decode the words inside the book.

Cressy documents a host of “totemic” uses of books in seventeenth-century England and New England, including accounts of bibliomedicine, Bible dipping, and bibliomancy:

Dozens of incidents are known in which individuals made use of the Bible for magical, talismanic, or curative purposes. . . . The Bible might, for example, be invaluable in child-bearing, or be laid on the head of a restless patient in order to induce sleep. . . . In other applications the Bible might be made a pillow, placed under the head, as a restorative, or simply brought into the sickroom as an aid to health. (98)

And in a scene analogous to that described in Ritchie’s The Slave-King, we find evidence of a young woman, in Hampshire, England, in the early twentieth century who “once ate a New Testament, day by day and leaf by leaf, between two slices of bread and butter, as a remedy for fits” (Bouchier). The title of Cressy’s article, “Books as Totems in Seventeenth-Century England and New England,” suggests that the totemic use of books is, again, associated with a premodern understanding of the world; but interestingly, quite a number of Cressy’s examples, including that of the Bible-eating Hampshire woman cited above, range well into the nineteenth century and even the twentieth.
Thus despite efforts to discount the physicality of the book as premodern or inappropriate, material engagements with the book persist together in tandem with the modernity of the book, in part because, as Leah Price points out, the book has always had a “Janus-faced potential” as both text and object (5). And indeed, recent work in book history and critical work in the field of “thing theory” and object-oriented ontology emphasizing the power and centrality of objects (as opposed to their subordination to subjects) have converged to place new emphasis on the materiality of the text as a site of aesthetic significance. Among the Victorian users of books Price studies, for instance, the material dimensions of books often loom large, as when the quality of books’ bindings trump the significance of the material within. Nonetheless, Price reports, Victorians were also schooled to hold such attachments to the materiality of books in low regard: “Not content to ignore the outsides of books, a good reader actively scorns them” (3); “[t]he Victorians cathected the text in proportion as they dis-owned the book” (4). In related terms, Peter Stallybrass emphasizes the centrality of materiality for an understanding of books and print culture while also tracing an ideology—linked to capitalist modernity—intent on eradicating the significance of this materiality:

With the development of capitalism . . . comes increasingly . . . demon- ized forms of materialization. . . . Writing detaches itself from the ma- terial supports of papyrus, parchment, rag-paper, wood-pulp. . . . The culture of capital feels the greatest embarrassment before materiality itself, for it reduces the subject to silence. One enters speech, in this new regime, through the disavowal of the materiality of the object. (24–25)

In contrast, then, to the logic of modernity that, as Bruno Latour contends, seeks to separate subject from object (and, in this case, the content of a book from its material imprint), scholars such as Stallybrass and Bill Brown have sought to foreground the fetishistic power of modern objects (including books) in terms that dissociate the fetish from a negative evaluation. In our aesthetic attachment to books, we might say, even moderns have never been modern.

A number of key points follow from this reassessment of the materiality of the book that are germane to Atlantic aesthesis. First, the aesthetic is a regime allied to, rather than divorced from, the fetish. As William Pietz points out, both terms, aesthetic and fetish, were coined in the eighteenth
century to refer to theories of “sensuous materiality,” albeit with quite distinct evaluative frameworks attached.\textsuperscript{18} The aesthetic, like the fetish, involves a particular attention to, if not overvaluation of, the material—a value that is irreducible to a concept, and irreducible to a commodity value. And this brings us to a second key point: the emphasis on materiality is not one that leads away from all social meaning, but one that partakes of sociality in the form of sensus communis or shared sensation and judgment. Pietz’s description of the fetish as just such a social object points, again, to the resonances between the aesthetic and the fetish: “‘Fetish’ has always named the incomprehensible mystery of the power of material things to be collective social objects experienced by individuals as truly embodying determinate values or virtues, always as judged from a cross-cultural perspective of relative infinite degradation, ‘dénués de valeur symbolique’” (“Problem” 14).\textsuperscript{19} The fetish, in its simultaneous material and social being, oscillates between securing the ontic and mimetic dimensions of the relation binding subjects to objects and to one another—and for that very reason, it does so in a manner that opens the way for cross-cultural engagement. So too does aesthesis.

If we return, after this considerable excursus, to the volume of Shakespeare in the hands of Little Chief, we might be able to answer the question of what it would mean to posit that the volume did, indeed, hold aesthetic value for him, regardless of our lack of knowledge as to whether he was able to read English. First, the shared aesthetic value attributed to the volume of Shakespeare by both Little Chief and Morris might be seen to embed them in the same ground, and in a shared sense of meaning and value—one that facilitated the sharing of books, sons, melons, and gunpowder rather than death blows. Second, the recourse to the material dimensions of the book and aesthesis more generally might point us to a very different reading of this scene than Morris’s account in which the aesthetic value of Shakespeare allows him to abstract himself from the violence of settler colonial warfare and oppose the savagery of Native Americans to his own civility.

Although Morris and readers such as Parkman credit Shakespeare—and specifically, Morris’s decision to read Shakespeare in his canoe rather than disembark in a Miami village—with saving his life, a reading of the account of exchange that occurs in the journal suggests that a different material object than the book is instrumental to Morris’s survival—namely, wampum. Indeed, in the narrative of events that occur upon Morris’s ar-
rival in the Ottawa village, it is clear that once a wampum belt is presented to Pontiac by Thomas King, an Oneida chief traveling with Morris, Pontiac recalibrates his response to Morris’s mission. The sequence of events is worth tracking closely: initially, when Morris encounters Pontiac among the Ottawas whom he describes as intending to kill him, Pontiac presents Morris with a letter, written in French, that details accounts of French military successes over the British and includes the news that a French army has landed in Louisiana that intends to drive the British out of the country. Morris regards this news as utterly apocryphal, but his dismissal of the letter seems to create anger among the Ottawas. Morris, in turn, relates the details of the Treaty of Paris—an account that the Miami leader at the meeting responds to with equal contempt. Morris writes,

When I mentioned that their father, the king of France, had ceded those countries to their brother the king of England, (for so the two kings are called by Indians) the great Miamis chief started up and spoke very loud, in his singular language, and laughed. [My translator] whispered me, that it was very lucky that he received my intelligence with contempt and not anger, and desired me to say no more, but sit down, and let my chief speak; accordingly I sat down and [Morris’s escort, Oneida Chief Thomas King] produced his belts, and spoke. (“Journal” 306)

To recap: a letter written in French and presented by an Ottawa leader is dismissed as an illegitimate source of information and untrustworthy communication; a speech in English (by Morris) is subsequently dismissed with contempt by a speaker of the Miami language; and finally, wampum is presented by the Oneida leader who is escorting Morris, which serves as the medium by which communication and community are brokered. Far from having miraculous qualities, the written word, in this case, produces distrust and dissension that are remedied only by the reading of wampum. Following the reading of the wampum, Pontiac’s demeanor shifts considerably. Morris reports that Pontiac “made a speech to the chiefs, who wanted to put me to death, which does him honour; and shews that he was acquainted with the law of nations: ‘We must not,’ said he, ‘kill ambassadors: do we not send them to the Flat-heads, our greatest enemies, and they to us? Yet these are always treated with hospitality’” (“Journal” 307). The medium of wampum, then, seemingly effects Pontiac’s reassessment of Morris’s status, which shifts from adversary to emissary.
Although it is probably unwise to take Morris’s account as a wholly accurate representation of what transpired, particularly with respect to the Native American leaders’ intentions regarding the British, it is nonetheless clear that the presentation and reading of wampum belts were instrumental in negotiating whatever fragile community emerged from the meeting—one in which, at the very least, Morris’s life was deemed worth recognizing and preserving. Further, this same series of events, in which wampum belts appear to be key determinants in brokering relations across cultural divides, occurs repeatedly in Morris’s narrative. How then, is wampum related to Atlantic aesthesis? Although wampum has been understood both as a form of writing (one speaks of “reading” wampum) as well as a form of currency, both analogies are reductive. Importantly, wampum has tactile, performative, and sonic dimensions that contribute to its capacity to convey meaning. Further, central to the meaning of wampum is its ability not only to convey information but to generate sensus communis—that is, to generate a community of sense across linguistic and cultural divides. Richard Cullen Rath points out that wampum operates by way of touch, sound, and performance—not just as a visual code. Specifically, Rath details the way in which wampum belts were presented at meetings between tribes, with a “vocal but nonverbal communal shout . . . [that] fixed or set the speech belts, as they were often called, demonstrating that the message had been received” (298). A shout, described, variously, by European writers as “the Yo-Hah,” “the U-huy,” or the “mutual Ha!,” always accompanied the reading and performance of wampum belts. Rath points out that it is crucial to understand this shout as verbal but nonlinguistic: “[c]oming only after translation, it was a way of acknowledging across languages and cultures that the other party had been heard and understood” (302). What the wampum communicates—in the particular sensate dimension of the shout—is thus communication itself or, we might say, sensus communis.20 As Angela Haas emphasizes, wampum is thus a form of multimedia or hypermedia, operating across multiple sensate and communicative dimensions.

Germaine Warkentin usefully describes wampum as a “knowledge transfer” object, which it certainly is; my interest, however, is not in the referential meaning of wampum but in its aesthetic edge—that is, the way in which its material and sensate dimensions enable, and indeed call explicitly for, a sharing of sense.21 To return briefly to Kant, we might recall
that the sensus communis is a sharing of taste that involves the creation of a “public sense” rather than a sharing of concepts. The sharing of sensation, and the judgment as to what constitutes meaningful and valued sensation, does not go without saying. Jacques Rancière’s account of the “partage du sensible” (the division of sense or the sharing of sense) involved in the aesthetic realm is particularly relevant here: according to Rancière, the question as to what counts as meaningful sensation—the division between noise and speech, between the visible and the invisible—is a fundamentally aesthetic distribution of communal belonging—one that links aesthetics to politics in an essential way: “[T]he relationship between aesthetics and politics [is found] at this level, the level of the sensible delimitation of what is common to the community, the forms of its visibility and of its organization” (18). The aesthetic dimensions of the wampum thus seem particularly significant in this regard: through sound, visual code, performance, and tactile presence, wampum defines and opens up a shared sensorium that generates a community of negotiation across disparate linguistic groups.22 If we look to the scene of negotiation between Morris and Pontiac, it seems clear that the written word is not the magical object that conveys meaning, but rather, the aesthesis associated with wampum—in oscillating between sensation and meaning, and in performing and gathering the ontic into the mimetic—serves to establish a community of sense that enables the preservation of Morris’s life.

Read together with an understanding of wampum as an aesthetic and communicative medium, the engagements of Native Americans and African Americans with the nonreferential dimensions of books seem less evidence of primitive adulation than of aesthesis—a form of engagement with books that is equally evident among European readers and nonreaders as well. I use the term aesthesis, as indicated earlier, to emphasize the procedural nature of the “partage du sensible” or commoning at stake in aesthetic judgment. I mean to underscore, as well, the way in which an engagement with materiality (rather than a “modern” rejection of it) becomes a resource for a politics of commoning. Mark Rifkin’s recent book Settler Common Sense makes the case for the way in which a common sense—a shared white US national mode of perception—underpins a political community that excludes and eradicates native peoples and renders the history of settler colonialism largely invisible. Rifkin, then, suggests that colonialism has a “common sense” that might be disrupted by alter-
native modes of perception and being in common. Following Rifkin’s injunction to think beyond a colonizing “common sense,” let me propose that rather than viewing books in the hands of colonized subjects as books that refuse to talk, we might instead view them as objects that generate new meanings—sites of dissensus, formed in relation to the ontic force of the book object or wampum, which generate newly imagined communities of sense. For the Algonquians who kissed the Bible and rubbed it against their bodies, the meaning of the text surely did not lie in the ability to decode (or not decode) the words written on the paper: rather, the book served as an embodiment of value that drew individuals together in shared pleasure and recognition.

What these examples point to is the common-making function of aesthesis: if the aesthetic is a regime of common sense, then aesthesis is the enactment of commoning with an emphasis on the sensate—on the presencing of the sensory that enjoins toward community. Aesthesis from below hinges on making use of the moment when the mimetic tips toward the ontic—when a book becomes a thing, and when that ontic tips, in a different way, toward the mimetic as a site of commoning and shared meaning. The ontic properties of the book open it to uses that give us insight into an aesthesis that rewrites the abstractive force of European technology—one that does so not by writing or reading a book, but by way, as we have seen, of haptic, aural, and performative engagements such as drinking a book, rubbing a book all over one’s body, kissing a book, or caressing a book. Aesthesis, then, has the capacity to challenge the structural regime of imperial knowledge at the scene of the imposition of that violence—in the very face of books, guns, and compasses—insofar as aesthesis enables dissensus and the “represencing” and repurposing of sensation and perception. We might read early American books, then (whether a volume of Shakespeare or the Bible), in other ways—as sites of aesthesis that open themselves to divergent commoning possibilities and practices. Although Captain Thomas Morris may have sought to frame the aesthetic value of Shakespeare as removing him from the violence of warfare and the material brutalities of settler colonialism, the materiality of aesthetic also resurfaces (necessarily) in this account, and it foregrounds a materiality and aesthetic in which Native Americans participated as well as Europeans—a shared community of sense. The capacity to read the aesthetic then, as critics, enables us to expand the distinction between the human and the
nonhuman on which accounts of European modernity rely and to read, in 
new ways, the aesthetic dimensions of Atlantic community on the ground.

NOTES

I extend warm thanks to Ed Cahill, Theo Davis, Ed Larkin, and Ivy Schweitzer 
for their valuable comments on earlier versions of this essay.

1. In the *Critique of Judgment* Kant writes, “[T]he judgement of taste, with its at-
tendant consciousness of detachment from all interest, must involve a claim to 
validity for all men . . . [and there] must be coupled with it a claim to subjective 
universality” (51). Kant thus links the universal validity of aesthetic judgment to 
the fact that it is undertaken in a disinterested way—that is, in a fashion asso-
ciated with freedom from constraint (detachment) rather than with utilitarian-
ism or necessity (interest). For further discussion of the universality of aesthetic 
judgment, see Rogerson. On “sensus communis,” see section 40 of the *Critique 
of Judgment*: “[B]y the name *sensus communis* is to be understood the idea of a 
public sense, i.e. a critical faculty which in its reflective act takes account (*a priori*)
of the mode of representations of every one else, in order, as it were, to weigh its 
judgement with the collective reason of mankind” (151). For a useful survey of 
pre-Kantian formulations of sensus communis (including the work of Vico and 
Shaftesbury) and a discussion of contemporary postcolonialism in relation to 
sensus communis, see Khanna.

2. The term *survivance*, coined by Vizenor to assert the ongoing vital presence of 
Native Americans in the United States, is treated at length in the essays collected 
in his edited volume.

3. Eagleton, for instance, describes aesthetics as exercising a colonizing force: “The 
ultimate binding force of the bourgeois social order, in contrast to the coercive 
apparatus of absolutism, will be habits, pieties, sentiments and affections. And this 
is equivalent to saying that power in such an order has become *aestheticized*” (20).

4. Weinstein and Looby offer a valuable critical genealogy of this turn away from 
aesthetics in their introduction: “[F]or many years the predominant approach 
in American literary studies, as in many other sectors of the academic humani-
ties, was a politically engaged historicism, and the aesthetic dimension was con-
sciously dismissed (although never, to be sure, successfully avoided) as a matter 
of minor importance, trivial distraction, or accidental detail” (1). The essays col-
clected in Weinstein and Looby’s volume represent a range of important critical 
work engaged in a return to the aesthetic in a politically and historically in-
formed fashion.


6. My interest in the aesthetic as a site of community formation tends in the direc-
tion of important work by Shields on the early American public sphere, rather
than that of Habermas. Shields uses the term “social aesthetics” to analyze sites of the formation of civil society in British America in relation to a “play of bodies that lay intermediate between the private person and the state” (xxvii). Shields thus emphasizes the aesthetic and performative dimensions of early American letters in relation to the creation of new modes of affiliation: his work “presume[s] that new ways of communicating pleasure gave rise to novel ways of associating: that is, that aesthetics instructed politics in private society” (xiv).

7. Morris published a redacted version of his field journal twenty-seven years after the events recounted therein, together with other literary writings, under the title *Miscellanies in Prose and Verse*. This edited version of the journal was reprinted in Thwaites’s thirty-two-volume series *Early Western Travels: 1748–1846*, vol. 1, in 1904 (“Journal”). The original, unedited version of Morris’s field journal (based on a copy of the journal that was sent to Morris’s commanding officer, Colonel John Bradstreet, in 1764) was published by Peckham, as “Captain Morris’ Journal.” Discussion of the original passage concerning Shakespeare appears below. For further discussion of the divergence between the two journals see Newman. My thanks to Andrew Newman for sharing this work in progress; it has furthered my thinking for this essay in valuable ways.

8. Recent scholarship has done a great deal to challenge the image of English print as distant from and unrelated to Native American orality. As Round points out, “the trajectory of print history in America has been from the beginning intimately tied to the indigenous cultures of this continent,” citing the fact that in 1663, the Puritan missionary John Eliot, together with the Nipmuck printer “James Printer,” produced the first Bible printed in North America in the Algonquian language (5). See also Brooks; the essays and documents collected in Bross and Wyss; and Cohen.

9. I would caution against taking the earlier, manuscript version as a more accurate account of the events than the later edited and printed version: rather, we might understand each as written for a different audience—the first for Colonel Bradstreet and the second for a London book-purchasing audience.

10. As scholars have demonstrated, the exchange of gifts in the setting of intercultural diplomacy implies a mutual recognition between sovereign groups or individuals. For discussion of some of the complexities of such exchanges in the setting of colonial North America, see Rojas and Hall. The issue of gift giving during Morris’s excursion in 1764 was particularly freighted given that Pontiac’s War, and the refusal of tribes in the *pays d’en haut* to agree to terms of peace with the British, was in no small part due to the refusal of British General Jeffrey Amherst to participate in the culture of gift giving that the French had established with Native Americans in the region. As White argues, the exchange of presents had been crucial in establishing the shared sovereignty between Indians and the French that constituted the “middle ground.” Amherst’s refusal to give gifts to tribal leaders was an overt disavowal of any form of native sovereignty:
General Amherst’s new vision of the *pays d’en haut* was a simple one: the British were conquerors; the Indians were subjects. It was a view that abolished the middle ground. . . . At the center of Amherst’s policy was a determination to eliminate the presents that served as a token of the entire middle ground. Amherst believed that presents were emblematic of the problems with existing relationships with the Indians. Presents cultivated the natural lassitude of savagery. If Indians got provisions by asking for them, they would ‘grow remiss in their hunting.’ . . . Indians would have to support themselves by hunting. (256–57)

Morris’s excursion took place shortly after Amherst was recalled to England and British command was placed in the hands of General Thomas Gage. Morris’s decision to describe the exchange of the Shakespeare volume for gunpowder as a sale (rather than a gift), in his field journal, might, then, be due to the fact that Morris was attuned to this British policy. And in contrast, his description of the gift exchange in his later, literary memoir serves to emphasize the aesthetic rather than commercial value of the literary text as it changed hands.

11. For his account of Morris’s experience, see Parkman 407–10. For additional accounts of Morris’s expedition in the context of Pontiac’s War see Anson 68–72 and Middleton 156–64.

12. My thanks to Ed Cahill for pointing to the salience of American waterfall imagery in this passage. For discussion of writing about aesthetics and waterfalls in the early United States (including that by Kalm, Carver, and Pownall), as well as the natural landscape more broadly, see Cahill 99–137.

13. Poisson traces the Shakespeare allusion to Thomas Nash and Richard Eden’s English translation of the letters of Amerigo Vespucci. See also Grier, who traces this trope at further length.

14. As Jackson comments, “A phenomenon such as the talking book . . . is hardly unique to African Americans” (267). Jackson offers valuable genealogies of the fields of early African American literary studies and book history, and details the unfortunate lack of conversation between the two.

15. Consider Brown’s formulation regarding things that are removed from the logic of commodification: “Thingness is precipitated as a kind of misuse value. By *mis-use value* I mean to name the aspects of an object—sensuous, aesthetic, semiotic—that become legible, audible, palpable when the object is experienced in whatever time it takes . . . for an object to become another” (“Secret Life” 3). Thingness, Brown argues, places aesthetic value in play.

16. Axtell, for instance, writes: “We who take literacy and printing so much for granted may have difficulty recapturing the sense of wonder, the *almost totemic reverence*, engendered by a tribal, exclusively oral person’s first encounter with a book” (Invasion 102–3, emphasis added). On the association of the fetish with the primitive, see Pietz, “Fetish.” Latour defines being “modern” in relation to the ability or desire to separate subject and object.
17. Jaudon offers a provocative account of bibliomancy and obeah as means of animating texts in interaction with bodies. See Gundaker, as well, for a compelling discussion of vernacular forms of literacy among New World Africans, including modes of engaging with texts that occupy an ambiguous ground between literacy and orality.

18. Pietz writes,

   Although the theory of fetishism formed part of the Enlightenment critique of religious superstition, while that of aesthetics marked the successful effort to identify artworks and aesthetic feeling as forming a discrete domain of enlightened experience—one quite distinct from the domain proper to sacramental objects and religious sentiment and from that of utilitarian objects and economic reasoning—the underlying philosophical problem of understanding the powers and processes entailed in our passionate apprehension of sensuously material objects has ever since placed the idea of the fetish and that of art in a certain theoretical proximity. (“Fetish”)

19. See also Bartolovich's useful response to Stallybrass's discussion of materiality and the fetish. Bartolovich cites the Pietz passage quoted above to make a related point:

   A “fetish” was an object that neither served as an “image” of a greater power (as did an idol) nor as an item for which exchange value (as Europeans reckoned it) was paramount (as was a commodity), but rather one that actually embodied virtues and values in excess of exchange value—religious, cultural, social. Hence it was “irreducibly material,” in the sense of specific to a particular place and time, and a site in which personal and social systems of value converge. (5)

20. On the performative nature of wampum, see also Foster, who discusses the “prospective function of wampum” as a “device for organizing ongoing events,” not just remembering them: “In brief, while wampum served during the invitation phase of a council to establish contact, during the business phase it served to maintain or prolong communication, and eventually, to terminate it” (108). Important work on oral performance in the early American public sphere has demonstrated the value of attending to the verbal and performative dimensions of early American letters: see, for instance, Fliegelman; Gustafson; and Looby. However, as both Foster and Rath's work indicates, what was at stake in the verbal dimension of wampum performance was not the communication of linguistic content, but a metacommunication that opened, sustained, and closed a communal scene of communication.

21. Warkentin uses this phrase throughout her essay “Dead Metaphor,” which offers a useful exploration of the relationship between the European codex form and Native American objects of knowledge transfer such as wampum.
22. For further attention to the aesthetic dimensions of wampum, see Kelsey, who considers the work of contemporary Hodinöhso:ni’ artists, including James Thomas Stevens, Eric Gansworth, Shelley Niro, and Tracey Deer, all of whom use wampum in their work. Kelsey writes:

[T]he scope of wampum’s cross-fertilization extends far into the scholarly and aesthetic realm. . . . The manner of each [artist’s] adaptation, innovation, and rearticulation of the wampum strings and belts tells us something important about the adaptability and potency of wampum as a record of Indigenous thought and its capacity to re-center conversations long after the original wampum maker has departed. (103–04)

WORKS CITED


