Creative Encounters
Appreciating Difference

And How the Study of Religion Might Contribute

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Abstract

History, culture, drama, and life itself are animated by encounters. Only difference energizes and defines encounters; the greater the difference the more complex and often the more significant the encounter. Difference is commonly valued negatively. Most strategies of encounter focus on overcoming or diminishing difference. A common objective is often stated in terms of somehow tolerating difference. This book is based on the premise that difference is not to be approached primarily as something to be overcome or explained away or somehow tolerated; difference is to be appreciated for its capacity for creativity and vitality. Even encounters that are apparently harmful and negatively valued (arguments, conflict, war, oppression) usually heighten the potential for creativity, innovation, movement, action, and identity.

Drawing on classic encounters that have occurred in history that have played a significant role in the founding of the academic study of religion and the social sciences, this book explores in some depth the dynamics of encounter to reveal both its problematic and creative aspects. The two examples most extensively considered from a variety of perspectives across the various sections of this book are encounters of the peoples already in the American landscape when Europeans arrived to make it their home and encounters of the same sorts of people in the Australian landscape with new arrivals from Europe. These encounters are recognized as fundamental to the identity creation of not only Native Americans and European Americans and Australian Aborigines and European Australians, but also the distinctive theories that fundamentally shaped the social sciences and the academic study of religion.

Revealed in these examples is the remarkable revelation that academic encounters with their subjects often involve creative constructions (concoctions) of primary examples required to establish and give authority to their proposed theories and definitions. While it is tempting to either dismiss certain works as "bad scholarship" or to damn the whole academic enterprise as "colonialist" or "elitist," this book considers these examples as encounter engendered creative constructions that are distinctive to academia.

Since these historical examples engage highly relevant at present concerns —the distinction of real and fake, truth and lie, map and territory—the threading essays, written for this publication, show how these more or less classic examples might contribute to appreciating these contemporary concerns that are generated in the presence of difference. Since the author's research has been located mostly in the academic study of religion, his career spanning the full history of the field in its modern phase, there is a threading discussion of how this field might take advantage of its heritage as well as its location among the humanities to offer a distinctive contribution to the appreciation of difference.

Sam Gill, Professor at the University of Colorado, is the author of many books and articles most recently *Dancing Culture Religion*. His research has engaged him in fieldwork in Africa, Australia, Indonesia, Latin America, and Native America. Recent work includes *Into the Future: Making, Gender, Technology, and Religion from Adam to Androids & Galatea to Tomorrow's Eve* and *Creative Encounters: Appreciating Difference; and How the Study of Religion Might*

Contribute. His current research is related to perception, conception, gesture/posture/prosthesis, movement, dancing, and body distinctively approached by integrating a wide range of academic and cultural perspectives as well as the experience he has acquired in his long career dancing and moving.

Section and Chapter Summaries

The one hundred-thousand-word book is organized into seven sections, most with multiple chapters. Seven of fifteen chapters have been written for this book.

"Section I: Appreciating Difference: Encountering, Moving, Mapping, Naming" introduces, in three chapters, the importance of appreciating difference and establishes some basic parameters and objectives for the book. The first chapter, "Moving beyond Place," based on the current research of the author against the background of half a century of experience as a scholar of religion, introduces many of the key aspects and the threading objective of the book which is to shift attention from a primary goals of articulating place, revealing meaning, establishing categories, and finding a categorical label toward appreciating creative encounters, those often-disruptive conjunctions that raise questions, challenge definitions, and occasionally lead to insight and new more interesting questions. Chapter Two, "Territory" excerpts a previously published work that focuses on Australian Aboriginal (Central Australia) understandings of land, territory, country, maps in order to demonstrate that there are alternatives to the customary understandings of territory as bounded spaces with much focus on borderlands. Aboriginal territory is understood as storied tracks across the land defined by crossings ripe for encounter. Difference is fundamental to the core way in which identity is linked to territory. Newly written for this book is the next chapter "Not by Any Name." At one level this chapter is a critical examination of the long history of naming others who are present in a landscape newly occupied by Europeans. Primitive, aboriginal, native, primal, first nation, indigenous are but a few of these terms as are the more formal American Indian, Native American, Australian Aboriginal, and so forth as labels for other people around the world. The discussion shows that all these names are the product of encounter; all reflect more the outsider than the insider; all tend to be limiting and objectifying and, indeed, colonizing. Yet, in a sense all namings of others—left/right, liberal/conservative, Christian/Muslim—as well as the many other terms by which we are identified—male/female, young/old, child/parent—are also limiting and often unsatisfying. "Not by Any Name" suggests a critique of the objectifying classifying defining strategy so common to labeling others and presents an approach in which naming is an opening to creative encountering, where names are strategies of relating creatively and ongoing, rather than halting by categorizing and objectifying.

"Creations of Encounters" (Section II) offers four chapters focused on specific encounters, one centering on "Mother Earth" in North America and the other centering on a figure named "Numbakulla" in Central Australia. Mother Earth offers insight into how the encounter of the peoples in the American landscape responded to the infringing "new Americans" whose ancestry was not of this land. Despite the broadly negative impact on these many indigenous cultures, their development of Mother Earth is seen as a positive and creative innovation motivated by the crisis. The Numbakulla account is one of those odd encounters between academics (both in the field and from afar) that resulted in the creation (concoction is an

appropriate word) of classic primary examples supporting much of modern social scientific and religion theory. In turn, these theories recreated the actual people in their likeness. These two examples are presented in considerable depth because it is in the detail that the larger stories emerge. The section ends with consideration of two other creative encounters with remarkable and unexpected impacts on history and people; one set in Central Australia, the other in the America. These encounters reveal how stories of encounters (whole lineages of transforming stories) often overwhelm any possibility of an objective account of the actual event. The stories further creatively the encounter throughout considerable periods of history with remarkable real world consequences.

"Section III: Aesthetics of Impossibles" includes two chapters. The first, written for this book, "Story and Aesthetics of Impossibles" is a careful discussion of a distinctive aspect of many stories, especially those we call "myth," the presence of characters and events that are incredulous, fantastic, unbelievable—in a word "impossibles." These are the very stories on which whole religious traditions are founded and function in those religions, ironically it would seem, as the very definition of reality. This chapter places the consideration of story/myth in the context of the contemporary complex discussion of what constitutes reality and truth. The author's development of what is termed "aesthetic of impossibles" offers an important insight as to how it is the impossibility itself that fuels creative encounter in hearing and telling these stories. The second chapter in this section, "'Making Them Speak': Colonialism and the Study of Mythology," is a detailed presentation of the encounter of academics looking to Central Australia largely to establish Western intellectual theory by their creative encounters with the mythology, ritual, and language of the peoples who were considered to represent "the original people."

"Gesture" is the topic of Section IV. The author's recent and ongoing research is to establish the fundamental importance of gesture (and also posture) in creating and establishing and transmitting the fundamental concepts and practices that are at the core of identity. The chapter "Gesture, Posture, Prosthesis," written for this book, presents the author's perspective on this broadly applicable body of theory. Gesture comprises the media, and thus subsequently also the message, of encounter. The power of this theory is demonstrated in the chapter "They Jump Up of Themselves" in the careful discussion of the ontology of people in Central Australia as revealed in their gestural practices. What is of particular importance is that the focus on gesture reveals surprising insight into the most fundamental aspects of these cultures (at the time of contact with Europeans). For these cultures, it has been their creative encounter with the land that has been the foundation for their identity. The consideration of the gestural aspect of these encounters shows a way to appreciate in detail aspects of identity without resorting to a translation into intellectualist terms of meaning or theology. The last chapter focuses on Navajo prayer, updating the research done by the author 50 years ago, to demonstrate that approaching Navajo prayer in gestural terms rather than in "meaning" terms, is not only greatly revealing of the specifics of Navajo culture and religion, but also and most importantly in the study and understanding of all prayer traditions. Going further, this chapter suggests that "prayer" may be understood as fundamentally a creative encounter of a religious kind and it argues that once one may appreciate the importance of understanding prayer in terms of gesture, then so also are the advantages of studying religions in these terms.

The author has studied the philosophy and structurality of play for decades. Section V "Play" offers another strategic approach to the appreciation of difference as well as the complex contemporary issue of discerning fact from fiction, actual from make believe. Play is acting as if a thing is what we know that it is not. Alternatively play often indicates that vital skilled movement (gesture) that constitutes identity and the actions of arting. The chapter "No Place to Stand: Jonathan Z. Smith as *homo ludens*, the Academic Study of Religion *sub specie ludi"* focuses on Jonathan Smith's many studies of religion marked by a focus on the appreciation of difference as core to comparison. The chapter traces Smith's approach, arguably one of "play," from his early study of Frazer's *The Golden Bough* in which he appreciated Frazer's propensity to concoct his evidence to a strategy of play. Smith is widely cited for his articulation of the various maps that constitute categories of religion. In this chapter emphasis is placed on what is rarely noticed in Smith's discussion of mapping which is that religions are best characterized in terms of "play." To provide detailed and specific examples of how religions might be appreciated, especially in their distinctiveness and differences, a range of Native American examples is presented in the chapter "Go Up Into the Gaps: Play of Native American Religions."

Concluding the book, Section VI: "Creative Encounters" is a summary chapter by the same name that offers a wide ranging engaging discussion of the importance of appreciating difference in a variety of contexts and situations. Rather than a simple summary of the book, this chapter looks beyond to the potential of encounters, however experienced, to be creative and vitalizing. The chapter shows that understanding encounters in this way helps accomplish the mandate that we must do far more than simply tolerate difference, we must appreciate and celebrate difference for its potential, for its energetics that fuel creativity.

Preface

As an undergraduate I studied mathematics and physics. In my senior year, having completed my undergrad requirements, I took up business administration. I then entered a graduate program in business while starting a fulltime job in a local international company. After a couple years, with MA in business in hand and working a job I liked and that paid well, I felt I was about to enter a vortex from which I might not ever emerge. The vortex of a successful business career. Having had the briefest introduction to the "religions of the world," I sought this area, and quite incidentally the University of Chicago (about which I knew nothing), as a place to take a brief leave from business to assure myself I actually wanted to leap in that whirlpool. In the fall of 1967 I took a leave of absence, went to Chicago, entered a completely alien world, and have been attempting to find something of a place in this field since. Now reaching half a century experiencing this process offers, indeed demands, this time as an occasion for reflection. Let me be brief.

Looking back, trying to be careful not to simply fall into the dead and irrelevant past, I ask, what have I been up to all this time? Has it been worth it? Have I accomplished anything of value? Is anyone or anything the least bit better for what I have done? I have to attempt to answer these questions however tentatively, yet, I find myself much more interested in looking forward. These lookings backward and forward are related, entwined. The future trajectory seems at the moment the more serious; the more interesting and urgent. What must I do now to continue the work? I feel a certain responsibility, really more of a longing, to offer to others something of my accumulated experience. Basically, I ask, what can I do now that I might share something of what I've learned and experienced? How does my current work advance what I have done before? It is a Janus effort magical in looking at once in opposite directions.

In 2010, with considerable effort I persuaded my colleagues to invite Jonathan Smith to present a lecture on his ideas of what will shape the academic study of religion over the next forty years. I found Jonathan's lecture to be remarkably important and quite surprising given that I had devoted much of my career to the study of Smith's work, having been powerfully inspired and guide by it. That single lecture has powerfully shaped the work I have done since. Hints of this new work are provided here in a looking back to thread together the whole, if a bit ragged, tapestry of my work. I've found this Janus endeavor exciting and vitalizing.

A bit of background. In the early part of my career my work was focused on the study of Native American religions and specifically on the Navajo and on the cultures in the American Southwest. My PhD dissertation at the University of Chicago was on Navajo prayer. I wrote a number of books and not a few articles on related topics (see, list of publications). My interests have always focused on the study of the religions of specific people to demonstrate that they merited a study on the scale similar to what is commonly given to Christianity or Islam or Hinduism. Yet, I have also always been interested in the dynamics of the general study of religion, in the theories of religion that are at the core of a comparative academic study, in the ethics of even attempting to comprehend and appreciate some "other" folks and what we understand to be their religion. My work involved ethnographic fieldwork as well as careful readings of history and ethnography.

As my interests expanded so did the cultures that I found fascinating. Linked closely to my efforts to discover how to come to terms with cultures that did not produce and use writing in a primary religious way, my attention was drawn to the rich arenas of action and behavior and experience. I became interested early on in dancing and masking and ritual and drama and the stories (folklore and mythologies) that were a constant presence in the lives lived in these cultures. My interests were drawn to cultures outside of North America. Early on, through something of a fluke, I became obsessed with comprehending how the dances, dramas, stories, rituals of the peoples in Central Australia had been recorded and understood by the most prestigious academics at work in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to establish fields such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, and later in mid-twentieth century also religion. I was stunned to learn that many of these renowned scholars had used the same primary examples attributed to the "native tribes of Central Australia." I began to see that to study these specific cultures could not be separated from discovering the story being created by celebrated Western scholars in service to the establishment of modern Western cultural and religious identity.

My growing interest in the study of dancing correlated with my growing participation in dancing and in physical acts of moving. I was a laboratory to my own studies. These interests led me to travel widely to study dancing and ritual: Bali, Java, Ghana, Mali, Australia, and various places in Latin America—Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Mexico, Puerto Rico. In these places, I learned to the extent of my ability some of the dances distinctive to these people and I studied the histories and cultures in which these dance traditions developed. For many years, I taught courses related to religion and dancing. I also founded and opened a dance studio in which dancers and musicians from many countries taught and shared their cultures. Many of them took groups of interested Americans to visit their countries to learn their languages and dances and musics and to immerse themselves in their cultures. Guests from all over the world taught in this studio of dance and music.

As my experience of movement grew, enriched by the movement styles of many cultures, so too did my interest in the philosophy of movement as well as the biology of movement. These correlating studies have been the core of my work for a decade or more now. Some aspects of my current work appear here in the threading essays and in section on gesture in particular. Other presentations on this research are in preparation. The prominent cultural base for the examples explored in this book are in Native American cultures with an emphasis on the American Southwest and on cultures in Central Australia, particularly at the time shortly after first contact with Europeans. I also mention occasionally a variety of other cultures in Africa, Indonesia, and Latin America where I have some experience. While among my earliest originating thoughts for this book were to address the study of "indigenous" peoples, especially their religions, I quickly recognized my impatience with classifying terminology and at the same time clearly recognizing that all of this work is premised on my deepest and most abiding concerns to contribute to an appreciation of difference. Thus, as I reviewed various possible inclusions of works previously published, I was stunned that so many of them investigated creative encounters with the effort to develop academic and popular principles that might lead to the deeper appreciation of difference.

As I continued to think about this particular book, I realized that most of my publication on Native American and Australian Aboriginal cultures came to an end by the late 1990s. I was curious to revisit these early publications to see how dated and irrelevant they might now seem. Most of my Native American works were published before the mid-nineteen nineties and my publications on Australian Aboriginals occurred before the turn of the century. To my considerable surprise, especially since in my own mind my work today is remarkably different than my work before the turn of this century, I found the seeds of my current interest strewn widely and obviously throughout these early publications. I came to recognize that, with some proper contemporary contextualization, some of these early publications are even more relevant and useful today than they were when published. I realized that these selections had to be newly contextualized in terms of the issues of the contemporary world as well as in light of the decades of research and writing I have done since the original publications.

In this book, the designated sections identify specific concerns important and relevant today. Each section includes newly written chapters that both presents the abiding issue and the basis for its importance as well as offers my views, often including my personal experience, on this issue developed over the past fifty years. Each section also includes select articles or book chapters (some excerpted) I believe are important and relevant, yet are no longer readily available to most readers. The new writings are also threading essays, intended to provide coherence to the work as well as to develop the implications of these prior works as important to the present.

Overarching the entire work are the issues of the encounters—in this case typically fostered by the academic enterprise, yet applicable generally as well—that occur among people that are different from one another. If there is a single issue of vital importance to the entire world today, it is how we might change ourselves so as to not only tolerate and live peacefully among those different from us, it is also how to develop perspectives and dynamics that allow us to appreciate others because they are different from us. The humanities academic enterprise surely has no higher purpose, no greater mandate, than to advance this effort, to lead the way for the broad advancement of this lofty goal.

Acknowledgements:

I: Appreciating Difference: Encountering, Moving, Mapping, Naming

1: Moving Beyond Place

At the root of most every issue that is experienced throughout the world today are the most basic questions: What is truth? What is lie? What is real? What is fantasy? Who or what can provide answers to these questions? Are there answers to these questions? Why does nearly every encounter at every level, from family to neighbors to countries to continents to religions to ethnicities/races, seem to raise these most fundamental questions? How did we get to such a stressful time that these most fundamental questions so utterly confound?

Most everyone I know, most everything in current affairs I read, most news and commentary I consume all seem to be approaching levels of stress and often shock aptly caught by a phrase I hear every day, "We've never seen anything like this before!"

A flood of articles, whole issues of magazines, and books offer insights, explanations, hope, historical perspective. These are instant best sellers because so many are feeling stress and bewilderment "unlike they have ever felt before." These questions are not new; they are at the heart of philosophy. It is the business of religions to offer theological and cosmogonical grounds for answering these questions; yet, of course, these grounds and the associated answers vary, sometimes radically, among religions. Science is synonymous with reason, objectivity, control, laws; the very hallmarks of what is presented as definitive answers to the fundamental questions. Yet the history and the philosophy of science show the shifts in paradigms and personal/subjective influence, even determine, science. It is clear that large portions of the population do not "believe in" scientific results.

Kurt Andersen's *Fantasyland: How America Went Haywire: A 500-year History* (2017) holds an approximate synonymy of this term "haywire" with anything religious, which he often describes as nuts, magic, fantasy, unfounded, stupid. Beginning with Martin Luther (obviously not American) Andersen recounts brief and interesting historical cameos showing an almost constant presence in American history of the fantasies and "falsehoods" he identifies with religion. As a farm boy from Kansas I find his use of the term "haywire" interesting. The term originated near the end of the nineteenth century when hay came to be baled using wire to hold the bale together. On our family farm, when we removed the wire from a bale of hay to feed livestock we always wrapped up the wire in a bundle and hung it in the shed because you'd never knew when you'd need some "baling wire" to fix something. While there is a sense that haywire indicates something broken that is poorly fixed, it also, at least in my experience, has a MacGyver implication to it. It denoted ingenuity and resourcefulness. Haywire was the go to fix-it-all before duct tape. I well remember my dad's expression that you could fix most anything with baling wire and a wad of chewing gum. Perhaps because I grew up loving what you could do with baling wire, my fascination has always been with resourcefulness, innovation, and creativity, especially in times of need (and regarding Andersen's history, America has always had so many who lived gloriously and creativity with baling wire while having so little), in response to something broken, on occasions of the random and unexpected, in the folks who didn't need much means to come up with something that works, even if temporarily.

Some of my current work charts the trajectory into the future of what Andersen would call fantasy. I'm interested in the long and often religious (but also scientific) history of the popularity of automata, androids, and robots. As Mary Shelley showed, these made creatures tend always to raise the very same fundamental questions with which I began. These "makings" might be described using the term "fantasy" and most have at least religious implications. Here too I believe I differ from Andersen. Whereas he tends to consider fantasy as the flight from sanity and reason (and certainly it can be used with these effects), I tend to prefer the associations with the deep history of the term which derives from Latin *phantasia* and from Greek *phantazein* meaning "imagination, appearance" and to "make visible." Thus, fantasy might just as well refer to the processes of making present, giving appearance to the imagined, to create things. What Andersen sees as fantasy (a taking leave of sanity and reason) in religions, I have preferred to recognize as the creative and innovative aspects that distinguish religions. I refer to this sort of religious "fantasyland" as evidence of an *aesthetic of impossibles*. Such an aesthetic posits as "just so" or given (unquestioned) things that are wildly impossible and knowingly so. To embrace an aesthetic of impossibles as a distinctive religious strategy does not diminish the importance of the fantastical; rather it offers a way to understand it as the articulation of the creative and imaginative. To appreciate an aesthetic of impossibles offers a way to see fantasy, not as nutty and stupid, but rather as a powerful and distinctly human raising of the most fundamental questions.

It is obvious that history is charted in terms of dramatic encounters that shift the course. Encounter implicates and depends on difference. The more radical the difference the more energy is generated in the encounter and, often, the more outstanding the historical event. While we may feel enormous stress and disorientation in encounter, the avoidance of encounter is either impossible or pathologically isolating. The often stressful and disorienting experience of encounter typically motivates the urge toward resolution. Yet, the very structurality that defines encounter (relationship, alliance, hate, war) is based on difference. No difference, no separation, no encounter. We are motivated by the stress and disquiet of encounter to seek means of mediation and conflict resolution or total destruction of the "other." Yet, we might seek a more MacGyver-style baling wire kind of strategy of holding something together through innovation and ingenuity, even if temporarily, that it might continue. In other words, as I have preferred, to see encounter as inherently creative and imaginative as raising the most fundamental questions all the while knowing that there are no definitive answers.

As a student of religion and religions for nearly half a century, I have increasingly wanted to find in the experience and knowledge I've gained through these decades help in comprehending my own felt current stress as well as the larger (largest) constituents of the stress inducing environment. And with that I've wanted to offer some insights that might be of interest and value to others. I came to realize that my academic work has always been about creative encounters that gave rise to history and culture and religion. I realized that the parties of the encounters I have been interested in were vastly different from one another at an ontological level; the measure of difference is why I found these encounters so important and interesting. Looking over the record that documents my work, I have been surprised to so frequently find my use of the language of creative encounter. From my earliest academic days, my attraction to

religion rested both in the fascinating ubiquity of the use of what I now call an aesthetic of impossibles (holding the most fundamental grounds for truth and reality in impossible beings and places) and in the ubiquity of religion as fundamental to cultures throughout human history. The very "fantastical" sense of religion was for me at once inexplicable while also being undeniably fundamental to the creative and innovative qualities that mark us as humans.

In this book, I bring forward my earlier interests in Native Americans, Australian Aborigines, and the indigenous folks of Africa and Latin America. I also draw on my constant interest in the theories that might be advanced by the academic study of religions and the larger studies of culture and human life, particularly as I am currently working on them. Centering on the encounters as inherently creative, if also stressful and displacing, I want to contribute to, or better, I want to show how the study of religion might contribute to, the most difficult and complex questions of our (and also most other) times. The mandate I feel is not to offer answers or to resolve the conflict of encounter. The mandate I feel is not to find some "common ground" or grounds for a superficial tolerance of difference. The mandate I feel and accept is to appreciate difference; to fully understand that creativity, ingenuity, innovation, movement, evolution, development, coherence . . . all are generated in the common presence of difference. I feel that this appreciation (beyond tolerance) of difference is what should be the mandate for the academic study of religion and for the academy in general.

The academic study of religion gained a new place in educational institutions as a result of Justice Clark's opinion in the Abington v Schempp US Supreme Court decision in 1963 in which he wrote, "education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization." Yet, the justice gave no markers to distinguish religion as a subject of study.

As the academic study of religion geared up to train teachers and scholars to fill the many positions in new religion departments in state colleges and universities, a common distinction made at the time was to give considerable weight to Justice Clark's indication that teaching "about" religion was appropriate while it remained illegal to teach religion in any manner that would impact the students' religious beliefs or behavior. In the early days of establishing an academic field, many scholars held the assumption that there is a religious dimension to being human, expressed in Latin as *homo religiosus*, the religious human. Early efforts to distinguish religion were commonly articulated in terms of place. In the mid-twentieth century environment highly influential figures, particularly Mircea Eliade, renowned for the broad comparative study of religions throughout the world, understood religion largely in terms of place. In a world of historical complexity, in a world of science marked by relativity, in a world reeling from world wars and continual conflict, in the presence of an emerging post-modern philosophy, religion was understood as distinguished by the stability it offered. This stability, understood as the basis for Reality and Truth, was commonly described in terms of place. The spatial vocabulary for stability (Reality, Truth) was that of *center*, the axis that gave orientation to the world (*axis mundi*) and all that occurred therein. The temporal vocabulary for stable could only be the *beginning of time* (*in illo tempore*) when, indeed, the gods' actions not only prepared the world for time itself, but they also designated the center place that would provide dependable orientation. With these quite reasonable, although humorless, expectations that both centered on designating religion precisely and principally in terms of place, a great many

specific objects and actions were then found to be concrete exemplification of the place designations that defined religion in culture after culture around the world and throughout history. The enormous variation among cultures was understood largely in terms of variant manifestations of common patterns; mountains and cities and buildings and trees were all identified as centers that had been established in the beginning by the gods. The ubiquitous treasured (held sacred) stories (myths) provided evidence of the defining trait of accounts of beginnings.

Inspired by and borrowing from late nineteenth and early twentieth century social sciences— anthropology, sociology, psychology—the study of religion in its formative decades looked to primitive, aboriginal, indigenous peoples as well as peoples of antiquity for the strongest most convincing evidence of understanding religion in terms of aspects of society that met the distinctly human need for stability and orientation and served as a hedge against the relativity of history and science and experience. While both indigenous and ancient people were distant from the actual origins of the universe, the need for examples to assure the proposed distinction of religion overwhelmed the obvious facts of history and geography. While religion has commonly been distinguished from magic, there has been an unapologetic practice of magic in the academic assumptions that folks one meets face-to-face are, by means of some magical wrinkle in time (a wormhole or a fold in the fabric of the universe perhaps) offer direct evidence from the creation times. Our persistent seeming need to construct and name a classification for these people, especially as distinguished among all cultures, attests to the impossibility, so far anyway, of moving beyond this imposed notion of religion and the desperate need to somehow offer evidence to establish or maintain it. The seeming difficulty in labeling these groups of people is, as I've discussed above, inseparable from the difficulty that the academic study of religion has had in providing any non-controversial markers for the subject of study, religion. These issues are twined historically as well as in terms of the assumptions that seem not to be avoidable about both cultural classifications (primitive, aboriginal, indigenous) and the markers of religion (societal institutions that ground Reality and Truth in terms of place, time and space). Both derive historically from what might be called an academic theology that is beholden to the largely Protestant Christian world view in which it arose. Baldly put, the academic study of religion is bound to a theological belief that god created the world and initiated time. For several decades, the more obvious religious connotations have been scoured from academic jargon. Further, the most fundamental issues that should ground and distinguish a field of study have been increasingly ignored. Yet, it can be argued that, because we are still grasping for appropriate terms (indigenous) for what we once referred to simply as primitives or aborigines and because we are producing few insightful discussions of religion (as an academic invention), there remain tacit theological assumptions operative in the academic study of religion.

Certainly, the demands of the contemporary, as well as the historical, world indicate that the comprehension and appreciation of difference among cultures, peoples, and religions are fundamental. What is needed minimally is a basis for genuine tolerance, yet the best hopes for humanity surpass mere tolerance to establish a world view that appreciates and treasures differences among people, cultures, and religions. Surely this goal, however seemingly romantic, should be central to the academic study of religion. It is because of the great

differences, the rich variation, the presence of things surprising and unexpected that human life is so amazing, interesting, and has such potential. Perhaps in most periods of human history, especially so now, cultural, racial, gender, age, ethnic, political, religious difference is nearly inseparable from hate and derision. This attitude is so pervasive and entrenched at the present that any shift at all towards a genuine appreciation of difference seems unlikely.

In the last several decades, the presence of difference and its potential for a positive valuation, has been introduced to the study of religion. Notably, however, place has remained a valued vocabulary. Particularly the work of Jonathan Smith has been important in this regard. He often cited the dictum attributed to Archimedes "Give me a place to stand on and I will move the world." Smith showed that religions are enterprises of mapping and that the style of map (articulated as relationships among place designations) is important to any study of religion. Still, while for Smith difference, incongruity, and incredulity are of value, the maps that distinguish religions are ones that are most commonly based on a high measure of congruence with designated territory. Religions, Smith argues, most commonly (although there are some exceptions) distinguish value in terms of the designation and occupation of place. One embraces the map commonly offered by religion as providing access to the territory of Reality and Truth. Much of Smith's work demonstrates that embracing a map is rarely a simple or obvious process. His interest is drawn much more toward the negotiation and manipulation that must occur as one attempts to apply map to territory, in living a religious life. Thus, rather than myth being the objective account of some real time and place in the beginning, myth is a story that has a history. This history is one of the modification and creative development that occurs in the application of the myth to the exigencies of history.

Smith understands the study of religion in similar terms. He showed that the choice of theory or perspective (that is, in his terms "a place on which to stand" as an academic), largely determines the outcomes of the study. Yet, the process of academic study requires the creative negotiation of the value of a theory revealed through its rigorous application to the subject of study. Thus, academic processes serve a developing field of the study of religion.

My interests over the decades have shifted progressively towards a non-reductionist biologically sensitive understanding of religion. I have been enthralled by the amazing capacities that distinguish all animate organism, yet particularly humans among them. My interests have moved progressively toward human movement, particularly self-movement or the movement that is initiated by the organism; the emphasis is on the living active body rather than the passive objective body. Inquiring of the biological and philosophical aspects of self-movement I have come to appreciate that it is essential to perception and that perception must be appreciated as an act of transcendence. It is essential to cognition. I am convinced that all concepts are fundamentally corporeal or are ultimately based in corporeal experience. I have come to appreciate that gesture—repetitive patterned movement—is perhaps the greatest basis for distinguishing identity and emotion. Extending from here, the values we experience as coherence and incoherence are far more important than anything we might term as "meaning."

Given these developing dynamics religions are both distinguished and valuable because they provide a context and a repetitive practice for developing patterns of self-movement. Religions engage networks of gestural patterings that might be understood as the skills that people use

to construct and experience identity and coherence. Religions are practiced. Religion ought best be understood as a verb, religioning, to remind that it is not a thing so much as an array of skills born in self-movement. Place is not so important as providing stability itself. To the extent place is important it might better be appreciated as the shaping dynamic effects of a resounding vessel. Brian Massumi and Jean Luc Nancy have both developed this analogy. Place might influence the movement of sound within a vessel (a well, a cistern), yet it is the unstoppable sounding and resounding that is first in importance, for sound exists in its moving and the folding back on itself, on its sounding and resounding. The study of religion then might be vitalized itself by an emphasis on religioning, the moving dynamics of the practitioners.

In terms of the dictum of Archimedes, while our attention has been directed largely to the part that has to do with place, we must recognize that his statement was actually about leverage and that finding a place is the beginning, not the end, for Archimedes. His interest was in moving, in agency, in action, in applying leverage.

The core of this book has been to shift attention from a primary goal of articulating place, revealing meaning, establishing categories, and finding a categorical label toward appreciating creative encounters, those often-disruptive conjunctions that raise questions, challenge definitions, and occasionally lead to insight and new more interesting questions. The recommendation is to move beyond place as either an adequate beginning or ending to the study of religion and to the way we imagine how this term, religioning, might direct our attention to something in the world that is the interest of our efforts.

2: Territory[1]

> Archie marked the key sites in the dirt, and drew a line between them.
> Then he indicated how a second rain track, belonging to Jakamarra-
> Jupurrurla/Nakamarra Napurrurla, split off from the main one and ran to
> a place called Wingkiyi. Still other tracks converged on Kulpulurnu from
> the west. I recognized enough of the site names to realize that Archie's
> sand diagram was an objectification of how he *thought* of their
> relationships: the tracks would actually meander and dogleg in linking all
> the places he had named.
>
> –Michael Jackson, *At Home in the World*

"Territory" is not a term commonly used in the academic study of religion. It does not appear among the 3,200 articles in *The HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion*. Space, time, and place, particularly when qualified by the adjective "sacred," are commonly used terms. While territory, in this sense, may refer to concrete space and time, to the specific geographical physical and temporal structuring of actual religious traditions, it is also used metaphorically to refer to a wide range of theoretical issues. For example, the complicated theoretical issues regarding the relationship between the concrete materials considered by students of religion and some supposed corresponding religious reality, understood as either a spiritual realm or an academic construct, have been addressed in the metaphorical terms of the relationship between map and territory. Reflection upon the term "territory" provokes a wide-ranging critical discussion of academic theory.

The concerns regarding territory serve the correlations of meaning with order. Distinctions made in spatial and temporal terms are often assumed to be fundamental to the way humans designate meaning, create order. Certainly, it is a central theme in Western thought to make sense of the world by correlating meaning with order using the terms associated with space, shape, and body. As a product of this propensity, virtually every aspect of religion, both within specific traditions and academic categories is articulated using a vocabulary of territory. Issues regarding territory must also address the even more fundamental academic assumption that reality invariably exhibits some meaningful order or plan (for an interesting discussion of the expectation that reality presents itself to us as an exhibit, see Mitchell 1988). This assumption motivates the persistence of academic methods to prescribe where to stand to "get the picture," to see the underlying plan or intention of reality.

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[1] Originally published in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*. Edited by Mark C. Taylor. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, pp. 298-313. A section that compares Eliade's and Smith's perspectives on place and its role in religion and the study of religion has been deleted. Territory provides a fundamental vocabulary for articulating creative encounters. This article "Territory" considers the term in both a concrete and physical as well as a theoretical and metaphorical sense. An Australian Aboriginal setting offers a specific territory in which to consider such concerns as the relationships between map and territory and different mapping strategies that are practiced by both cultures in Central Australia and the culture of the academic study of religion.

One of the primary means of individual and group identity for the aboriginal cultures in Central Australia is the complex concept often rendered as "the dreaming," though the English term all too often suggests unfounded Western romantic projections. Each language has its own term, for example, the Warlpiri call it *jukurrpa* while the Arrernte call it *altjira*.

The people of these cultures are divided into subgroupings, often referred to as totems, and each group is identical with mythic figures who are recognized, in some sense, as their ancestors. These ancestors are identified in the terms of a natural form, that is, they are called by the name of a plant, an animal, or even a meteorological phenomenon like rain. Songs sung during rites tell the actions of the ancestors. They arose from the earth at a particular geographical location. They journeyed across the land, camping at a variety of named places where they performed rites and sometimes interacted with others. Eventually they returned to the earth. These ancestors are not deities (in any sense of being numinous, transcendent, cosmic creators, or sky dwellers), though they are heroic and mythic in being credited with engaging in formative acts, establishing rites, and identifying themselves and their actions with the territory they traveled through. Aborigines do not have accounts of cosmic creation or origination.

Jukurrpa or *altjira* can refer variously to these mythic ancestors, to their actions, to the accounts told of their actions, to graphic depictions of ancestral journeys, and to the country defined by the itinerary taken by these ancestors. *Jukurrpa* or *altjira* also denotes one of the ways all human beings are identified, including one's responsibilities (one's dreaming is the law) and the potential of one's opportunities (particularly in terms of the potential for forming new relationships). For aborigines, identity is inseparable from territory and, as Tony Swain (1993) has shown, their ontology is strongly spatial, rather than temporal, in character.

Aborigines identify with country, but it is a conception of country that differs from the boundaried understandings by which cartographers customarily circumscribe countries. Country, to aborigines, is designated by a track across the land. It is a series of nameable geographical locations interconnected as the itinerary of ancestral travels. The totem identity— that is, the identity with a plant, animal, or natural form—designates a track (a song line) and one's country.

The groups of people who are identified with a given country have the responsibility to "hold up" that country, which they do by traveling to specific locations along the track where they perform song and dance dramas that refresh the knowledge of the actions performed by their ancestors at this location. Over a period of years, each track is retraced by the group whose members identify with the country.

Unlike countries that mutually exclude one another, this aboriginal conception of country allows one country to span the territory occupied by peoples who speak mutually unintelligible languages or different dialects, and who have different social structures and kinship systems. It also allows for countries, tracks, to cross one another, to occupy the same objective space. Typically, one country crosses another at a specific location that is important to both. Each group's story of their dreaming tells of the encounter with the other group at the place of intersection. When a group performs rites at a totem location shared by other groups, they all

meet together, share their knowledge through dance drama performances, and form relationships based on the terms of these crossings.

Jukurrpa, *altjira*, country, totem, dreaming, law (all more or less synonymous) define a person's identity, her or his descent (though not consanguineous). Each person receives this identity at birth, and it is immutable. However, the aboriginal conception of territory interplays with complex consanguine relationships providing the foundation for aboriginal society and religion.

Nineteenth-century colonialism and the rise of modern anthropology with its vast ethnographic project challenged accepted, basically theological views of the world by introducing evidence and experience of human diversity. Distinctions in space and time were employed as fundamental to the social sciences informed by the powerful presumption of evolution developed by the natural sciences. The evolutionist assumption demanded that the territory of human existence be presented as a sequence of developmental stages. The quest, distinctive to the social sciences during this late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century period, often took the form of a concern with beginnings that frequently included the search for the origin of religion. Emile Durkheim (1965, pub. 1912) found the origin of religion in society as expressed in his famous statement that "the sacred is society." Sigmund Freud (1913) articulated his understanding of origination in terms of "the primal scene." Phylogenetically this primal event occurred "one day" and was distinguished by brothers killing and eating their father because of their sexual desire for their mothers and sisters. The proposition of this event endeavors to explain the origin of sacrifice, taboos, and belief in gods. Ontogenetically this primal scene is inseparable from the dynamics of infant sexuality, it designates a child's observation of her or his parents in coitus. Both Durkheim and Freud depended heavily on Australian aboriginal ethnography for the development of their theories of origination. All of the classical works in the social sciences during this period were influenced to some extent by the evolutionist assumptions and an essentialist/objectivist epistemology.

The emergence of the modern academic study of religion in the nineteenth century correlates with the realization that religion might be understood in such a way as to be useful in accounting for the development, classification, and distinction of being human. Since the academic study of religion developed from Western intellectual roots, with Christianity (and, to a lesser extent, other Abrahamic traditions) functioning as the categorical prototype, religion was, as it continues to be, understood in largely theological terms, that is, religion has to do with beliefs in the existence of God. A broad and concerted effort was made in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to retain belief in God as the distinctive characteristic of religion by seeking high gods among so-called primitive and archaic peoples to show that these peoples, considered as representative of the earliest stages of human development, believed in a creator god. The belief of the first peoples in a high god arguably confirmed the Christian understanding of religion, the early existence of the Christian god, and the definition of religion as belief in god.

The academic study of religion began to emerge as a distinctive enterprise with the shifting from theologically based to territorially based understandings of religion. Concerns with documenting the high god and original monotheism blended into more neutral, less theological concerns with a study of religion centered on beginnings or origins. In the nineteenth century,

religion, seen on a worldwide stage, began to be thought of in terms of classifications in space and time. While these territorial classifications simply overlay the underlying theological assumptions, they established the taxonomy of religion that remains broadly accepted today. The most fundamental classification in this taxonomy is world religions. World religions are those that, like Western religions, transcend national boundaries and are inclusive with respect to national and ethnic identity. World religions contrast with national and ethnic religions in terms of their relationship to territory. Though world religions transcend national boundaries, they continue to be identified in terms of basic relative territorial categories: Western and Asian or Eastern, which are further subclassified East Asian, Southeast Asian, Middle Eastern, American, and so forth. Temporal distinctions have also been important. Archaic and ancient religions are distinguished from modern or living religions. Primitive religions, though temporally contemporary, are commonly correlated with the archaic. Further, historical methods have constituted the primary approaches used to study world religions. Studies of religion are commonly distinguished in terms of a particular historical period as more fundamental even than the designation of geographical place. So-called primitive religions, being made to correlate with the time of origination, have been typically considered, following the logic of the temporal assumption, ahistorical.

The shift to concerns with territory—space, time, and place—and away from theological interests corresponded with the shift from understanding religion as principally Christian or Western to acknowledging religion as a distinct aspect of being human. It corresponded with the growing awareness that comparison among religions serves the endeavor of understanding the human world rather than advancing the understanding of a particular religious tradition or people. Still, analysis of these often self-contradictory and illogical divisions of the territory of religion reveals the persistence of the powerful historical and ideological assumptions of the Western prototype for the category religion. The academic study of religion has yet to free itself from its roots in a colonial territorial ideology.

[section removed]

The more fully we appreciate the operative uses of territorial terms, the clearer it is that they have yet to realize fully the morality of the academic study of religion [i.e. to study religions free of religious assumptions and expectations]; they remain terms used within the temple, at least the temple of colonialism. In this respect territory is a political term. The search for neutral language has served as a disguise, though doubtless most often unwittingly, for knowing the other in the sense of controlling the other.

Jean Baudrillard uses the map-territory metaphor to describe the process in which the map becomes the only reality, a process he sees as increasingly characterizing the modern West. Applying his perspective to the academic enterprise suggests that abstractions, models, academic constructs of the generic are no longer maps that reflect a real territory. They are not used as maps to direct the inquiry of historically and culturally real territories, nor are they the products of such inquiries. Rather they amount to a hyperreality without the traditional correspondence of a represented territory. As Baudrillard puts it, "Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation of models of a real without

origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory—*precession of simulacra*—that engenders the territory" (1994, 1).

Doubtless Baudrillard's broad analysis of Western culture applies, to a degree not yet appreciated because it would be too damning, to the academic study of religion. The implication is that we may have come to rely so deeply on our maps, on our generic ideas regarding religion, that our presentations of religion are simulations of culture and history; hyperrealities with few territorial or referential realities beyond the simulation.

Territorial terms that are used in the analysis of phenomena considered to be religious remain largely those of space and time. Terms that are used in conjunction with territory—such as perspective, worldview, insight, outlook, landscape—all privilege the visual sense. Both in its literal and figurative senses, the visually dominated sensorium subtly transforms the world senses, to use Walter Ong's term, of others into the familiar Western concept of worldview. Studies in sensory anthropology show that the visual is not primary to the sensoria of many cultures. For the Arrernte and Warlpiri, while their dreamings are represented in diagrams etched on *tjurungas* (oval-shaped ritual objects) and in the designs of body painting, these markings are not pictures, maps, or even representations. They are themselves presentations, something more akin to embodied poetry. They correspond with the poetic songs sung in dance dramatic performances. An important use of *tjurungas* is to rub them with fat and ochre and press them to the human body, particularly the stomach. "Painting up," that is, body painting in preparation for dancing, requires extensive touching of the body. Sight is no more important than other senses to aboriginal understandings of territory. While travel literature is brimming with descriptions and personal responses to the stimulation of the nonvisual senses, suggesting that the full sensorium can hardly be suppressed when one is in another's territory, students of religion have given little attention to the sensoria of others.

Many of the limitations on the present conceptions of territory stem from the Western style of separating mind and body that elevates the mind over the body. The privileging of sight is associated with this devaluation of body. Sight is understood to be the objective sense: seeing is believing. The other senses are more personal and, therefore, more subjective. Territory, though the key to cultural differences, tends to be considered as objectified and impersonal. But Merleau-Ponty insisted that lived space is different from objective uniform space. Territory is perceived and experienced differently with respect to gender, culture, age, and bodily ability. Lived territory, as evidenced by human action, does not appear much in analyses or descriptions of territory. The terms of territory in use in academic analyses have focused largely on the designation of objective structural categories that distinguish religion. However, territory is always significant only as the setting for action, only as the background against which action engages the motion that is life. The dream tracks of aborigines are useless and meaningless to them without the movement and actions of the mythic ancestors and without the weight of the law these actions bear upon the people. It is fitting that aborigines present dreamings in the dynamic form of dance dramas. Students of religion must conceive anew the terms of territory using enriched metaphors. The map-territory metaphor, as powerful and effective as it has been, tends to support the comprehension of territory as static, as stable, as mappable, as graspable from some view. Jonathan Smith's attention to application implies the

importance of movement and process. Journey or story may serve more effectively to stimulate a richer conception of territory, and these active terms are now receiving increasing attention.

The aborigines of Central Australia may inspire, as they have in the past, the rethinking of our present approaches to territory, and they may stimulate our imaginations with regard to developing new concepts. Their conception of dreamings as designating countries overlying one another, as mythic journeys that crisscross one another, and as webs of storytracks, as well as the way these notions of territory facilitate human relations is powerfully provocative.

> The Warlpiri social universe was made up of skeins of relationships, not just songlines. A Dreaming defined a person's descent. It was immutable and given. But during the course of a lifetime, a man made contacts with others outside of his own home area. Networks of ties developed which were different for each person, reflecting the contingencies of where he traveled, lived, worked, married, and learned ceremony. It went without saying that alliances shifted, things changed. (Jackson 1995, 64-65)

Warlpiri networks of relationships, which Jackson aptly describes as "skeins," suggest something akin to the structure of the Internet and postmodern models of communication and interaction. Among Internet users, each person has a distinctive point of access, a way of entering, a motivating idea or need, and a strategy of interacting. Cyberspace is an incredibly complex dynamic field of play in which personal interests, personal whim, and pure coincidence greatly influence the way relationships are made, the way one travels (surfs), works, and learns.

These examples suggest a number of shifts presently under way in our conception of territory. The traditional conception of territory as space and time divided into jigsaw puzzle-like maps in which every division is entirely separate from all others is a less and less useful model. These traditional expectations of territory correspond with traditional conceptions of categories as containers whose members all share a common definitive trait that is the essential feature of the category. We have held such a categorical expectation with regard to religion. Discussions of the definition of religion have been battles over territory. Even identifiable religious traditions—such as Buddhism, Judaism, Islam—are often presented in terms of this understanding of category. Each tradition is identified, despite all of its manifestations and subdivisions throughout history, in terms of a single distinctive trait.

The sociology of knowledge is a discourse on territory. The frequent discussions of the appropriateness of studying religion from the inside as opposed to the outside reflect a traditional understanding of category and associated concepts of power. That the lion's share of the study of religion has been done by insiders (a trend that continues), that is, by members of the tradition studied, has received little critical attention. Being a member of a tradition or gender or ethnicity, being an insider, is often a major criterion for academic authority and authenticity. Strategies of field study are often directed towards making the scholar in some respects an insider of the religion studied and thus to win the associated authority.

The studies of religious phenomena such as myth, ritual, rites of passage, and pilgrimage are often approached on the basis of a classical theory of category, a traditional understanding of territory directed toward discovering the essential distinctive feature for all phenomena so

classified. Unlike the Warlpiri, academic students of religion have not known how to deal with territorial designations that overlap one another, that have fizzy or fluid boundaries.

If the examples of the Warlpiri and the Arrernte dreamings are not adequate stimulation for imagining an enriched vision of territory, George Lakoff's discussion of category theory in *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal About the Mind* (1987) may be: "The Australian Aboriginal language Dyirbal…. has a category, *balan*, that actually includes women, fire, and dangerous things. It also includes birds that are not dangerous, as well as exceptional animals, such as the platypus, bandicoot, and echidna" (5). Lakoff proposes a prototype theory of category along with a variety of principles by which prototypes are extended and expanded to bring inclusion of other items into a category. This theory of category helps us understand the richness and apparent conflicting character of such categories as *balan*, and it has promise to do the same for the terms "territory" and "religion."

There is an odd intertwining of Western academic conceptions of territory and Australian aborigines. Doubtless to some extent this has occurred because in being considered *ab origine*, "from the origin," aborigines have been imagined into existence, hyperrealities, in the terms that have satisfied Western territorial needs, whether colonial, conceptual, or observational (sensorial). While this process has been actively imaginative, it has not been interactive. Imaginative constructs of aborigines have been inadequately constrained by the independent reality of the aborigines; they are often preceding simulacra. Perhaps the greatest challenge facing the conception of territory is how to foster the creative interpretation of others based on appreciating their lived territory, without the accompanying need to control them and their territory.

Archie stared somberly at Japanangka's diagrams, "That's the whitefella way," he said irritably, "fixing boundaries." (Jackson 1995, 64)

3: Not by Any Name

Many years ago, I received a personal letter from Jacob Neusner praising my little book *Beyond the Primitive: Religions of Nonliterate People*. I was not quite finished gloating from Jack's praise when, I think it was the next day, I received a follow-up letter from him. In it he noted that upon thinking about the book he realized that it was based on a serious flaw. I had to admit that my ego boost associated with his first letter had been accompanied by my sense of it being unearned. The error was, of course, one can't identify the distinction of some group of people on the basis of something they don't have. The absence of a trait is inadequate at the least. Then, of course, although I'd given much attention to the selection of the word "nonliterate," it still tends to call forth associations to terms like illiterate and preliterate and the unfortunate accompanying associations with terms like primitive, primal, simple, unsophisticated, uneducated, or just plain stupid. Reeling from this, for a while I went to an even more complex kind of terminology trying to turn what I saw as important into some acceptable term. What about "exclusively oral"? Seemed to conjure X-rated imagery. My interests then as now were on such insights, which I consider enormous, that the medium is the message (McLuhan) and that there is a major cultural and ontological shift that occurs with the introduction of literacy (Ong & Goody). Yet, such terms seemed always to require a long explanation and made the discourse about the term rather than about those folks to whom I wanted to give my attention.

When I was a graduate student at the University of Chicago a good deal of the literature on the development of the academic comparative study of religion credited the study of "primitive religions" and sometimes "archaic religions" as crucial to the establishment of the fundamental comparative categories and issues. Or even "savage" if the French sources like Levi Strauss were used. The mentor for much of the field in this mid-twentieth century formative period, Mircea Eliade, wrote the book *Australian Religions: An Introduction* (1966-67) despite never having been to Australia. The development of the academic study of religion in the mid-twentieth century paid much attention to Frazer, Tylor, Durkheim, Freud, and so many others whose theories of culture depended heavily on the study of these "primitive" and "archaic" peoples. This literature remains important to the comparative study of religion (the academic construct) and religions (the specific people and cultures and groups).

In my study of Navajo religion as the focus for my broader study of Native American religions, I found myself in the same difficult position. In those days, there was much discussion of the appropriateness of terms like "Indian" or "American Indian" or "Native American." In the larger academic community that included anthropology and the academic study of religion terms like "tribal," "native," "small-scale," and "traditional" were adopted only to soon be dismissed. In the Australian context, the term "aboriginal" had so deeply seated itself that it was commonly used by the folks themselves as at least a self-identifier to the European Australians. This term was never in my awareness adopted very widely in North America, although "First Nations" has some similarities. Similarly, in North America the people themselves embrace the term "Indian" (often pronounced more like In-dun) to refer to the common identity while continuing to use their own terms to designate their particular language and culture.

I tended toward "Native American" which seemed most respectful all the while recognizing two important difficulties with the term. Simply on the surface of it, America is not a term that preceded colonialism and the term native, as an adjective, is often a thinly veiled euphemism for "primitive" or "savage." The term is widely used in popular media in this way; "the natives are restless." The term commonly conjures images of glistening sweaty black bodies gyrating around a fire. Of course, the terminology related to Africans is even more complex.[2] Another concern I had with this term, used in its sense of connection with territory, was based on the obvious diversity among folks referenced by the term that implies homogeneity. It didn't take much exposure to these groups to realize the enormous diversity among hundreds of different cultures. Each one has important histories and stories describing and insinuating these distinct differences. The differences in languages alone are vast and undeniable.

A further concern was that even the names by which we identified groups, tribes, languages, communities were often those that arose from these encounters or from the long colonial or academic practice of giving names without much input from the object/subject people named. Typically, the names we used—Navajo (and once we struggled with "h" or "j") for example— differed from the names they used—*Diyin* in the case of the Navajo. In my *Native American Religions* as well as my *Native American Traditions* my goal was to emphasize the importance of differences among the religions, cultures, histories, languages of these various groups and to avoid the reduction of these differences to come concocted or superficial singularity. While I found Navajo (*Diyin*) to be every bit as sophisticated and complex as any other religion with which I was familiar (including so called "world" religions), I found no scholars who believed we should spend as much time and energy on the Navajo as we do on Christianity (even a local Christian community or specific period) or as we do on Islam. Such imbalance reveals a scale of importance that is based on a Christian and European-American scale.

An additional complication in the naming effort that reflects creative encounter related to the way terms are valued and used widely in the broader American culture. The term "Indian," for example, if used in the context of the history and stories of the expanding American frontier, consistently denotes brutality and savagery. Yet, the same term used in the New Age movement denotes those with inherent wisdom about ecology and spirituality and community. It is not just the modern New Age movement that has fostered this almost worshipful practice. Germany and other European and American countries (there is a group in Prescott Arizona) have had long active "Indian clubs" in which non-Indian people dressed up like "Indians" and

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[2] I went to Ghana in the late 1990s. The geographical boundaries of Ghana are the result of colonial history with area occupied by a number of ethnic/language groups overlapping the boundaries reflecting older territories. There are over 100 ethnic/language groups in Ghana. The overlay of religions introduced by colonists are predominantly Christianity in the south half of the country and Islam in the north. Ghanaians identify themselves primarily in terms of their ethnic/language rather than as Ghanaian or African, terms reserved for "others." Years later I traveled to Mali and found, in this much larger country, an even more complex composition of cultural groups. Africa, as a continent, is comprised of 54 countries whose boundaries are largely drawn by colonists, with each country, like Ghana and Mali, comprised of many ethnic/language groups.

performed rituals and dances concocted as modeled on romantic images of "Indians." Many of the people whose identity is determined by others in such strongly polarized and radically different values suffer whiplash and frustration.

Another strategy to find adequate terminology was based on the larger stage set by the global studies of anthropology and the vast collection of material by ethnography. Native Americans (north, central, and south) were considered to be more similar to Australian Aboriginals, African tribal folks, Pacific Islanders, village folks in Indonesia, small communities in Mongolia and Siberia and so on than they were to the traditions that had worldwide incidence (and not incidentally written religious documents); these traditions have been commonly identified in terms indicating globalist reductions to singularities—Christianity rather than Christianities, Hinduism rather than the vast conglomerate of distinct groups accumulated under that term, and so on. Terms applied to the "others," that is, non-world religions, that emerged in the effort to support these large and largely constructed groupings and classifications were "traditional" and "indigenous." In the efforts to create the *Harper Dictionary of Religion* (1995) the universe of religion was divided into various areas for development. I was the editor for what was termed "traditional religions" and, indeed, I wrote an extensive article for that dictionary on the topic. Yet, the term "traditional" is lacking in so many ways as well, not the least of which is that surely all folks who exist as a group do so on the basis of sharing action, behavior, perspectives, gestures, clothing, food, and so forth over an extended period of time and it is the thread of continuity of such actions, gestures, and objects that constitutes "tradition"; thus, all communities of people are surely "traditional" peoples. There are also strong correlations, with negative implications, between the term "traditional" and the unchanging, the pre-modern, the old fashioned. Focusing more on racial and country identity is the term "ethnic." This term is often used in a slightly, if disguised, way to insinuate a lower other. It often disguises racism. Joann Kealiinohomoku shocked many in "*the* dance world" by proclaiming ballet, commonly known as "*the* dance," as an ethnic dance. Yet, all dancing arises as actions of specific people located undeniably in history, culture, language, race, ethnicity.

Perhaps the most common and widely used term today is *indigenous*. This term focuses on connection with land. The term is from Late Latin *indigenus* "born in a country, native," from Latin *indigena* "sprung from the land, native," as a noun, "a native," literally "in-born," or "born in (a place)." While I think the current preference for this term is to indicate those people who were in a place before colonization, sometimes also indicated as "First Nations," the term is clearly the product of a creative encounter involving colonists. The term can't help but invoke an extensive and fraught history of immigration including the evidence that those people thus designated also traveled, although long ago, to their current homeland from great distances and it invokes the strife related to the current politically complex and charged immigration policies, or lack thereof, of the United States in which birth within the borders (thus indigenous by definition) carries citizenship privileges whereas being brought here a few days after birth does not.

The term *aboriginal* is the temporal equivalent of the spatially based term indigenous. The term of course is the Latin ab *origine*, or from the beginning. In a fascinating way, it corresponds with the classic Western concerns with origins and centers. Both these terms, indigenous and aboriginal, cannot escape implications that have developed over centuries in

Western religious traditions. Both arise in the persistent concern with origins and origination and this interest is nearly impossible to address without invoking religious imagery and language. Both are shaped by nationalist concerns corresponding with place boundaries. A classic concern of nineteenth century anthropology hinged on two differing sets of assumptions about the development of culture and religion. The one inspired efforts to discover "high gods" among the "primitives" to demonstrate that "in the beginning god created the world." The alternative was to document the gradual evolution of religion preceded by a long period of the practice of magic. The first privileges a theological worldview, the second a scientific one. As a biologist and anthropologist, Baldwin Spencer's (with Frank Gillen) classic *Native Tribes of Central Australia* (1899) did not anywhere use the word religion. At the same time, Carl Strehlow's ethnography began with accounts of the Aboriginal gods and their acts of creation. Strehlow was a German missionary who resided at Hermannsburg mission station 90 kilometers west of Alice Springs. Alice Springs was where Spencer observed and recorded much of what is reported in his classic work. It is also a matter of record that Tylor and Frazer commonly contacted Spencer in Melbourne, who in turn contacted his colleague Frank Gillen at Alice Springs, to provide specific Aboriginal examples that would support the theories they were advancing. It is little acknowledged, but this single book by Spencer was used as a foundational document for the development of much of modern anthropology and sociology being a key source of examples used by Tylor, Frazer, Lang, Durkheim, Freud and many others; and then in the mid-twentieth century it was a key source that supported Eliade's theory and definition of religion that were fundamental to the founding of the modern academic study of religion. It is important to recognize that these contemporary terms—indigenous and aboriginal—represent classic Western academic and religious issues.

When I was in Ghana wandering the streets of Accra and Kumasi on Sunday mornings I witnessed hours long exuberant Christian church meetings including drumming, singing, and a great deal of lively preaching. The British, among other European countries colonized Ghana, so, beyond the 100 or so African languages spoken there, it is an English speaking and, beyond the deep and rich presence of the religious traditions distinctive to each of these various people, Christianity is practiced throughout the southern half of Ghana (Islam in the north).

When I lived in Arizona I frequently went, especially during Easter season, to Guadalupe, a Yaqui (Yoeme) village not far from my house. The assault on the church by the Pilates and Chapayekas, the burning of the effigy of Judas, the mildly frightening Friday night outdoor processions of the cross, the Saturday festival that erupts upon the defeat of imminent evil; all these were emotionally powerful experiences that must be called Christian, but also Yaqui. Since early in the sixteenth century the Yaqui have been shaped by creative encounter with Christianity.

On a windy rainy day in Laguna Pueblo I followed the dancers into the mission church (built centuries ago with forced pueblo labor), prominent in the village, where the pews had been pushed to the side so that the dancers could perform the ritual dramas associated with Saints' Days. As the pueblo dancers performed in costume, I recall seeing the brown-robed church brother doing custodial work in the area of the altar. Most people in Laguna Pueblo have long identified themselves as Christian while also maintaining their non-Christian pueblo traditions as identity. Churches dominate the architecture of eastern Pueblo villages, testimony to the

long presence of Christianity—preceding Jamestown—and that Pueblo peoples have for centuries identified as Christian, as well as Pueblo as well as their specific culture. The prominence of the belief in the exclusiveness of Christian identity held by European and American Christians does not pertain to most other Christians.

Latin America and other southern hemisphere cultures (Africa for example) are currently the areas in the world of fastest growth of the religion they label Christianity. Southern hemisphere Christianities are markedly different from European or American Christianity and, of course, these broadly identified Christianities include huge variation. My point is that we label this entire richly diverse conglomerate with communities of enormous diversity living all over the globe with the single term Christianity. Depending on location, the term invokes starkly different associations and values. Nowhere do we find a community identified as Christian that is not the product of creative encounter.

In my study of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century history of Central Australia it seemed important to those of my readers unfamiliar with the peoples of the area for me to provide an overview of their cultures and religions. To do so for this period of time, the main resources I had were the several extensive ethnographic accounts. The issue I faced was how to treat the considerable differences that appeared among these various accounts; one by the collaboration of a biologist and a telegraph station manager, one by a Neo-Freudian, one by a German Christian Missionary (the multi-volume work available in English only in an unpublished manuscript), and another by his son, the first non-aboriginal child born in Central Australia. My first inclination was to seek those points of agreement among the majority of the accounts as the basis for constructing a general description. Yet, as I attempted this endeavor, I began to recognize that each ethnographic account was, to a significant extent, the product of a creative encounter. Each reflected as much the observer/recorder/writer as the observed, as the nominal subject of these accounts. I realized that should I proceed with my efforts I'd be adding yet another layer of construction on top of others, a layer shaped by my own interests that I hadn't carefully considered nor was I prepared to even identify. Róheim based his approach to field work on psychoanalytic theory, stating then that field workers tend to largely project onto their subjects of study. I could see no way that this common-factors approach wouldn't further fictionalize and concoct the very subject I was most interested in. Rather than constructing a composite generalized account, I elected to attempt to honestly reflect that what was available to me were the products of creative encounters. I offered multiple accounts labeled: "Spencer's and Gillen's Arrernte," "Carl Strehlow's Arrernte," "Géza Róheim's Arrernte," and "Theodore Strehlow's Arrernte." In each of these accounts I included the biography and interests of the ethnographer and some information on the nature of their creative encounters.

This brief and personally centered overview of this history of terminology is intended to make two observations. The first is that the problem of identifying groups of people, the issue of labeling, the adoption of terminology that defines objects/subjects of study or even interrelations is successfully accomplished *not by any name*. It just can't be done. Every single option invokes differences in power, implies objectification, demands a transduction (the transformation of one thing into something of a different order), invokes painful history, expresses tacit (sometimes overt) racism, is often shaped by gender biases, and invariably seeks

to establish hierarchy and authority. Not by any name will we be able to move forward in what I believe is the intent and desire of all those involved.

Surely a positive aspect of the modern liberal agenda is to devote interest and attention to understanding and appreciating difference. In a world filled with strife and hostility and nationalism and tribalism and conflict and war, is not this effort to appreciate difference one of the great hopes for survival as human and humane beings into the future? What I see as fundamental is, and this is my second observation, to recognize and accept that encounters among people are inherently creative, even if experienced at the time as uncomfortable, contentious, even violent.

We have long understood and appreciated that identity—individual and group—is forged, discovered, and codified in encounter. It is the presence of some "other" that gives rise to an articulation of self and family and community and ethnicity and gender and nationality and humanity. Isn't it remarkable that we have such strong emotional connections with our own identity? Surely, we all have moments when we realize that, were it not for the accident of our specific birth, we might very well be one of those with whom we most disagree. We tend to know who we are, not in terms of being able to articulate some observable distinctions that can be clearly observed and freely selected by all, but rather because we experience, we feel, a belonging, a sense of identity based on a history and geography not of our choosing. Identity is not a reasoned choice among a range of equal possibilities. Identity is a feeling of belonging, of self-awareness, of valued differences. We achieve the feelings we attach to identity usually over time as we accumulate experience of belonging and not belonging, as we practice and develop the bodied skills that make us feel identified with place (home, country) and group (ethnicity, community, gender, age, nationality, religion, team). Over our lifetimes, we continue to negotiate aspects of our identities; and again, the encounters we have are as often accidental as planned.

Our identities are forged and confirmed in the ongoing processes of *creative encounters*. Our identity is acquired and shaped over time also in the process of shared doings involving gesture, food, habitat, language, practice and the process unfolds and changes over time. When forced to use labels even to indicate our own identity, we tend almost invariably to feel such labels inadequate because *not by any name* are we sufficiently identified in the complex history and world we feel is at the core of who we are. We are the sum of our experience set in the much larger context of history, culture, language, and psychology and that accumulated experience can rarely be expressed by a name.

When I consider the nouns that label my identity—American, male, older ("senior" God forbid), father, grandfather, academic, dancer, brother, son, and so on—I feel some irritation related to most of them. Most of these terms raise issues for me rather than adequately identify me. I hate being asked, and the damned question is ubiquitous on occasions of meeting people, "What do you do?" Or these days, "Are you retired?" For decades to answer this first question "Oh I teach" invariably raises a second question, "And what do you teach?" And the answer to this question, "I teach religion" is a conversation stopper. Most folks assume that this term means minimally that I'm religious. Most assume that I'm some sort of religious figure—a priest or pastor (the main choices for white guys). Some fear or are delighted that this implies

some embrace of piety. Many are just plain flummoxed and walk away. In my own experience my identity is adequately captured not by any name.

If, in our interest in knowing others, we realize that any effort to label them is adequate not by any name, then we should ask, why do we seem to think we have to continue the folly of coming up with names and labels justifying each new one as somehow more adequate or less harmful than the last? Perhaps it is partly due to our holding an ontology, an understanding of reality, that values nouns more than verbs. Baldwin Spencer was sent to Australia to establish the study of biology; during his sea voyage to Australia he designed the building at the University of Melbourne where that study originated; I visited this building. Soon after his arrival he helped organize and joined the Horn Expedition comprised of scientists representing various fields who traveled through areas of Central Australia, a virtual paradise of new species to identify, classify, and name. He was obsessed, and rightly so, with the endless possibilities of finding new species which of course had to be collected, described, classified, and named. The Aborigines that traveled with him and assisted him in this work called him by a term that translated "all day pick um up." It is clear that for Spencer his ethnography differed little from his field biology. The exploration of Central Australia that occurred in the late nineteenth century involved naming many land forms, areas, rivers, gaps and so on. A widespread practice was to use the full or family names of the male explorers—George Gill Mountains, Todd River, Tennent Creek—and the first names of their spouses or siblings—Alice Springs, Emily Gap, Glen Helen—perhaps following the model of identifying the Queen of England by her name (indeed, Victoria is the name of the southeastern most state in Australia). Some place names were adaptations of Aboriginal names, yet some of these came as a result of later chapters in these creative encounters, for example, the change of the name Ayers Rock (named for Chief Secretary of South Australia, Sir Henry Ayers) to the Aboriginal term, Uluru.

Not all ways of marking identity are based on defined categories. Again, in Australia, Aboriginal personal identity is commonly linked to country, but not country in the sense of clearly marked boundaries, but rather identified with the travels of beings as told in stories across actual landscapes. These "countries" are marked by tracks across a landscape spotted with encampments rather than areas with distinct borders. It was the traveling and encountering that gave rise to identity, not the establishment and defense of boundaries that separate. Places designated in these tracks are often where tracks cross; these are the locations where different groups come together to creatively negotiate, through dancing and song, the potential of their relationship. Kinship and human relations are always a creative negotiation of acquisitions related to stories.

Years ago, I had a graduate student who did a master's thesis on Hopi. Quite remarkably she received formal permission from the Hopi Tribe to do her research. As it seemed fitting, we invited the Hopi tribal chairman (Vernon Masayesva) to serve as a voting member on her thesis committee and the graduate school actually approved his appointment to the graduate faculty for the one day of her defense so he could be a voting member. Her oral defense was fascinating because the Hopi chairman wanted to discuss in great depth the relationships among the many Hopis she included in her thesis. While each person is identified by family and clan, it is the long history of the relationships forged among clans that become remarkably complex that must be explored to understand who someone is and what roles and knowledge

they might have rightful access to. The clan names were not labels that bounded someone to a particular identity; they were the basis for constantly and creatively negotiating the possibilities of aspects of identity over time and through various encounters.

My point here is that it seems our practice of naming and labeling people and groups of people is motivated by an effort to objectify and identify them in terms of associated traits or categories that are based in biology, anthropology, theology. It is done in many respects to give halt to encounter. Yet, for many of the actual folks we seek to name and label (as well as ourselves), their use of labeling terms is but the beginning of the exploration of identity and the potential implications of relationship. It seems entirely possible that rather than using names to objectify, classify, and thus put in place a person or group thus confining them to what we believe we already know, we might be challenged to adopt a strategy in which names are openings to creative encounters that facilitate the never-ending ongoing negotiation of the processes accompanied by the experience of knowing who we, and they, are and are not.

II: Creations of Encounter

4: Mother Earth and Numbakulla

Encounters between people of different cultures are often accompanied by overly simple and emotionally charged characterizations of those involved. Sometimes these identifications are complementary, often not so much. Broadly across the US these days there is an all too quick association approaching identity of Muslim and terrorism, African American men and the threat of violence, police and racial profiling, women as unsuited for math science and technology, men as unsuited for dancing, Christian as conservative (even right wing). Most of us have found ourselves affronted by associations with labels applied often glibly to us. My contention is that even these often negative and hurtful experiences may still be understood as having the potential for creative encounter. They often precipitate reflection, action, organization, discussion, protest and, in the process, they contribute to raising and establishing enriched senses of identity and relationships. The process is often painful and ongoing, only occasionally gratifying.

In my academic life experience, two of these creative encounters that center on labels stand out; both engaged me in years' long processes. As part of my graduate studies at the University of Chicago I spent a great deal of time reading the huge ethnographic tomes produced through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by the Bureau of American Ethnology. Huge volumes exist on hundreds of cultures across North America and I read and took careful notes on a great many of them. I did so to become as familiar as I could with the diversity and complexity of the cultural landscape across the continent, particularly in terms of specifically distinct cultures. While I found common patterns and themes among these cultures (these ethnologies were collected largely on the basis of a checklist of cultural factors), I found none that were simply common to all or even to a few as based in the language and practices of these people. Complexity, diversity, distinctions were far the more important and interesting than commonalities that might dismiss the distinctive identities of specific cultures.

Much of my writing and research on Native Americans was set in the context of demonstrating the importance of understanding each and every culture as whole and distinct, if related in some ways, among every other of the hundreds that existed in the land area now known as the United States. My early work took me frequently to various communities identified as Navajo, Hopi, Zuni, Yaqui and less frequently to a great many others residing in the Arizona-New Mexico region. The differences in almost every respect among these cultures was obvious and pervasive. Navajos and Hopis, while for centuries living in contiguous and even overlapping and disputed land, are starkly different.

Some year ago, I hosted a public discussion among Navajo and Hopi tribal leaders and a ranking officer in the US Department of Interior on the subject of the long history of the disputed lands commonly occupied by Navajos and Hopis. Notably I found the government official fundamentally legalistic; he wanted a prompt legal resolution to the dispute. He seemed to assume that a resolution, decided by a United States court, should be simply accepted by all parties. When the Navajo and Hopi leaders spoke, each grounded his people's connection to the land as attested in their stories of origin and their long history of occupying and living on the land; they were referring to the same land. While the specific land areas were the source of

their livelihood, more importantly it was the source of their identity. Their connection to the land, they demonstrated by telling the stories, was not based in legality, especially that of the laws of the United States, but in history and in their feeling of identity. They indicated that in a strong sense they are the land where they live.

I remember standing in the Shipaulovi plaza at Hopi during Powamu in February watching dancers imitate Navajo dancers with clever bits of humor demonstrating an awareness of the stark differences of their long-time neighbors. The differences run deep including language, sustenance base, living preferences, history, costume, housing, religion, mythology, governance, and gender roles just to begin the list. Yet Navajos and Hopis have lived in proximity for centuries and through their creative exchanges have influenced one another in noticeable and interesting ways. Yet, today there is no hint of some amalgamation or embrace of a common identity other than when together they find themselves labeled by people, usually of European heritage, that tend to see them as members of a common category.

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In the days of my early teaching at Arizona State I focused on specific language and culturally distinguished groups presenting them in terms of their history and complexity and distinctiveness among their neighbors. My students were often young people that identified with these groups even though their knowledge and experience and language competence in their blood heritage were often limited. At that time, many had parents who had grown up immersed in their language/cultural group but left home as young adults to find work in cities where they would raise their families. Many of these people felt their own language and cultural identities were harmful to them as they sought work and life outside their parent's community. They did not teach their children their mother language nor did they provide many occasions for their kids to actually experience this life in order to have feelings of identity. Many of these young people found themselves with few strong feelings of identity apart from the constant sense of belonging nowhere. Oddly many of them took my class to learn about the cultures of their parents.

In those early years of my teaching I also frequently had students express their admiration for Native Americans giving specificity to what they valued by citing Mother Earth. This was a time before the awareness of climate change, but it was a time of ecological sensitivity and many students correlated their dedication to being good stewards of the planet with their understanding of the central place of Mother Earth in the religious cultures of Native Americans. I agreed with and supported the values of these students, yet I was faced with gnawing concerns about the way they saw Native Americans. First, there is something of a primitivist romanticism in the alliance between modern ecological concerns and an implied ancient (*ab original*) ecological value of Native Americans. Second, I found that almost any implied commonality among all groups collectively referred to as Native Americans simply couldn't be supported by my studies of quite a few of these groups. The differences among these cultures seemed to be far more important and prominent than anything, particularly the common connection with a named religiously/ecologically based figure. Yet, without question there were common contemporary mentions of such figures—Mother Earth and Father Sky and the Great Spirit. It came to be an urgent concern for me and I made a long and concerted effort

to track down the history of the use of this term referring to a common figure, to determine if there were specific histories based in different cultures and languages that might be accurately understood as represented by this single figure, and to chart as fully as possible how the figure became so valued and frequently referenced at the present.

The results of that research confirmed to me that there were no grounds for a single figure named Mother Earth (even in the various languages among these cultures) to have common incidence among all, or even a significant number, of the groups comprising the category of cultures referred to as Native Americans. I found many strong, interesting, and valued female figures with rich histories and extensive story and folk traditions. Many of them played important roles in ritual and cultural iconography. Some, but not all, had associations with the physical territory, yet usually not an identity with the entire earth. In tracking the history of the use of the term Mother Earth, I found significant evidence and a growing history that this figure originated and was developed largely in the context of the creative encounter various groups had while attempting to protect their ancestral lands from the threats of the colonizing efforts of Americans with European ancestry. The articulation was often done in courts of law. The discovered common plight of threat to land of so many different specific cultures across the landscape gave impetus and motivation for them to articulate some aspects of a common identity, typically as a contrast to those they saw as their oppressors. Mother Earth played an important role in this development of new identities in the context of common creative encounters.

An important aspect of the presentation of this story, which I have seen as an American story since it includes all cultures present in the North American landscape including even those of European ancestry, is the affirmation that new figures, images, realities can arise, can have their origins, in the midst of a datable and relatively recent history of creative encounter, while still legitimately holding claim to originality and primacy and fundamental originality because they are entwined with felt and experienced identity. It is entirely expected that markers of identity that emerge from historical creative encounters be stated in the terms of primacy, the religious language of origination.

The responses to my research and storytelling ranged from, on the one hand, gratitude that distinct cultural identities be affirmed in contrast with the preference for a unified common identity to, on the other hand, the claims that as a "white man" or a "white academic" I had no understanding of things "native." Sometimes this later response proposed a "native worldview or ontology" so distinctive that "non-natives" simply have no basis for comprehending it; only people biologically "native" have access. Creative encounters often engender more creative encounters.

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My study of Australian Aborigines was focused and greatly expanded by my discovery, as it seems so often the case, that I had cited questionable sources in support of my writings on religion. In one of my books, I had uncritically embraced a standard example used by one of my mentors, Mircea Eliade, that referred to Aborigines. It is the example I refer to as "Numbakulla and the Sacred Pole." Eliade used this example on several occasions as the principal evidence that religion is distinguished by establishing the foundations for the *real* in stories of the

originary events conducted by the gods in the beginning and by the ritual practices that honor these events often by replicating and repeating these originary events in the spatial terms of a center or a world axis that gave orientation in the created world and access to the gods that created the world. In brief, religions, according to this understanding, give access to the origin of existence, thus the absolute basis for truth and reality, while also establishing dependable points of orientation, designated as centers, for the ongoing processes of living according to the models set forth by gods in the beginning. These centers are commonly established by the originating events of the gods and continue through time to provide access to the gods. They are replicated in cities (Mecca and Jerusalem, for example), and in buildings such as mosques and cathedrals, and in landforms or natural forms (mountain tops and pilgrimage destinations, and even in cosmic trees).

The core idea in the example I uncritically repeated had to do with the Arrernte, an Aboriginal group in Central Australia, who used a pole to provide orientation in their landscape. Eliade's focused on the aspect of the story that had to do with a fateful day when the pole was broken and the Arrernte, finding themselves without center or orientation or access to their god, simply lay down and died. In some uses of this account, Eliade placed it in the context of mythology, yet in at least one instance it appears he thought it was a historic occasion observed by ethnographers. Of the example he wrote, "Seldom do we find a more pathetic avowal that man cannot live without a 'sacred center' which permits him both to 'cosmicize' space and to communicate with the transhuman world of heaven" (Eliade, *Australian Religions*, 53). Certainly, my motivation for repeating the example, that overwhelmed my academic training requiring me to carefully check my sources, was the dramatic and powerful and, indeed, romantic effect of the account and Eliade's understanding of it. My comeuppance was when asked, very politely, by another scholar if this account was really credulous and if the ethnographic sources actually confirm it.

I was compelled to do what I knew was proper and to check out as exhaustively as possible my sources. And over several years and a couple visits to Australia I did so as exhaustively as possible all the way to the specific people and occasion of the ethnographic recording of this account. My discovery was that the account as presented by Eliade was almost entirely of his construction and, in many respects, was quite the opposite of what existed as characterizing the perspectives of the Aborigines involved at that time. The account was important to Eliade in large part because it reported on *ab original* people privileged as being the people closest to the actual origins. The story though documented in the late nineteenth century stood as proxy for what occurred at the beginnings of religion among human cultures.

In the process of my work I also found that one of the most common attributes cited as distinctive of Australian Aborigines (usually attributed to all of them), often referred to as "Dreamtime," was also the product of a similar creative encounter. Its widespread dissemination in Australia from an early period led in time to it becoming widely embraced by Aborigines themselves especially when communicating with European Australians. Interestingly, the academic invention of a scholar who likely never met an Aborigine, came, in time, to be documentable by ethnographers recording Aboriginal perspectives.

The fascinating issue that arises in both of these examples—Mother Earth and Numbakulla— has to do with the difference, in fact the opposition, between what can be demonstrated as historically accurate and what is widely-held as traits considered foundational to the identity of people, yet are known to be products of creative encounter. For those who hold the primacy of Mother Earth as a universal belief distinctive to all Native Americans and those who hold the primacy of Dreamtime and the ontology of the Numbakulla story as a universal belief distinctive to all Australian Aborigines, to be informed, especially by some white academic, of this history, to be told the story of the way these traits was developed in creative encounter, is not only not wanted it is often received as blatantly incredulous. This response is as likely among academics who have read and repeated what they consider "knowledge" as it is among interested and informed non-academics.

My interest is not in finding some resolution based in academic methods of establishing fact and knowledge or in the held perspectives that are experienced as undisputed unquestioned fact and truth by others. My interest is in embracing these complex and often contentious parallel and often conflicting stories (as I like to call them) as party to creative encounters that engender discussion and reflection and that give rise to the most fundamental questions related to what is real, what is identity, how we come to feel and experience real and true, how we tell our own stories while engaging and respecting the stories of others?

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What was intended as but a brief period of self-reflection at an early stage of my career in business (before I expected to commit myself to that career), I entered the Divinity School at the University of Chicago in a field I knew nothing about, the history of religions. Indeed, the whole selection of Chicago and religion was somewhat of a lark. I suppose there was a time when as a child that I would have considered myself religious and I grew up in a household in a small farm town where the extended family all attended the Presbyterian Church. Still, my study of religion at Chicago was much more a respite than a calling or a thoughtful academic choice. Now, after 50 years, I can admit that I've never been comfortable with the field of study or with the almost unavoidable social implications of the terms religion, religions, spiritual, and so forth. I've never felt satisfied with what these terms, that are supposed to denote an aspect of human distinctiveness, invoke among both scholars who study the subject and also non-academics who hear and use the terms. I did not return to my business career because, well, when the farm kid finally got out of Kansas the rest of the world seemed like Oz. I was fascinated with the complexity and diversity of being human and I saw some potential for "religion" to be a fascinating category for a comparative study. I think, as a young person with an undergraduate degree in math and a graduate degree in business, one thing that fascinated me is that so much of what I learned about related to religions everywhere seemed so fanciful and impossible and incredulous. I found myself also intrigued by academic efforts to somehow appreciate and gain knowledge of others, people not like me. What are the ethics and goals of such an enterprise? What is the larger value of studying someone else's religion? Given the powerful history that deeply shapes the assumptions of an academic study of religion, I wonder if one can ever do much more in such studies than project one's expectations on other folks. Is not the academic study of religion at base a colonialist project and perhaps even one of proselytization?

Through the half century of my academic study of religion I have been equally interested in the close and detailed study of specific peoples/cultures as well as the inquiry into how we might understand something that all of these distinct and varying people do or have or are that might be called "religion" and to do both of these things without assuming at the outset that I already know what religion is (which of course would be a thinly veiled reflection of something a lot like Christianity). The part of my approach that has focused on particular people is inseparable from the comparative and academic constructive part, yet the two can and I believe must have some sense of distinction as well as opposition even as they are and must be copresent with one another. My approach has evolved with the growing appreciation that no adequate study of the religion of others (and perhaps even of self, if the study be academic) can occur without having both of these concerns present while appreciating that they are in conflict and often in opposition.

When I was a graduate student at Chicago there was a lineage of discourse including multiple theories and ideas on articulating "religion" as a comparative category. This comparative and definitional concern was likely energized, at that time, by the boost given to widely expanding the academic study of religion on the basis of the Abington v. Schempp (1963) decision. In his opinion on the decision, Justice Clark wrote that "education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization." This statement encouraged the expansion of study into non-western and non-Christian cultures/religions as it found constitutional the inclusion of religion as a subject of study in state funded schools. In realizing the development of an academic study of religion one issue addressed how to comprehend the obvious differences among cultures in terms of a common comparative category. The understanding was never achieved, yet I think the ongoing inquiry is generative of an academic study of religion. My sense is that in the last decade or two such interlaced concerns have progressively disappeared being replaced by the rise of specific area studies based on geography, history, or other classifications such as gender, race, media, body, and so forth. The academic constructive concerns have now become more commonly framed within these specific areas of emphasis.

What has been lost, if my observations are at all accurate, is the fundamental struggle of how to comprehend and appreciate difference within sameness; how to articulate sameness without devolving into the trite or the utterly abstract to the positing of empty universals; how to comprehend others without turning them into reflections of ourselves. In terms more fundamental to the plight of humanity in a complex and diverse world, what has been lost is the large project of appreciating and treasuring difference because it is different, all the while recognizing somehow that there are common and comparative grounds by which fundamental communication—creative exchange—is possible.

At this point, had I to do it all over again, I would have chosen a different path I think. In the early history of the development of an academic study so emotionally charged as is religion, I think it nearly impossible in such a short time (half a century) to adequately gain independence of the distinguishing category, religion, from the specific "religious" expectations of the larger cultural and historical arena (especially European and North American Christianity) in which it developed. Further there is the presence of the range of associations with religion that are deeply and emotionally held by the general public, from the disdain or devotion to the

"organized" religions to the endless designer "spiritualities" that at once distinguish themselves from "organized" religions while also still claiming some fundamental religiousness. There is the powerful sense related to religion across the general population that one's own religion is somehow good and true while the "so-called" religions of others are questionable, false, and threatening. I believe that such associations to the term "religion" are so pervasive and complex and emotionally charged both for the folk as well as for academics as to make impossible a proper study of religion, as a comparative category, or religions, marked aspects of specific cultures.

Throughout my career, I have progressively moved in the direction of humanity, that is, inquiring about what there is in the biological and psychological development of human beings among animate organisms that gives rise to something we might label religion, holding our popular beliefs present yet open. I now believe that "religion" should be a subfield in biology (considered broadly) as it already is in psychology, philosophy, history, sociology and anthropology. My concern is not some effort to reduce religion to biology as in finding in the brain some hidden "god spot" that explains why folks have held such a belief.[3] Rather, my concern is the opposite. The more I understand about the biological and physiological distinctions of human beings, the more I appreciate the human capacities of perception, conceptualization, imagination, experience, and how these distinctly human capabilities necessarily give rise to the philosophical concerns about the nature of reality, the extent of the universe, the basis for identity, the banal transcendence that occurs in writing and communication and perception and movement. And within this context I've been intrigued to see that some actions and behaviors and concerns might both give rise to what we have understood as religions—so widely diverse, as we know them—and also how we can appreciate this religiousness without having to make assumptions of a specifically religious nature.

In my studies of both Native Americans and Australian Aborigines the precession of expectations—held both by scholars, the folk, and by the subjects of these studies—about what religion is and who these people are, have overly shaped, if not totally overwhelmed, the effort to simply understand some aspect of other cultures. What I'm proposing is that to save these academic efforts from being merely colonialist actions or psychological projections we have no choice but to frame them as creative encounters that hold potential for engaging the ongoing activities that, while likely not leading to any firm and final conclusions, provide the dynamics and energetics for exercising and realizing our common humanity.

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The following articles demonstrate in depth two quite significant "creative encounters." The first is at root the encounter of Europeans, some of them in Australia yet most not, and the peoples that occupied the Australian lands when these Europeans arrived in the mid to late nineteenth century. The second encounter is at root the encounter of Europeans, most but not all of whom lived in North America, and the peoples that occupied the American lands when these Europeans arrived.

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[3] I find that the cognitive science of religion (CSR) tends toward such limiting and to me uninteresting reductionism. While every study is a reduction, some are, for me, overly limiting.

"Storytracking the Arrernte through the Academic Bush" is the account of the Australian creative encounter based on years of tedious research and there is perhaps seeming overkill in the presentation of the evidence, yet I feel that a careful and detailed presentation of materials essential to my account of how academics concocted stories as evidentiary support for a theory of culture and religion. And, of course, my account is a story in itself; its own creative encounter. Remarkable is the extent to which the story and ritual actions associated with "Numbakulla and the sacred pole" were skewed or shaped both by the academics who first documented the account and also by those who later used it as a central and decisive example in support of unfolding social scientific and religion theory. The results amounted to a concocted story whose details were constructed expressly to support academic theory rather than to offer an unbiased presentation of primary evidence. While not presented in any detail in this article, it can be shown that the peoples of the Australian interior eventually themselves took on the images and expectations that were academic creations, especially in public arenas of encounter, largely so that they might be recognized and understood by the more powerful party in this exchange. Finally, it is important to recognize that this example characterized the academic side of the exchange; the principal motivation was to "find" (meaning to concoct as necessary) evidence from "primitive" cultures to support the social scientific theories in the fields of anthropology, sociology, psychology and eventually also religion that would provide the foundational academic theory that has shaped much of the twentieth century continuing to the present.

 "Mother Earth: An American Myth" presents the account of an American creative encounter based on years of research. It is about the fundamental and deeply felt importance of land, home, territory. The account endeavors to show how specific language and imagery were constructed to facilitate the communication in a creative exchange where the parties had little common ground. Mother Earth arose among the peoples in the American landscape who were attempting to demonstrate to colonizing and overpowering intruders the importance of their connection with the lands where they lived. She also served to articulate common identity, in common plight, of those many disparate peoples suffering the same power dynamics of these exchanges. Important to this example is that a figure might be newly minted to address contemporary concerns while also being rightfully placed in the originary roles and context of myth as a story account of creation. Later sections will focus on story and myth and also territory, yet this presentation offers a preliminary discussion of these terms and the categories of cultural communication they designate.

"Creative Encounter Stories" includes excerpts from two other publications again representing examples of encounters in Australia and North America. Both focus on seemingly random incidents that turned out to have significant impact on history and gave rise to fascinating stories. The first "Tecumseh and General Harrison" centers on a story of the creative and storied encounter of these men in 1810. The second "Irbmangkara: The Crossing Place of Many Storytracks" focuses on creative encounters occurring at a place named Irbmangkara in central Australia unfolding in the late nineteenth century.

5: Storytracking the Arrernte through the Academic Bush[4]

A Gaping Chasm

The academy exists because there is a gaping chasm between the reality of our world and our understanding of it.[5] It is the academic's job to imagine how one might span this chasm, even attempt to do so, yet knowing full well that whatever efforts are made one must never nullify, deny, or forget that the chasm exists. The chasm is to be honored for it is in this nothingness that we academics realize our being.

We have come to realize that the quotidian action of perceiving reality, a reality that we posit as independent of us, is an active process that affects reality, making at least our understanding of it dependent on us. That is, although we know that reality must be independent of our understanding of it—that reality exists independently of the mind—to attempt to understand it makes it in some measure dependent on us. This paradox pertains at all levels, from perception, in which individual human senses are active processes, to signification and reference and to scientific paradigms as analyzed, for example, by Thomas Kuhn.[6]

The responses to this paradox swing in a pendulum arc between a retrenched denial of the implications of this paradox[7] and a kind of nihilism painted either in the dark makeup of gloom or the gaudy makeup of the clown. Being convinced that there is no firm, safe, unchangeable, final place on which to stand to do our work, we are uncomfortable and nervous wherever we find ourselves standing; for we must stand somewhere. We are caught between objectivism and subjectivism as between a rock and a hard place. Fleeing solipsism, we run smack into essentialism and vice versa. Most commonly we carry out our work in vagueness, awaiting some clarifying insights or the revelation of an entirely new approach. Occasionally we may buck up our courage and enter the world of the tricky, abstract philosophical discourses that are designed to self-destruct or self-deconstruct, yet doing so often leaves us as fearful as though in the presence of trigger-happy terrorists.

Most of the time we go about our work as "normal scientists,"[8] snug in the reigning paradigm and trying to keep sufficiently busy to distract ourselves from the disconcerting suspicion that what we do is more groundless than we care to know, more a mirror of our personal, cultural,

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[4] Chapter One of my *Storytracking: Texts, Stories, Histories in Central Australia* (1998). I have made minor omissions from the original publication, principally those that make reference to other discussions in the book.

[5] This is the same gap that, in distinguishing sign from signified, makes representation possible, that gives sign a stake in reality. Signs represent or refer to something that they are not. The reality of signs is on a different order than the reality to which signs refer. The gap is what constitutes the poetry of signs, the foundation of their power to signify.

[6] Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1962] 1970).

[7] Such retrenchments are often disguised by a sort of liberal, too-quick openness to alternative ideas.

[8] "Normal science" means "research firmly based upon one or more past scientific achievements, achievements that some particular scientific community acknowledges for a time as supplying the foundation for its further practice." Kuhn, *Scientific Revolution*, p. 10.

and historical peculiarities than we care to imagine. One of the conventions by which human and social scientists carry on this normal science is the interpretation of text. A discussion of text may present more concretely the academic issues I have attempted to suggest by the chasm metaphor. The word text[9] particularly when it designates what is more properly termed *primary text*, is widely used to designate an object, usually a language object, that is a given, that exists outside of the academic enterprise and outside of the domain of the historian. Texts are found, chosen, recorded, translated, deciphered, presented, and used. Their existence, though not necessarily their content, is factual. Texts are the historian's counterpart to what the natural sciences call facts. Perhaps the principal defining characteristic of a primary text, even more than its denoted literary form[10] is that it exists in its own right. Its existence, independent of its readers, and its givenness can be depended on.

That a text has independent existence does not mean that its meaning is evident. It is almost always the opaqueness or suggestiveness that makes a text interesting. Traditionally understood, it is the work of the historian to discern, to discover, or to decipher the meaning or meanings of tantalizingly opaque texts.

Texts embody evidence from the subjects studied. They have the form of scriptures, books, documents, records, journals, diaries, letters, and so forth, and with the rise of ethnography they are ethnographic recordings of oral narratives and descriptions of cultural performances.[11] Put simply, what historians do is select, present, explain, and interpret texts.

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[9] I choose the word *text* here because of its common use in the academic study of religion and other human and social sciences to denote the common object (and sometimes subject) of study. I suspect that the common reference to biblical authority as text has influenced the use of this word in at least the academic study of religion. The term *text* as I am using it here corresponds more closely with the term *work* as discussed by Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text," in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-structuralist Criticism*, edited by Josué V. Harari, Ithica, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1979), pp. 73-81. Discussing primarily literature, Barthes charts the change taking place in our ideas about language and literature. He understands *work* to refer to the "concrete, occupying a portion of book-space" while the text "is a methodological field." *Text* then refers to aspects of literature, which Barthes describes as follows:

1. Text is not a defined object. It exists only as discourse. The text is experienced only in an activity, a production.
2. Text raises problems of the classification of literary genre. It always implies an experience of limits. Text is always paradoxical.
3. Text practices the infinite deferral of the signified; that is, it engages in infinite play.
4. Text achieves an irreducible plurality of meaning. Every text, is an intertext of another text; it belongs to the intertextual.

Thus, in what follows I will be suggesting for the human sciences something I call *storytrack*, which is akin to Barthes's *text*. The relationship of text to storytrack in my presentation is something on the order of work to text in Barthes.

[10] Film and other media forms are sometimes considered *text*.

[11] In his "Seeking an End to the Primary Text', or 'Putting an End to the Text as Primary'" in *Beyond the Classics? Essays in Religious Studies and Liberal Education*, edited by Frank E. Reynolds and Sheryl L. Burkhalter (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), pp. 41-59, Lawrence E.

Often the end toward which such interpretations[12] are made surpasses the texts and the cultures or temporal frames they represent in striving to make general statements: broadly applicable hypotheses, theories, and principles. The study of history and culture is always an interpretive endeavor, for the meanings of texts are never self-evident or singular. Texts can and do mean different things at different times and to different people. It is the job of the historian to interpret texts in various contexts. Still, no matter what kind of glory or mess a historian makes of interpreting a text, the interpretation never replaces the text. According to this common view, the text survives both good and bad interpretations of it.

Sullivan discusses the extent to which the academic study of religion has restricted itself to the study of texts. He speaks out against what he calls this "tyranny of text" (p. 45), believing it "an inadequate vehicle for transporting the full cargo of religious experiences of literate peoples, including those of our own culture" (p. 47) , and that the dominance of text has "narrowed this wide range of human reflection and distorted the many modes of reflection as they are found in historical cultures" (p. 47). Sullivan suggests a number of "other modalities of matter" on which the study of religion might focus: canoe making, pottery, musical performance, weeping, and so on. The problem I find with Sullivan's study appears to be an illegitimate shift in analytic frame in the midst of his argument. Certainly the academic study of religion has often restricted its attention to that set of texts ordinarily labeled primary texts. It can be rightly noted that this class of texts is in many senses restrictive of the religions from which they come. But this is no new criticism. For decades many textual studies have been set within cultural and historical contexts. This tyranny of text was challenged long ago. Sullivan proposes as a radical alternative to primary text the study of performative aspects of culture. I fail to see the novelty of this suggestion since the studies of the nonwritten elements of culture are extensive and common. If Sullivan is suggesting that such things as canoe making and pottery are the common source for scholarly discourse that is, without the mediation of even descriptive narratives regarding canoe making or pottery—then it would seem to me that scholarship would be limited to a face-to-face discourse in the presence of these activities and objects in situ and perhaps even more severely limited somehow to the engagement of academics in these very activities themselves. I doubt that this is what Sullivan is intending since it is to be noted that in every instance in which he presents these alternatives he makes bibliographical reference to "written" accounts of these activities. What he leaves unconsidered is the additional critical issues that arise in the mediation of these performances and objects by the "written" accounts on which scholar ship depends. Sullivan appears to hold that ethnography is free of interpretive issues. On this point the essays collected by James Clifford and George E. Marcus (eds.), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), are insightful.

[12] I use the term *interpretation* here in a general and nontechnical sense to include all those techniques and methods employed in rendering a text meaningful. Certainly there is precedent for using *interpretation* to refer to the subjective, personal, and perhaps speculative approach, distinguished from the term *explanation* to refer to the more rigorous and "scientific" methods. Should such a distinction be made, I would hold that they are in some ways inseparable and are interactive. For a discussion of these terms and how they have been understood, see E. Thomas Lawson and Robert N. McCauley, *Rethinking Religion: Connecting Cognition and Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 14-31.

Texts also function to bring closure. They are the basis for settling arguments and differences of opinion. It is to texts that one makes final appeal. They illustrate, test, or otherwise ground written history, culture studies, and academic theory. They anchor legitimate academic constructs in a nontheoretical, nonacademic reality in the world of subject, in the "real" world. To cite text in service to a history, a culture study, or an interpretation is to cross between interpretation and that which is interpreted, thus bringing closure, even if temporary. The interpretive enterprise is the anchor rope, the bridge, the connecting force between the given—the subject—that is terra firma and a rendering of its meaning. Interpretation bridges the chasm between us, that is, our understanding, and the reality of our subject.

To consider this view of texts from another angle, the human and social sciences (the enterprise that interprets texts) are secondary endeavors; thus academic writings are secondary texts. Historians and students of culture do not make history; they do not engage in actions that have an immediate effect on the world except, of course, the far corner of reality that is itself academia. At best, it would seem, scholars respond to what has happened, what is given, and their interpretive responses thereby may enrich our understanding of the past; of others; and it is hoped, even of ourselves. Thus, academic work may be felt in the world as a second-order effect, the effect of actions performed by those who are enriched by knowledge and understanding.

This discussion of text is intended only to remind us of the obvious, to articulate widely held assumptions. But of course these notions of text are undergoing challenge and transformation as one of the forefronts of the discussion of how there is an inevitable interdependence between scholar (or looker) and subject (object looked at) of study. While according to a reigning paradigm the independence of the text is fundamental, it is difficult to demonstrate that independence. Even as we present text it undergoes transformation, again revealing the paradox with which we began.

I am interested in this paradox and believe that some satisfactory position in its regard must be reached. I want to begin with an example of the presentation of a text and inquire and reflect on the sort of bridging that occurs in the interpretive operations that serve to join the presenter of this text with its reported subjects. Using an approach I call storytracking, I will attempt to follow the track from the report of a culture as presented in a recent academic study to the independent reality of the subject for the purpose of revealing and analyzing how the academic bridgework to the reality of the subject is built.

Storytracking, in this first use, is the simple method of comparing a text version as presented in an academic report with the text version as it appears as that report's cited source. The comparison helps reveal the motivations and extent to which the text is transformed through its presentation. I simply follow the chain of citations, comparing presentation versions with source versions to approach as closely as possible the independent subject. This method will produce the story—or as I call it, the storytrack—that interconnects the scholar with the scholar-independent subject. The storytrack will tell the story of the various academic operations conducted to build a bridge connecting subject and scholarly report. An account of these operations will reveal the character of the relationship between subject and scholar.

"Numbakulla and the Sacred Pole"

Mircea Eliade's Text

The cultural example I have chosen is from the Arrernte culture, an aboriginal people of Central Australia, as presented by the late, eminent student of religion Mircea Eliade.[13] Eliade, who shaped much of the present academic and popular understanding of religion, held that space is not homogeneous, that some places are held to be more important, of higher value, than other places. His position can scarcely be denied—it seems obvious, as does his assertion that the most important place is the one designated as the center. The center, to Eliade's understanding, is synonymous with the religious. Key to his argument, Eliade used to dramatic effect an Arrernte[14] example, which, following Eliade,[15] I call "Numbakulla and the Sacred Pole":

> Numbakulla arose "out of nothing" and traveled to the north, making mountains, rivers, and all sorts of animals and plants. He also created the "spirit children" (*kuruna*), a very large number of whom were concealed inside his body. Eventually he made a cave or storehouse, [in which] to hide the *tjuringas* that he was producing. At that time men did not yet exist. He inserted a *kuruna* into a *tjuringa*, and thus there arose the first Achilpa (mythical) Ancestor. Numbakulla then implanted a large number of *kuruna* in different *tjuringa*, producing other mythical Ancestors. He taught the first Achilpa how to perform the many ceremonies connected with the various totems.

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[13] One underlying reason for selecting this text is personal and incidental, but I would not pursue this publicly if it did not eventually transcend this motivation. A brief summary, though a bit personal, is in order. In a small book on the religions of small-scale tribal cultures, I turned to Eliade's example of "Numbakulla and the Sacred Pole" to illustrate the religious importance of centers to these kinds of peoples, a principle I then thought not only valid but also centrally important. Some years after the publication of that book I received a letter from Carl W. Ernst, a professor at Pamona College, asking my views on the incredulity that the Arrernte people, whose actions of lying down to die I had presented, following Eliade, as having been observed in the late nineteenth century. Ernst had discovered that the ethnographic source, Spencer and Gillen, had presented the example as myth. He asked for my view on the impact of this difference. Almost simultaneously I read Jonathan Smith's book *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). The first chapter presents a stunning text criticism of Eliade's "Numbakulla and the Sacred Pole" example. By comparing Eliade's account of the text with the source documents he cites, Smith shows that Eliade largely concocts this text. Holding the sanctity of the text inviolable, Smith uses his demonstration of Eliade's construction as the grounds to undo Eliade's key point, that is, that the center universally and necessarily designates the religious. The differences between Eliade and Smith reflect two important, though not entirely unrelated, approaches to the academic study of religion. These issues will be taken up in chapter 7.

[14] *Arrernte* is the currently preferred spelling of the Australian aboriginal culture whose name has been variously spelled, most commonly *Aranda* and *Arunta*. See John Henderson and Veronica Dobson, *Eastern and Central Arrernte to English Dictionary* (Alice Springs: IAD Press, 1994).

[15] Mircea Eliade, *Australian Religions: An Introduction* (Ithica, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1967), p. 50.

Now, Numbakulla had planted a pole called *kauwa-auwa* in the middle of a sacred ground…. After anointing it with blood, he began to climb it. He told the first Achilpa Ancestor to follow him; but the blood made the pole too slippery, and the man slid down. "Numbakulla went on alone, drew up the pole after him and was never seen again."

One day an incident befell one of these mythical groups: while pulling up the *kauwa-auwa*, which was very deeply implanted, the old chief broke it just above the ground. They carried the broken pole until they met another group. They were so tired and sad that they did not even try to erect their own *kauwa-auwa* "but, lying down together, died where they lay. A large hill, covered with big stones, arose to mark the spot."[16]

Eliade recognizes the pole as marking the center place and as functioning to maintain a channel of communication with the creator god, withdrawn into the sky. The break in communication is a loss of center and meaning for the Achilpa. In recounting these events, Eliade illustrates and gives dramatic ethnographic grounding to his understanding of the religious character of the center place: "Seldom do we find a more pathetic avowal that man cannot live without a 'sacred center' which permits him both to 'cosmicize' space and to communicate with the transhuman world of heaven. As long as they had their *kauwa-auwa*, the Achilpa Ancestors were never lost in the surrounding 'chaos.' Moreover, the sacred pole was for them the proof par excellence of Numbakulla's existence and activity."[17]

Furthermore, as is incumbent upon historians, Eliade's presentation of the Numbakulla text renders meaningful the otherwise enigmatic and incredulous act of people voluntarily dying because they break a pole. Eliade used this example on several occasions. It first appeared in his *The Sacred and the Profane*,[18] where it is presented as though it were an ethnographic account, an event that had been physically observed by the ethnographers Baldwin Spencer and Francis Gillen in the late nineteenth century in Australia.[19] In his *Australian Religions* (1967) Eliade changed the event from an ethnographic observation to a recorded account of a myth, that is, a story collected from the Arrernte by Spencer and Gillen. Only an outline of the process and results is presented here.

"Numbakulla and the Sacred Pole" is a minor ethnographic text. Although Eliade used it several times and it appears occasionally in the work of others, it is not a text widely debated or interpreted. Eliade makes a semiformal presentation of the text. He cites his source as Baldwin Spencer and Francis Gillen*, The Arunta: The Story of a Stone Age People* (1927). He provides brief quotations, designated by quotation marks from his source. The portions of the text not

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[16] Ibid, pp. 50-53.

[17] Ibid, p. 53.

[18] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), pp. 32-33; first published in German translation, *Das Heilige und das Profane* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1957). The English translation was prepared from the first French edition, *Le Sacré et le profane* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965). The passage also appears in *Occultism, Witchcraft and Contemporary Fashions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 20. See also Mircea Eliade, *Zalmoxis: The Vanishing God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 186.

[19] See Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*.

directly quoted must be assumed by the reader to be close approximations of the materials presented in the source. Thus Eliade presents material from Arrernte culture with all of the authority that accompanies the designation "text." The convention by which Eliade presents the Arrernte example, that is, a referenced ethnographic account of an identified culture, denotes that it is independent of Eliade and his use or interpretation of it. As presented, the Arrernte example is not of Eliade's making and the attribute of independence appears to be essential to the effectiveness of his presentation. As factual material, independent of Eliade and his theories and interpretations, the Arrernte example serves as exemplification, grounding, and closure to Eliade's theoretical position.

Spencer and Gillen's The Arunta (1927)

To begin now to storytrack this presentation of the Arrernte to the actual Arrernte people in Central Australia, I simply compare Eliade's "Numbakulla and the Sacred Pole" text to the text in his cited source. The storytrack begins with a detailed comparison of Eliade's text with the passages he cites from Spencer and Gillen's *The Arunta* (1927). This comparison shows how Eliade selected, organized, and presented the materials from his source. Eliade presents the Arrernte example in the span of five paragraphs of thirty-seven sentences. The information is taken principally from six pages in Spencer and Gillen, although those pages are selected from a span of twenty-eight pages that are an integral part of a forty-five-page section. While virtually every word in Eliade's account can be found in his source,[20] it is remarkable how, through his selection, ordering, and presentation, the resulting cultural event drastically differs. Further, of the thirty-seven sentences, fully seventeen are devoted to Eliade's interpretational comments, a fact that, while obvious if known, is perhaps not so obvious if not known.

In his first paragraph Eliade draws heavily on a five-page section (pp. 355-60) in Spencer and Gillen to establish that the Arrernte believe in a primordial figure named Numbakulla, who after performing his acts of creation planted a pole in the center of a ceremonial ground and then climbed up it to the sky. An ancestral figure was unable to follow him up the blood-anointed pole. Eliade then summarizes twenty-eight pages in Spencer and Gillen as "seemingly endless detail of wanderings of the first Achilpa Ancestors after the disappearance of Numbakulla" and then he leaps to an incident (Spencer and Gillen, p. 388) of only one of the several groups of Tjilpa,[21] or wildcat people, to recount the breaking of the pole and the radical response to this event. Given that this is an incident of only one Tjilpa group, given that most groups of

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[20] Jonathan Smith's study of Eliade's use of the Arrernte example, "In Search of Place," in *To Take Place*, focuses on the substantive points of Eliade's presentation Smith concludes that only one of the points was actually "verifiable without ambiguity" (p. 6) in Spencer and Gillen. Smith's conclusion is that Eliade "has misread the text" (p. 6). My assessment is that Eliade constructs his text rather than misreads it. My study compares Eliade with his cited source at the word, phrase, and sentence level. Nearly every word can be found in Spencer and Gillen, though this does not release Eliade from the accusation of sheer fabrication. What seems more interesting to me is the attempt to discern what motives he had for selecting and organizing the materials as he did.

[21] *Tjilpa* is the latest spelling of the name for the wildcat group. Spencer and Gillen, as well as many others, spelled it *Achilpa*.

ancestors die at the end of their journey and only one of four groups is connected with a pole at all, and given the many variances from Spencer and Gillen of Eliade's presentation, the conclusion cannot be avoided that although most of the words and phrases in Eliade's account can be traced to his source, the events or cultural elements that Eliade presents as primary are—by virtue of his selection, organization, and presentation—almost entirely concocted by him. The account resembles its source in that it contains many of the same words and phrases, but the account is different in structure and composition. The term *concoct* effectively portrays this relationship. *Concoct*, in a basic sense, means "to boil together, to prepare by cooking." Thus, the relationship of Eliade's Numbakulla text to its source is on the order of boiled potato soup to a vegetable garden. It is clear that Eliade's constructions are directly motivated by the necessity of supporting the principle he wished to establish, that is, that the center place is synonymous with the religious.

If the five paragraphs presented in Eliade as "Numbakulla and the Sacred Pole" are thought to be a primary text, which not only Eliade but also others have believed,[22] there is a breach in the essential criteria for a primary text. This text is not solely evidence from the Arrernte; it is a product of Mircea Eliade's reading, selecting, organizing, and presenting materials from Spencer and Gillen's *The Arunta*. The text is the scholar's making. It is at best tertiary but presented in the guise of primary. While there appears to be a realm beyond academia, by virtue of Eliade's citation of an ethnographic source, Eliade's presentation smudges the boundary between primary and secondary and violates the principle of the independence of the primary.

Rather than confirming academic closure, comparison of Eliade with his cited source opens questions about his approach. Importantly, the comparison shows that while Eliade's theoretical position is confirmed by his example, the confirmation seems to be achieved at the expense of the Arrernte, who thus recede from Eliade's readers. While there may be some trace of Arrernte experience and culture that survives in Eliade's "Numbakulla and the Sacred Pole" text, it appears to be less, both in quantity and accuracy, than it is in Spencer and Gillen. More radically, the Arrernte, at least as they are known to the large readership of Eliade's works, become a creation of the scholar, proceeding from his understanding of religion, rather than a culture with an existence independent of the academic. Rather than Eliade's work being dependent on the Arrernte, the Arrernte are dependent on Eliade.

In *The Sacred and the Profane*, Eliade presents broad patterns within religion as he understands it throughout the history of human existence. His citation of an Arrernte example, along with examples from other cultures, is illustrative of a pattern. The Arrernte example as Eliade presents it could be defended as correct, even if at odds with ethnographic sources, since for the Arrernte to be religious, as Eliade understands religion, they must have patterns consistent with those he described. It could be suggested that ethnographers did not record what must have been present. It could be argued that while this particular Arrernte example might not support Eliade's position, other examples from the Arrernte could doubtless be found that

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[22] See, for example, Sam Gill, *Beyond "the Primitive": The Religions of Nonliterate Peoples* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1982), pp. 19-21.

would very well do so.[23] But this argument turns around the interpretive enterprise; it holds that the scholar's understanding of the generic is more primary than the cultural specific.

Eliade's *Australian Religions* is a work seemingly directed toward the presentation of specific religions in their specific historical and cultural contexts. In his preface to the book, Eliade describes his task as presenting "the understanding of the meaning of a particular culture, as it is understood and assumed by its own members."[24] This is one of the few comprehensive books on Australian religions.[25] Nonetheless even a cursory review of Eliade's treatment of his sources makes it entirely clear that even in this work he was more interested and confident in the universal religious patterns he brings to the study than he was in Australian aboriginal religions.

The comparison of Eliade's "Numbakulla and the Sacred Pole" with its source raises basic questions. Is it possible to approach the Arrernte point of view? Can the people be presented accurately and in their terms? Do history and culture studies necessarily take us further from their subjects? If so, how do we justify these studies? Are texts actually independent of interpretation? Is history independent of the writing of history? Are cultures independent of students of culture? Are texts presented as primary actually considered more primary than academic constructions of the generic?

Spencer and Gillen's Native Tribes: (1899)

To storytrack this Arrernte example from Eliade to Spencer and Gillen's *The Arunta* (1927) goes only part way. It is important to inquire about Spencer and Gillen's presentation of the Arrernte. This storytracking work, that is, an attempt to get as close as possible to the Arrernte, is done to more properly ground my proposed approach and to more fully establish the comprehension and appreciation of the Arrernte.

By beginning with Eliade's "Numbakulla and the Sacred Pole" text it is possible to trace the trail of texts and records backward, source upon source, toward the Arrernte, comparing each document (text) with its source, as I did with Eliade's text. The effect, while moving progressively toward the Arrernte, is also to reveal as it has done with Eliade, how various presenters of the Arrernte have influenced, their presentations, that is, how the Arrernte, at least as known to the non-Australian world have been dependent on those who have studied them.

The preface to *The Arunta*, written by Baldwin Spencer, states that this two-volume work is a revision of an earlier work, *The Native Tribes in Central Australia*, published in 1899. Gillen died

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[23] Theodor Strehlow provides one and the suggestion of others in *Central Australian Religion: Personal Monototenism in a Polytotemic Community* (Adelaide: Australian Association for the Study of Religions, 1978), p. 12, and in his *Aranda Traditions* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1947), p. 78.

[24] Eliade, *Australian Religions*, p xviii.

[25] Tony Swain notes, for example, that Eliade's book is "the most coherent general introduction to Aboriginal religions" *Aboriginal Religions in Australia: A Bibliographical Survey* (New York, Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1991), p. 19.

in 1912, and Spencer returned to the field in 1926 to check the accuracy of the 1899 work and to collect additional information. Eliade did not cite the earlier edition.

The next storytracking task is to compare the sections relevant to the "Numbakulla and the Sacred Pole" text in the first edition with those in the revised edition to determine what, if any, information was added or changed by Spencer, based on his 1926 field study. This comparison shows that the entire section about Numbakulla as the creator and his climb up the pole does not exist in the earlier version. In both the 1899 and 1927 editions, there is a creation story in which sky beings come to earth, create people from embryolike forms, and then turn into lizards. Thus the part of Eliade's account in which Numbakulla creates things, then climbs up the pole into the sky, was added by Spencer as chapter XIII to the revised edition, based, as it will soon be shown, on his 1926 field study. However, the part of Eliade s story about people lying down to die when their pole is broken appears much the same in both editions. Eliade's conjunction of materials, which in Spencer and Gillen are separated by thirty pages, is also the conjunction of materials whose recording from the Arrernte was separated by thirty years.

Rather than two texts, Eliade and his source, there are now three: Eliade's, Spencer's of 1927, and Spencer and Gillen's of 1899. Is the 1927 version a correction and completion of the 1899 version? Does the 1927 version reflect historical changes that had occurred since 1899? Are there more texts? What did the Arrernte say? Who were Spencer and Gillen? Which Arrernte talked with Spencer and Gillen? Did Spencer talk with the same Arrernte in 1926 as he and Gillen did in 1896? These questions demand attention. Perhaps at this point it is more effective to turn the story around and tell some of it as it unfolded.

Spencer and Gillen's Early Field Studies

From his position as biologist at the University of Melbourne, Baldwin Spencer agreed to accompany the Horn expedition into Central Australia. The expedition, which lasted eleven weeks and covered 2,000 miles, began on May 3, 1894. While Spencer sketched and described many plants and animals and served as photographer for this expedition, he also became interested in the aboriginal peoples. When the expedition arrived at Alice Springs, Spencer met the postmaster, Francis Gillen, who shared Spencer's interest in the aborigines and had begun collecting information about Arrernte culture, that of the aboriginal people who lived near Alice Springs. Gillen knew little of the Arrernte language,[26] communicating with the people mostly in aboriginal English. When, after three days, the Horn expedition moved beyond Alice Springs,

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[26] There is some ambiguity about how well Gillen knew the Arrernte language. Theodor Strehlow constantly criticized Gillen and Spencer for not knowing the language and for their frequent, serious mistranslations. Gillen was surprised that Spencer wanted to include native terms in their publications because he felt no one was interested in learning Arrernte. Nonetheless, it is difficult to believe that Gillen spent so much time among the Arrernte people and incorporated a large number of Arrernte terms in the materials he recorded without knowing something of the language. There is little doubt that this lack seriously limited his recording and research.

Spencer remained behind for a time. Gillen sent aborigines to get biological specimens for Spencer's study, and the two men continued their conversations about aborigines.[27]

With Spencer back in Melbourne following the Horn expedition, his conversations with Gillen about aborigines continued, now by mail and telegraph. Spencer began to realize that Gillen's collections of aboriginal stories and customs deserved publication. He agreed to go to Alice Springs in November 1896 to observe a major ritual. Upon his return to Melbourne, loaded with field notes, he immediately began to prepare the manuscript. Sir James George Frazer, in London, learned of Spencer and Gillen's field studies and encouraged the publication of the work with Macmillan and suggested the title, *The Native Tribes of Central Australia*. Frazer, along with E. B. Tylor, edited the manuscript for an early 1899 publication.

Given the general history of the field studies behind the publications of the Arrernte ethnographies of Spencer and Gillen, it is possible to trace the field sources the various elements that contribute to Eliade's "Numbakulla and the Sacred Pole" account. In the 1899 edition of *Native Tribes* the relevant passages are (1) a human creation account and (2) a series of so-called totem group stories in which the Tjilpa ancestors traveled about the landscape and performed ceremonies. These accounts are revised in minor ways for the 1927 edition and supplemented by another: the Numbakulla creation story.

The portion of Eliade's Numbakulla account that is the same in both the 1899 and 1927 editions of Spencer and Gillen's work is the section of the Tjilpa story in which the pole is broken and, in response, the Tjilpa ancestors lie down and die. Arrernte stories, as reported in these sources, commonly depict ancestral beings who are traveling across the land. Typically the ancestors emerge from the ground; go to a location that is sometimes identified by a distinctive geological or even biological feature; and there perform an act, commonly a set of rites. They may encounter other people who reside at the camping place. They often leave someone behind when they go on to the next camping place. The stories can be traced by the Arrernte across the physical land. The stories begin by indicating that the ancestors "jump up of themselves," which means that they are uncreated beings. The stories usually end with the death or transformation into *tjurungas* (stone or wooden emblems) of the ancestral figure(s). Commonly the ancestral figure is considered to still reside at this final location or as a *tjurunga* in the local storehouse for these ritual objects. The Tjilpa—the wildcat group that Eliade identified simply as one of the Arrernte groups—stories depict several groups of ancestors who are traveling different routes across the landscape. The incident of the broken pole appears in the accounts of only one group of Tjilpa ancestors. All of the extant accounts of the Tjilpa stories were recorded by Gillen. The story that contains the broken pole incident was recorded in April or May 1897, identified as Column III, or the Eastern group of Tjilpa. He recorded other versions of this story, those not including the incident of the broken pole, on November 12, 18, and 26, 1896.

The seven sentences in *Native Tribes* that describe the broken pole incident closely match Gillen's journal account. The only notable variation is that Gillen's concluding sentence is

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[27] D.J. Mulvaney and J.H. Calaby, *'So Much That Is New': Baldwin Spencer, 1860-1929, A Biography* (Melbourne: University of Melbourne Press, 1985); see chap. 7.

clearer and simpler: "Their bodies [i.e., the bodies of the deceased ancestors] became Churinga [*tjurunga*] many large & long & which are now in the possession of local Achilpa." In editing the journal for publication, Spencer constructs two sentences and blurs Gillen's clarity: "Their [i.e., the deceased ancestors] Churinga, each with its associated spirit individual, remained behind. Many of them are very large and long, and now in the *ertnatulunga* or storehouse at Unjiacherta."

Human Creation Account

The account of human creation in *Native Tribes* underwent minor revision for the 1927 edition and, importantly, was supplemented by the Numbakulla creation story in a chapter entitled "The Achilpa Tradition. I. The Earlier Wanderings; the Tradition of Numbakulla and the Origin of Churinga and Kuruna."

Although the human creation account in *Native Tribes* (pp. 387-89), repeated in *The Arunta* (pp. 307-9), was not considered by Eliade, it is nonetheless relevant. A study of how this account relates to its field sources reveals both Gillen's and Spencer's presumptions about religion and culture, what they expected and assumed in their field studies, and what ideas guided the preparation of their publications. The story recounts how, in the days before there were men and women, two beings who dwelt in the western sky saw some rudimentary or incomplete human beings. These beings came down from their dwelling place, taking as their mission the transformation of the rudimentary beings into men and women, accomplished by cutting with their stone knives the arms, fingers, legs, toes, and so forth to release and complete them. The tale explains that these rudimentary creatures were stages in the transformation of animals and plants into human beings, thus accounting for the identification of groups of human beings with plants and animals—an explanation for the origin of totems. The story ends with the statement that after completing their mission, the sky beings transformed themselves into little lizards. In the preparation of this story of human origins, Spencer drew on two of Gillen's journal entries: the first, "Traditions of Origin," was recorded by Gillen in 1894; the other was recorded in June 1897 and identified as "Amunga-quinyirquinya, Flycatching lizard, Earliest alchiringa."

In 1894, when Gillen began keeping a journal about the Arrernte, one of the first things he recorded was an account he titled "Traditions of Origin." It tells how primordial ancestors of the aborigines were transformed into human beings by a spirit man who came from the east and used a magic knife to release their arms, legs, and so on. This spirit man gave them speech, instructed them on gender roles and social divisions, and circumcised the men. Gillen identified these figures as belonging to a giant species of porcupine (or Echidna), apparently because of the similarity of their appearance with Echidnas and because they were called "Inaapwerta,"[28] which he rendered as *Echidna*. This account was published in 1896 in the *Report on the Work of the Horn Scientific Expedition to Central Australia* in a section authored by Gillen. The 1899

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[28] "Inapwerla" in the Horn expedition report, though it should have been printed *inapwerta*. The *l* probably occurred because in Gillen's cursive style he rarely crossed his *t*s. In *The Arunta* the term becomes "Inapartua." Spencer explains: "We have adopted the spelling of *atua* for man instead of *ertwa*" (p. 308, n. 1).

published account, though more refined, is in substance not at variance with the journal account.[29]

In June 1897 Gillen collected information linked, at least in Spencer's mind, to his "Traditions of Origin" by the common reference to what in the earlier account he had identified as "Inaapwerta." In the 1897 account, Gillen revealed the discovery of his error in understanding and translating this term. The term reported as "Inaapwerta" in the Horn expedition report, Gillen now believed, should be "Inaapertwa," meaning "rudimentary men or men unable to walk."[30] Gillen noted this correction in his journal in the midst (sentence 5) of his account of the

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[29] It is clear that the missionaries who established Hermannsburg in 1877—as well as Francis Gillen, who became a telegraph operator at Alice Springs and began keeping journals about the aborigines in the early 1890s—began their inquiries with expectations shaped by Christianity. What are the first questions these Christians would be likely to ask other peoples about their traditions? Surely among the first must have been this: How did the world get created? How did human beings get created? Who are your gods? All of the principal works stemming from this early period begin with accounts of gods and creation.

It can be hypothesized that the very asking of these questions, as the first questions, has extensively shaped what is known of Arrernte culture. With no linguistic competence by early missionaries and with the Arrernte people not yet knowing aboriginal English, there had to be a great deal of negotiation in these first recordings and first translations. Surely the Arrernte negotiated their language to accommodate the questions as much as the German- and English-speaking missionaries adjusted their understandings of spiritual traditions (religion was not yet even a relevant comparative category) as a category that might contain more than German Lutheranism. Both, to accommodate the other, changed their ideas of the world. It is not at all unlikely that in this early phase of negotiation the Arrernte learned what would be acceptable to the European-Australians when asked questions about gods and creation. These accounts need not have preexisted in these painful first encounters but could have been constructed in the process. People with a culture that has no story of cosmic creation may very well permit one to be constructed through the processes of negotiating with inquirers who demand such information. By the time Gillen asks these key questions of his aboriginal English-speaking Arrernte in 1894, the Arrernte had already had more than fifteen years to grow familiar with what might have come to be a new story.

While this sequence of events is hypothetical, it is nonetheless far from unlikely. Should it be correct, there would be significant irony in Eliade's (and many others') use of Arrernte stories of creation. Eliade, as so many others, sought *ab original* sources because he believed that they represented primal, if not primordial, stages in the development of human culture. How ironic it would be if these sources were the direct product of a Christian presence in Central Australia. The creation story of the gigantic emu-footed man is also recorded in these earliest days of contact. See chapter 5 for a discussion of this figure.

[30] Carl Strehlow has a similar story. He uses the term *rella manerinja* to refer to these "undeveloped people." He notes: *nanerinja* means grown together, stuck together, *rella* means a person or people. In the course of his presentation Strehlow refers to the hands of these undeveloped people as being grown to their breast, a condition (presumably) he refers to by the terms *turba* or *innopúta*. In a footnote Strehlow adds: "*innopúta* presumably = *inapertwa* in Spencer and Gillen." See Strehlow, *Die Aranda- und Loritja- Stämme in Zentral Australien*,

"Flycatching Lizard," which he identified as the "earliest alcheringa," meaning the earliest of the heroic or mythic ancestors. This story tells of two men, identified as flycatching lizards, who were Ungambikulla; that is, they came "out of nothing or [were] enough in themselves"[31] and living in the western sky. They saw the Inaapertwa, who dwelt in various places. After the saltwaters were withdrawn, these men came down and used their knives to circumcise and subincise these rudimentary men, thus making them fully initiated men. In this way the flycatching lizard men made numerous groups[32] of initiated people. These groups were, however, threatened by "Brunch devils,"[33] who attacked and ate many of them. A defense was prepared in which the peoples armed themselves with spears and awaited the Oruncha attack. When it occurred, all of the Oruncha were killed. Their dead bodies turned to stone accounting for the great jumble of stones at the mouth of Simpson's Gap, west of Alice Springs. In a postscript, Gillen explains that the flycatching lizard men made some initiated groups while little hawk made others, both accomplished by performing the rites of circumcision and subincision. With their mission accomplished "these men of the heavens turned themselves into little lizards." This is a story of the origin of some totem groups and accounts for the origin of the circumcision and subincision initiatory practices in which youths, "rudimentary men," are transformed into fully initiated men.

Spencer combined and edited sections of Gillen's 1894 and I 897 journals in preparation for the account entitled "Origin of the Alcheringa Ancestors" in *Native Tribes* and "The Alchera and Alchera Ancestors" in *The Arunta*. Importantly, Spencer begins by stating that "in reality the traditions of the tribe recognize four more or less distinct eras in the Alcheringa." The earliest of these eras must, according to Spencer's understanding, account for origins. Spencer's construction of this chronology guided his reading of Gillen's two accounts, linked only in their common reference to the rudimentary by the term *Inaapertwa*. Spencer first draws on the beginning of the 1897 account, which as a biologist he found remarkable because it describes the land as once being covered with saltwater.[34] Against this setting, which certainly can appear primordial, Spencer places the two sky-dwelling figures. Although Gillen identifies them from the outset as flycatching lizard ancestors, Spencer does not. Rather he allows the adjective[35] *ungambikula*, which simply identifies figures that were themselves not created (i.e., they "jump

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edited by Moitz Freiherr von Leonhardi (Frankfurt arn Main: Joseph Baer, 1907), vol. 1, part 1, p. 3 (page number refer to the unpublished translation by Hans D. Oberscheidt).

[31] Even in the earliest missionary accounts there is a sense of the Arrernte expressing the idea that some figures in their stories were not created F.E.H.W. Krichauff, "The Customs, Religious Ceremonies, etc. of the 'Aldolinga' and 'Mbenderinga' Tribe of Aborigines in Krichauff Ranges, South Australia," *Royal Geographical Society of South Australia* 2 (1886-88): 33-37, based on letters written by J. Kempe, L. Schulze, and G.A. Heidenreich, all Lutheran pastors in Central Australia. Often this term is rendered "they jumped up of themselves."

[32] These are often called totem groups.

[33] For more information on Oruncha, see Spencer and Gillen, *Native Tribes*, pp 326-28 and 525-26, and Baldwin Spencer and F.J. Gillen, *Across Australia* (London: Macmillan, 1912), pp. 337f.

[34] See Spencer and Gillen, *Native Tribes*, p. 388, n.1.

[35] Smith calls Ungambikula a "common corporate name," which is accurate, but it seems to me the emphasis of the term is more adjectival, that is, concerned with how they came about.

up of themselves" or "out of nothing" or are "self existing"), to become their proper names. Unsupported by Gillen's journals, Spencer adds that "in those days there were no men and women." Having drawn only on the first five of the nineteen sentences in Gillen's 1897 account Spencer turns to Gillen's 1894 "Traditions of Origin." He ignores the fact that the protagonists of this story are clearly different from those of the 1897 story and draws on the part of the 1894 story in which rudimentary figures are transformed into human beings. With several interesting variances, such as omitting the creation of genitals,[36] Spencer holds closely to Gillen's 1894 account. But at the end Spencer seems to have remembered the 1897 account and concludes the text with "after having performed their mission, the *Ungambikula* transformed themselves into little lizards called *Amunga-quiniaquinia*…. There is no reason given for this, and in no other tradition do we meet with either the *Ungambikula* or the special kind of lizard into which they changed."

By combining sections of two accounts recorded by Gillen, Spencer meets the need he has created for himself through his temporal classification of Arrernte stories. He needed evidence of the "earliest wanderings," that is, stories about creation. Finding no stories for this era, he concocted one. Spencer's motivation seems clear in the editorial choices he made. He had to ignore any reference to the initiatory elements in Gillen's 1897 account because these would require the stories to be classified in Spencer's middle period. Yet he wanted to pick up the beginning of the 1897 account to establish a primordial setting not provided in Gillen's 1894 account. Spencer construed the knife-cutting operations of the 1897 account, which are definitely operations of circumcision, in terms of the transformations of prehuman, rudimentary forms. Perhaps the most curious and inexplicable part of Spencer's text is his concluding reference to lizards. In the last sentence, it seems that Spencer looked back at the story, ignoring or forgetting that it is of his own construction, and was genuinely puzzled by the unexplained transformation of creators into lizards.[37]

Spencer's 1926 Field Studies

Spencer's I927 account of the same "earliest tradition" has some curious changes from the 1899 account. He begins the chapter in which the account appears with a discussion of the term *Alchera*, including some phrases he had his aboriginal informants render into Arrernte to support his interpretation of the term. Then he discusses "the earliest tradition" and makes two important points in this comparative inquiry. First, he writes that for most local groups of Arrernte, "the creation of men and women is ascribed to the action of certain superhuman Beings called Numbakulla—self-existing or self-originating—who appeared upon the scene,

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[36] Such omissions may not have been Spencer's. There is evidence that James G. Frazer and Edward B. Tylor, who edited the manuscript for publication in London, debated extensively about the appropriateness of the sexual and genital matters in the work. See Mulvaney and Calaby, '*So Much That Is News*,' p. 179. It is possible that Spencer included such references only to have them removed by the editors. It must be remembered that while I am attributing the treatment of Gillen's records solely to Spencer, and I believe his influence was principal, both Frazer and Tylor (and perhaps others) may have had a hand in the final result.

[37] An inquiry into the materials related in one way or another to this human creation story reveals a very complicated set of issues.

completed their work of creation, or transformation, and then disappeared and were never seen again."[38] In a footnote (p. 307, n.1) Spencer holds that Numbakulla had been called Ungambikula in N*ative Tribes*. Second, Spencer continues to support his periodization, despite denouncing it all the while: "Certain of the traditions seem to recognize a division of the Alchera times into three or four periods, which are not, however, by any means sharply defined, and in others, such as the great Achilpa [Tjilpa] tradition, are not, or at most, only vaguely, indicated."[39] In a footnote to this sentence, Spencer rejects even more emphatically the temporal categorizations he had made in *Native Tribes*: "We previously described the traditions as recognizing four more or less distinct periods in the Alchera…. The general sequence of events thus indicated holds good, but further information shows that the periods overlap and merge into one another, and are not sufficiently distinctly marked off to make their retention serve any useful purpose."[40] But in the next sentence in the body of the work, Spencer begins the account of the creation of people from rudimentary forms with "the earliest tradition…."

Thus, there are two significant changes in the 1927 account from the 1899 account. The term *Numbakulla* replaces in every case the term *Ungambikula*, and the final sentence, revealing Spencer's confusion about the creators turning into lizards, is omitted.

The effect of this account in *Native Tribes* and *The Arunta* is that it satisfies both Spencer's and Gillen's expectations that the Arrernte have stories that explain the creation of human beings, if not also the cosmos. Logic would demand that these stories relate to the "earliest" period. There are no such stories in all the field records. Further, Spencer's simple conversion of *Ungambikula* from an adjective to a noun gives a proper-name identity to sky-dwelling creator figures, establishing a precedent to be followed in his revisions for *The Arunta*. Here this Tjilpa story presents the creator Numbakulla and prepares for the account presented in his following chapter in *The Arunta* (on which Eliade drew), broadly depicting Numbakulla as a creator figure. A further effect of this identification of creator figures by name is that it facilitates the conflation of figures having different identities, having different domiciles, and appearing in different stories.

Gillen, I believe, shared Spencer's expectations that creation stories of some sort should exist. That Gillen's "Traditions of Origin" appears early[41] in his first field journal, following entries such as "Spiritual Beings," indicates that his inquiries about creation were among his earliest.

Spencer's 1927 Creation Story

The last link in this story is the source for the creation account that identifies Numbakulla as a cosmic creator figure. This part of the story did not appear, as shown above, until the revised version of *Native Tribes* was published as *The Arunta* in 1927. Its source is Spencer's field research in 1926. When Spencer went to the Alice Springs area in 1926, thirty years after seeing the rites performed for him and Gillen, he discovered that not a single person in that

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[38] Spencer and Gillen, *Arunta*, pp. 306-7.
[39] Ibid, p. 307.
[40] Ibid, p. 307, n. 2.
[41] On pp.39 and 40 of the first volume of Gillen's unpublished journal.

community had survived. However, Spencer found a man he had worked with in 1896 who was from Owen Springs, south of Alice Springs. Spencer was pleased to learn that this man had, in the meantime, learned better English.[42] His English name was Charlie Cooper, and he served as Spencer's principal source of information in 1926. For the creation account, Spencer worked from information he recorded from Cooper on June 11 and July 23, 1926. Field notes, the apparent basis for fuller narrative journal accounts, bear the same dates.

The June 11 story, identified as a Tjilpa tale of the origin of various Arrernte groups, is about an Alcheringa being who is called Numbakulla. He made a ritual drawing in a cave that served as a *tjurunga* storehouse and put boughs all around it. He made a *tjurunga* and placed it on the painting, and from the *tjurunga* arose the first Tjilpa man. Numbakulla made many *tjurunga* for other totem groups. He showed the first Tjilpa man how to make ritual objects and perform ceremonies. Numbakulla made a second ritual painting outside the storehouse cave, and in the middle of this painting he planted a large ritual pole, *kauwa-auwa*, which he painted with blood to help him climb up it. He told the first Tjilpa man that the Tjilpa man had been given everything, that is, the ritual implements and ritual knowledge. Numbakulla told the Tjilpa man to follow, and he climbed up the pole. The Tjilpa man tried to climb the pole but slipped down. Numbakulla drew the pole up after him and was never seen again.

The July 23 account is summarized as follows: Numbakulla originated at Lamburkna. He made a Tjilpa *tjurunga*, with which he associated a *kuruna* (the spirit part of every person), thereby creating the first Tjilpa man. Numbakulla made a group of *kuruna*. He made many stone *tjurungas*, split them into pairs, and in between the halves of each pair placed a *kuruna*. He put all these in a ritual storehouse. Following Numbakulla's instructions, the first Tjilpa man walked all over the country, settling on all the spots identified with groups and leaving ground paintings and "marks" at all of them. Then the first Tjilpa man returned to Numbakulla. Numbakulla told the man how to make all the ritual objects and perform the rites. Numbakulla climbed up his pole, telling the Tjilpa man to follow him. The man slipped down. Numbakulla drew the pole up after him. The first Tjilpa man then went to the ritual storehouse, where he found the *tjurungas* with the *kurunas* in them. He walked about the country and threw out the *tjurungas* at the places associated with the various totem groups. At a place called Wairidja, a figure (Inkata Tjilpa *oknirra*) came out of the *tjurunga*. This figure went back to Lamburkna, and the first Tjilpa man gave him two *tjurungas* to take with him and instructed him about everything. Out of

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[42] Spencer wrote the following in the preface (pp. ix-x) to *Arunta*:

The changes that have taken place in the tribe during recent years have been of so vital a nature that it would now be absolutely impossible for anyone, starting afresh, to study it adequately. Of the local group of Udnirringita people at Alice Springs, that numbered forty when we knew them in 1896, not a solitary man, woman or child remains, and this is only one of many such groups, studied by us in the early days, upon whom the same fate has fallen. There are but a few of the older, unspoilt Arunta men left anywhere, and soon there will be none, and with them will pass away all knowledge of primitive customs and beliefs….

My chief informant was a native who, in 1896, was old enough to act as one of the leaders in the Engwura witnessed by Mr. Gillen and myself. He had since then learnt to speak English well and was thoroughly acquainted with the beliefs and traditions of the tribe. He himself was a Purula man of the Irriakura (a plant bulb) totem….

these *tjurungas* arose two more people—a man, *kupitcha*, which means "small" or "little," and a woman, *illapurinja*, which means "the changed one" and refers to the first woman made by the first Tjilpa man. The man was given ritual objects and taught the rites. This man and woman camped together. A number of *kurunas* entered the woman and came out of her as men. They traveled to a third camp, although the actions there are unclear.

Moving beyond any support from his field notes, Spencer's journal at this point returns to Numbakulla, who is speaking to the first Tjilpa man. Spencer provides the Arrernte language text without a literal translation and then freely renders the story. The first Tjilpa man goes out and settles at all the group places. When Numbakulla was about to go up his *kuaka auwa* (pole), he said (in good aboriginal English) to the first Tjilpa man, "We two go up see camp." Numbakulla climbs the pole. Nothing is said about the first Tjilpa man attempting or failing to follow Numbakulla up the pole or about it being painted with blood. The story ends with the first Tjilpa man finding the *tjurungas* made by Numbakulla in a ritual storehouse.

Spencer draws extensively but highly selectively on both these accounts in preparing the creation story for chapter XIII in *The Arunta*. The most significant variance from the journals is the shift of Numbakulla's role from the ritualist who originates the first Tjilpa man, who then becomes the principal ritualist, to Numbakulla's role as a cosmic creator. Spencer makes Numbakulla into the one who travels "all over the country." During these travels, "He created many of the features of the country and decided upon the location of the central places now associated with all the *Knanjas* [totems]." He creates by the actions of placing his foot and speaking: "At every place he put his foot down, saying…." Rather than Numbakulla being the creator of the Tjilpa ancestor, as in the journals, Spencer makes him be the one who leaves marks on the land associated with group places. Though completely unsupported by the journals, Spencer has Numbakulla create everything: "While traversing the country he not only created mountains, rivers, flats and sand-hills, but also brought into existence all kinds of animals and plants." Many of the other variances from the journals are of interest, but this broad recasting of the story is the most significant.

Spencer's editorial management of his field sources for "The Earlier Wanderings" in *The Arunta* is consistent with his motivation for preparing the "Origin of Alcheringa Ancestors" in *Native Tribes*. Even though in a footnote Spencer indicates the uselessness of his periodization, he retains these periods as his principal organizational scheme. It is clear that his expectations and periodization of mythology demand an era of cosmic creation in which a sky-dwelling figure creates the earth and human beings. Though none of the field resources support such an account, Spencer's selections, interpretations, contextualizations, embellishments, interpolations, conflation, and organizations transform the field sources into what his expectations demand. Stories that clearly recount group origins—that focus on the ritual acts of circumcision to transform the uninitiated into fully initiated men—and that would necessarily fit into the "middle wanderings" era of Spencer's classification are transformed into tales of cosmic and human creation. Group ancestors, such as the flycatching lizard, are called Ungambikula or Numbakulla, terms that are allowed to appear as proper names, by converting an adjective, which indicates that they were uncreated beings, to a noun.

"Numbakalla and the Sacred Pole" Summary

The results of storytracking the "Numbakulla and the Sacred Pole" text that appears in Eliade's *Australian Religions* will now be summarized. Eliade based his account on a section in Spencer and Gillen's *The Arunta*. The twenty sentences of Eliade's concocted account present what in Spencer and Gillen cover forty-five pages. His text is inspired most directly by two passages separated by thirty pages in Spencer and Gillen. One passage of *The Arunta* relevant to Eliade's Numbakulla account is based on Spencer's concoction of a creation account based on two accounts he recorded from Charlie Cooper in 1926. The other passage Eliade uses is the product of Baldwin Spencer's editing and conflation of two of Francis Gillen's field reports, reports recorded at a three-year interval. Thus the two relevant passages were separated not only by thirty pages but also by thirty years. Spencer constructed a chronology for Arrernte mythology and then performed creative and heavy-handed editing to provide materials for the earliest creation period. In preparation for the 1899 edition (slightly revised in the 1927 edition), Spencer conflates two of Gillen's field reports to almost wholly concoct a creation account, one that clearly contradicts the Gillen field sources. In the 1927 edition, Spencer complements this account with one based on two of his own field reports. Spencer's editorial choices are based on eliminating elements that would have placed these materials in a period other than his "early wanderings" designation. Spencer wanted an Arrernte creation story, and he created two of them. While field notes are not available for Gillen's journals, they are for Spencer's. A comparison of Spencer's journals and his field notes indicates the further extent of his creative role in interpreting what Charlie Cooper told him. Neither Spencer nor Gillen was fluent in Arrernte. Both relied extensively on aboriginal English.

The Arrernte Sources

The name of at least one Arrernte man has emerged as an actual Arrernte source of information for Spencer, and thus for Eliade and many others. The question is, Who were the Arrernte on whom Spencer and Gillen depended and what was the extent of their knowledge of their culture?

The significance of Spencer's and Gillen's lack of knowledge of the Arrernte language cannot be overstated. The limitations of aboriginal English are fully evident in Spencer's field notes. Theodor Strehlow, who knew Arrernte from childhood, had long listened to court proceedings in Alice Springs, where aborigines communicated through aboriginal English interpreters.[43] Strehlow concludes that "rarely, if ever, did an interpreter to whom I listened pass on a literal rendering of the original question; and even his summary of the answer was sometimes coloured by his own ideas. The person who had posed the first question remained at the mercy

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[43] Aboriginal English is a pidgin language, that is, one that has never been the first language of any group of speakers. It arises as a medium for communication between different speech communities. The more powerful (or "aggressor") community supplies the basis for the lexicon. The syntax and lexicon are usually highly restricted. See John W. Harris, *Northern Territory Pidgins and the Origin of Kriol*, Pacific Linguistics Series C, no. 89, (Canberra: Australian National University, 1986), and Jakelin Troy, *Australian Aboriginal Contact with the English Language in New South Wales: 1788 to 1845*, Pacific Linguistics Series B-103 (Canberra: Australian National University, 1990).

of his interpreter throughout."[44] Spencer noted in the preface to *The Arunta* that Charlie Cooper had been old enough in 1896 to be one of the leaders of the rites that he and Gillen had observed, but the implication is that at that time he did not speak aboriginal English: "He had since [i.e., since 1896] learnt to speak English well...."[45] Cooper then might have been a source of information for Spencer and Gillen in 1896, but he would have had to have spoken with them through aboriginal interpreters. The knowledge and identities of these interpreters, or how influential their role was in "translation," is not known. There is no question, however, whether these "interpreters" played a huge role in what Spencer and Gillen heard.

Which Arrernte knew aboriginal English in 1896? The motivation for learning it was primarily to communicate with English-speaking Australians. Those who needed to do so were mostly young men[46] who had left the full practice of their traditional cultures to work for wages for Australians of European descent as police boys, trackers, and stock boys. These were the Arrernte on whom Gillen relied as interpreters so that he might speak to all other Arrernte, and these were the interpreters employed by Spencer and Gillen in 1896 to speak with the leaders of the rites. These young men were, effectively, Spencer's and Gillen's principal sources of information for Arrernte culture.

But there is Charlie Cooper, reportedly a leader in the 1896 rites. By 1926 he had learned aboriginal English and could speak for himself in response to Spencer's enquiries. In the preface to *The Arunta*, Spencer identifies him as "a Paula man of the Irriakura (a plant bulb) totem."[47] In his description of the "local organization associated with totemic groups," Spencer indicates that his information came from "a Purula man named Rera-knilliga of the Irriakura totem."[48] According to Strehlow, who also know Cooper, he was a Purula man, from Ultunta (Owen Springs), whose ordinary name was Iriakura or Ireakura. His secret name was Reralautnulaka, which means "where the hair-roots bit each other", i.e., "where the hair-roots intersected." The ereakura plants grow in dense stands, and the thin hair-roots of the individual plants cross and intertwine. It is allegedly at these crossing points that the ereakura bulbs form in the ground. Reralautnalaka was corrupted by Spencer into "Rera-knillinga." Ireakura, under the name of

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[44] Theodor Strehlow, *Songs of Central Australia* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1971), p. xxviii. In another publication, *Aranda Traditions* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1947), Strehlow dramatizes the impact of rendering standard English into aboriginal English by presenting the story of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* as it would be told in aboriginal English. It begins:
    Long time ago ole feller Donkey him bin big feller boss longa country. Alright. By an' by another feller—him name ole Muckbet—bin hearem longa three feller debbil-debbil woman: them feller debbil-debbil woman bin tellem him straight out—"You'll be big feller boss yourself soon." Alright. Him bin havem lubra, ole lady Muckbet. (p. xix)

[45] Spencer and Gillen, *Arunta*, p. ix.

[46] Strehlow estimates that these "informants" were twenty-five to thirty-five years old. *Songs*, p. xxviii.

[47] Spencer and Gillen, *Arunta*, p. x.

[48] Ibid, p. 65.

Charlie Cooper, became, some time after 1911, the head tracker of Sergeant Robert Stott, or Alice Springs.[49]

There are issues regarding Cooper's significance as a source of information He came from Owen Springs and, therefore, would not have been fully knowledgeable of the rites being performed in 1896 by people from Inteera, Imanda, and Tjoritja local groups.[50] He had been a police tracker for perhaps fifteen years by the time he spoke with Spencer in 1926, thus growing accustomed to European-Australian interests and probably knowing well the information desired by them. Further Theodor Strehlow reported that Cooper told him that he contrived the information he gave Spencer as a creation story.[51] Strehlow frequently criticized Spencer. The criticism was part of Strehlow's defense of his missionary father Carl Strehlow, whose work on the Arrernte was frequently attacked by Spencer.

Only Bush

Beginning with Mircea Eliade's presentations of a specific Arrernte example "Numbakulla and the Sacred Pole," I have, through a detailed comparative analysis (one aspect of a technique I call storytracking), attempted to trace the example to actual Arrernte sources, that is, to the other side of the chasm, to Arrernte reality, a reality independent of academics. As the Arrernte sources of Arrernte information are approached, the ground quakes with the heaviness of nonaboriginal feet. The chasm seems to have disappeared in that there appears to be only one side, the side on which the scholar stands. Although one Arrernte can be named, he seems to be a pawn in the nonaboriginal game of claiming authority for recording and presenting the Arrernte. Gillen often seems to be the pawn of Spencer in this game. But we will see that even Baldwin Spencer and Carl Strehlow were pawns in the larger game being played by James G. Frazer, Andrew Lang, and others over the nature of religion and culture. There are no clear Arrernte voices. There are no Arrernte texts independent of nonaborigines.

The task of storytracking the Arrernte through the academic bush has failed to find an independent Arrernte reality (at least in any clear sense) but it has revealed much about the character of the academic bush. At every stop along the itinerary of this storytrack, the academic operation revealed has been one of concocting a description of the Arrernte, presented to the reader in more or less primary terms, drawing freely on content elements found in source materials. These concoctions are invariably heavily influenced by the generic perspectives held by the presenter.

Storytracking powerfully illustrates the paradox of the necessity, yet seeming impossibility, of the subject of study being a reality independent of the scholar. While to all surface appearances the textual presentations considered are descriptions of a real and independent culture, storytracking has shown that in these text presentations the scholar and subject become

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[49] Strehlow, *Songs*, pp. xxix-xxx.

[50] Se Strehlow's comments in *Songs*, p. xxix.

[51] See Theodor Strehlow, "Geography and the Totemic Landscape in Central Australia," in *Australian Aboriginal Anthropology*, edited by Ronald M. Berndt (Perth: University of Western Australian Press, 1970), pp 138-39, n. 25.

enmeshed and the subject is finally extensively dependent on the scholar's presentation. Further analysis is necessary.

6: Mother Earth: An American Myth[52]

> Once the world was all water, and God lived alone; he was lonesome, he had no place to put his foot; so he scratched the sand up from the bottom, and made the land and he made rocks, and he made trees, and he made man, and the man was winged and could go anywhere. The man was lonesome, and God made a woman. They ate fish from the water, and God made the deer and other animals, and he sent the man to hunt, and told the woman to cook the meat and to dress the skins. Many more men and women grew up, and they lived on the banks of the great river whose waters were full of salmon. The mountains contained much game, and there were buffalo on the plains. There were so many people that the stronger ones sometimes oppressed the weak and drove them from the best fisheries, which they claimed as their own. They fought, and nearly all were killed, and their bones are to be seen in the sand hills yet. God was very angry and he took away their wings and commanded that the lands and fisheries should be common to all who lived upon them. That they were never to be marked off or divided, but that the people should enjoy the fruits that God planted in the land and the animals that lived upon it, and the fishes in the water. God said he was the father, and the earth was the mother of mankind; that nature was the law; that the animals and fish and plants obeyed nature, and that man only was sinful. This is the old law. (MacMurray 1887:247-48)

This story was told in the late nineteenth century by a Sahaptin speaking native American named Smohalla who lived in the state of Washington. He did not recognize the territory in which he lived by the name "Washington." Neither did he recognize the rights to the land that Americans of European ancestry claimed—as they occupied his land, forcing him to live as an outlaw. Nor would he have recognized the word *myth* by which his story of the creation and history of his world would be called by them. The word *myth* has long been a problem for me in my study of native American cultures. I dare not tell native Americans that I consider their stories to be myths, for they know that in standard English usage myth denotes the fictitious, the unscientific, the false. Native Americans do not want their stories to be thought of as false, nor do they appreciate others claiming that their beliefs are unfounded. In recognition of and respect for Smohalla and many other native Americans, I have tried to use the word *myth* sparingly, if at all. When I attempt to use it, I find myself spending more time and effort clarifying and defending what I mean than I do using the word in service to the study and appreciation of stories like the one told by Smohalla. I find the word story acceptable. It can be used along with descriptive adjectives to clarify story type. Though often misleading, the use of the word myth persists.

Myth has a European etymology, rooted in the Greek *muthos* meaning "word" or "speech" about the gods and supernaturals. The classic Greek stories, as well as the ancient and sacred stories of the peoples of Asia, Africa, Melanesia, and the Americas, have been most commonly designated as myths by Westerners. The term myth may have a variety of meanings: it may be

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[52] Originally "Mother Earth: An American Myth." In *The Invented Indian: Cultural Fictions and Government Policies*.   Edited by James A. Clifton. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1990, pp. 129-43

thought of as a true story or as foundational underpinning of a society. Yet, the use of the word nearly always conveys a qualitative, even emotional, judgment. For many, referring to a story as a myth often bestows a special quality upon it—a spirituality, a primordiality, even a romanticism.

Curiously, we contemporary Westerners have difficulty using the term *myth* in a positive sense when referring to anything in our own culture. When applied to our own culture, the attributes of myth tend to invert. We seek to dispel our myths and to chastise those among us who believe in myths as being not of this age. Should a contemporary Westerner believe in myths, he or she is charged with harboring a naive romanticism for the ancient past or indulging in a curious folk wisdom based on unscientific premises, or holding outright fallacious beliefs.

Since those whose stories we call myths do not seem to care for the term, I am curious as to why Westerners persist in using it. Perhaps the study of myth might best be focused upon those who use it—American and European writers, who reflect and influence Western culture to a significant degree.

I will examine a lineage of Western writers who have considered the Mother Earth figure as a native American goddess. From their writing a story of Mother Earth emerges, a story attributed to native Americans but actually created by the writers themselves.

The story of Mother Earth begins almost concurrently with the story told by Smohalla in 1885, and a remarkable connection exists between the two. According to Smohalla's story, "God said he was the father, and the earth was the mother of mankind," but he went on to say,

> Those who cut up the lands or sign papers for lands will be defrauded of their rights, and will be punished by God's anger…

> It is not a good law that would take my people away from me to make them sin against the laws of God. You ask me to plough the ground? Shall I take a knife and tear my mother's bosom? Then when I die she will not take me to her bosom to rest.

> You ask me to dig for stone! Shall I dig under her skin for her bones? Then when I die I can not enter her body to be born again.

> You ask me to cut grass and make hay and sell it, and be rich like white men, but how dare I cut off my mother's hair?

> It is a bad law and my people shall not obey it. I want my people to stay with me here. All the dead men will come to life again; their spirits will come to their bodies again. We must wait here, in the homes of our fathers, and be ready to meet them in the bosom of our mother. (MacMurray 1887: 247-8)

This statement attributed to Smohalla has been often and widely quoted. Moreover, it has served as the principal example scholars have used to demonstrate the native American belief in the goddess Mother Earth. We may begin our analysis of the story of Mother Earth with an excerpt from the writings of Edward B. Tylor, sometimes credited as the father of modern anthropology. In his classic book *Primitive Culture*, published in London in 1873, Tylor proclaimed that: "The idea of the Earth as a mother is more simple and obvious, and no doubt for that reason more common in the World, than the idea of the Heaven as a father. Among the

native races of America the Earth-mother is one of the great personages of mythology" (Tylor 1873: volume 1, 326). However, Tylor cited only three insignificant examples of its uses. These citations are therefore of little consequence in reporting major beliefs of native Americans.

Within a decade, Hubert Bancroft, undoubtedly influenced by Tylor, affirmed the same view in his American publication *The Native Races* (1882). He wrote, "It seems long ago and often to have come into men's minds that the over-arching heaven or something there and the all-producing earth are, as it were a father and mother to all living creatures" (Bancroft 1882: volume 3, 121).

Tylor's and Bancroft's views of the ancient motherhood of the earth received a fuller and more concrete expression in Smohalla's later statement in 1885. Shortly after he recited his story, two ethnologists, Albert Gatschet and James Mooney, who were studying the cultures of the Washington-Oregon area, used Smohalla's statement to exemplify a Mother Earth theology they believed to be common to all native Americans. These were the first of many such uses of Smohalla's statement.

In 1890, Albert S. Gatschet, in an ethnography of the Klamath of southern Oregon, waxed poetic on the native belief in the earth as mother.

> Among all nations of the world we find the idea, which is real as well as poetical, that the Earth is our common mother. "She is dealing out her bountiful gifts to her children, the human beings, without envy or restraint, in the shape of corn, fruits, and esculent roots. Her eyes are the lakes and ponds disseminated over the green surface of the plains, her breasts are the hills and hillocks; and the rivulets and brooks irrigating the valleys are the milk flowing from her breasts." [Gatschet did not indicate the source of this quotation.]

> The Indian Smúxale [Smohalla] at Priest Rapids, on Middle Columbia River, and his numerous followers, called the "Dreamers," from the implicit faith these Sahaptin sectarians place in dreams, dissuade their adherents from tilling the ground, as the white man does; "for it is a sin to wound or cut, tear up or scratch our common mother by agricultural pursuits; she will revenge herself on the whites and on the Indians following their example by opening her bosom and engulfing such malefactors by their misdeeds." [Again, no source of the quotation is given.]

> The Earth is regarded by these Indians as a mysterious, shadowy power of incalculable energies and influences, rather mischievous and wicked than beneficial to mankind. The Indians ascribe anger and other passions to it, but never personify it in clearer outlines than the ancients did their *'Epa* or *Tellus*. (Gatschet 1890: xciii-xcii)

Although Gatschet's comments on the Indian belief in Mother Earth have had minimal popular effect because they have remained hidden away in a little-read book, they almost certainly influenced James Mooney, who in 1896, just six years later, published a major study, "The Ghost Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890." His work became a widely read classic. In it Mooney not only quoted Smohalla's statement as a chapter epigraph, but he used the statement to exemplify the idea that:

> The earth is the mother of all created things lies at the base, not only of the Smohalla religion, but of the theology of the Indian tribes generally and of primitive races all over the world…. In the Indian mind the corn, fruits, and edible roots are the gifts which the earth-mother gives freely to her children. Lakes and ponds are her eyes, hills are her breasts, and streams are the milk flowing from her breasts. Earthquakes and underground noises are signs of her displeasure at the wrongdoings of her children. Especially are the malarial fevers, which often followed extensive disturbance of the surface by excavation or otherwise, held to be direct punishment for the crime of lacerating her bosom. (Mooney 1896:721)

Mooney's quotation of Smohalla and his romantically colorful description of the Mother Earth theology, which he declared to be common to "primitive races all over the world," stimulated the explosion of literature about Mother Earth that began at the turn of the twentieth century and has yet to subside.

Such eminent scholars and well-known authors as Andrew Lang, Albrecht Dieterich, Sir James George Frazer, George B. Grinnell, and Hartley Burr Alexander held the view that Mother Earth is one of the great deities of native Americans. Yet only a few examples from tribal cultures in North America were cited as evidence for the statements made by these writers. None of these citations was as significant as nor has had the influence of the statement attributed to Smohalla. By the middle of the twentieth century, the statement had come to be a favorite used by the late eminent historian of religion, Mircea Eliade, in his discussion of Mother Earth. In his classic *Patterns of Comparative Religion* (1958), Eliade uses the Smohalla source to exemplify Mother Earth as she exists in the history of religions.

> Before becoming a mother goddess, or divinity of fertility, the earth presented itself to men as a Mother, *Tellus Mater*. The later growth of agricultural cults, forming a gradually clearer and clearer notion of a Great Goddess of vegetation and harvesting, finally destroyed all trace of the Earth-Mother. In Greece, the place of Gaia was taken by Demeter. However, certain ancient ethnological documents reveal relics of the old worship of the Earth-Mother, Smohalla, an Indian prophet of the Umatilla tribe, forbade his followers to dig the earth, for, he said, it is a sin to wound or cut, tear or scratch our common mother by the labours of farming. "You ask me to plough the ground completing the famous statement"… Such a mystical devotion to the Earth-Mother is not an isolated instance. (Eliade 1958: 245-6)

In Eliade's view, Mother Earth is an ancient goddess, preexisting the rise of mother goddesses and fertility goddesses who replaced her during the rise of agricultural cults. Smohalla's statement, found in "ancient ethnological documents," is understood by Eliade as a relic of this "old worship." Although when he quotes Smohalla in his discussion of "Mother Earth and the Cosmic Hierogamies" in his book *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, Eliade recognizes the recentness of the statement, he still maintains that the concept came from the very distant past.

> Those words [of Smohalla] were spoken not more than half a century ago. But they come to us from very distant ages. The emotion that we feel when we hear them is our response to what they evoke with their wonderful freshness and spontaneity—the

> primordial image of the Earth-Mother. It is an image that we find everywhere in the world, in countless forms and varieties. (Eliade 1957:155)

In the most recent generation in this literary lineage, the latest dependence on Smohalla's statement comes from the noted Swedish authority on native American religions, Åke Hultkrantz. His views of Mother Earth appear in his book (1979) and an essay on the native North American Goddess herself (1983). Hultkrantz understands Mother Earth to be a deity of great antiquity. He writes:

> It is an indisputable fact that the concept of the earth goddess has grown strongest among the cultivating peoples…. Her origins may have been in the old hunting culture which ranged all through America until about 2000 B.C. and was maintained by many tribes until the last decades of the nineteenth century. Far away from agricultural peoples lived, in the state of Washington, those Sahaptin Indians whose chief in the 1880s was the dreamer Smohalla. [Hultkrantz quotes the famed statement here.] As elsewhere, the earth deity is here represented as animatistic, at one with her substratum and yet an intimately experienced personal being. Many hunting tribes in North America manifest the same primitive belief in "our mother," "Mother Earth." (Hultkrantz 1979:54)

Even in this bare outline of writings on Mother Earth we find evidence of a highly interesting story. For even though Smohalla's remarks clearly speak to a specific crisis experienced by native peoples in that region during the last half of the nineteenth century, they have been used again and again to document not only the religious beliefs of Smohalla, the theology of the Wanapum and other Sahaptin speakers, and the peoples native to North America or all of the Americas, but of "primitive' peoples the world over. Moreover, the statement has been used to document beliefs not only during Smohalla's lifetime but of hunting peoples some millennia ago. The resulting Mother Earth story is therefore truly an Amazing Story.

Although Tylor stated that "among the native races of America the Earth-mother is one of the great personages of mythology," the Mother Earth story that seems most mythic is the one Europeans and Americans have created in their writings based on a statement attributed to Smohalla. Let me briefly tell this European-American Mother Earth story.

> Long, long ago there were hunting peoples who ranged throughout the world. Some of them lived in that landscape we now know as the Americas. Being peoples of so long ago, at such an early stage of development, they were very primitive. Their material cultures were undeveloped as were their mental capacities. Because of the simplicity of their minds they could not yet comprehend the complex idea of the heaven as a father, they could only conceive of the simpler idea of the earth as a mother. They could recognize parts of her body in the landscape in which they walked. The hills and hillocks were her breasts, the rivulets and brooks were the milk flowing from her breasts. The ponds and lakes were her eyes. From her body she gave people their nourishment; roots, fruits, and plants. She took people back into her body upon their deaths.

> As time went on some of these peoples developed more advanced cultures, though compared to us they remained primitive; and eventually the idea dawned that the sky

was a father and they came to realize that the sky, as father, and the earth, as a mother, came together as progenitors of all life.

Much, much later, though still long, long ago, as some of these people continued to develop, they finally discovered agriculture and agricultural cults arose among them. With this development the earth mother was replaced by fertility goddesses and mother goddesses who were separate from the earth itself.

Some of these ideas were known to our ancient ancestors who lived in Greece and wrote them down. These writings have been passed down to us. In this way our ancient ancestors provided us with an understanding of all of the forms that cultures and religions take as they are developing. We are now in the fullest and most advanced stage of development.

Since those archaic times many peoples and cultures developed as we have, but some did not. They remained primitive while we became civilized. Even today there are primitive people who speak to us of the beliefs of the archaic peoples of millennia ago. Just a century ago, shortly after Washington became a state in North America, a man there spoke of the belief in Mother Earth as it existed among ancient hunters. His name was Smohalla.

This story is amazing in several respects. During the last 100 years it has gradually developed in the Writings of some of our most eminent scholars, specialists in the study of culture. Smohalla's single statement provides almost the only cited evidence on which to base the story. Most remarkably, the story is not about native American beliefs at all; it is not even about native Americans. If it were, a great many more native American examples from their cultures would be present. Standard academic procedure used to document the presence of a trait among any culture or culture group requires the exhaustive analysis of the available data. In the case of the study of Mother Earth as one of the great goddesses in the mythology of North America, this basic academic requirement clearly was not done by any one of these writers in the lineage outlined above. The questions that come most immediately to mind are: Do these writers' views about Mother Earth accurately represent native American beliefs? What were these scholars really writing about? A little reflection on these writings and especially on the use made of the Smohalla's alleged statement suggests that historical and ethnographic accuracy were largely irrelevant to the Mother Earth story and in fact would lead us away from what is important about it. We must consider both the Mother Earth story as it emerged through European and American writings and the one told by Smohalla as myths. This must be so because, curiously, both versions are stories told about the Other.

At the time Smohalla told his story, he was one of only a few hundred native Americans in the Washington-Oregon area still holding out against American plans to confine Indians to reservations. Throughout Smohalla's lifetime there had been pressures to radically transform native ways of life. Early in the nineteenth century trappers and missionaries came into the area. Their success encouraged settlers to seek land in the Pacific Northwest. By midcentury, the U.S. government procured treaties that effectively removed the Indians from lands and resources most desirable to them. Statehood for Washington and Oregon followed. Reservation lands were reduced so that gold mining, lumbering, farming, and ranching could expand. Any

real hope held by the native peoples that they might retain their traditional way of life was destroyed when Chief Joseph was captured in 1877. Nonetheless, Smohalla and his followers persisted in attempting to live according to the old ways. They dreamed of the time when the Americans would be destroyed and past ways could be restored to the Indians. Smohalla and his followers practiced a ritual born of and shaped by this crisis. They met in a churchlike building and included obvious Christian ritual elements in their meetings. The story he told in 1885 must be viewed against this historical backdrop.

Smohalla's story tells of the creation of a world by a god who, in his loneliness, scratched sand from the bottom of the water that covered the world. From this sand he made the land. This god created human beings and furnished the world abundantly with plants, animals, and fish. He gave humans wings so they could travel wherever they liked. But many people came to inhabit the land, and the stronger oppressed the weaker. They drove the weaker from favorite lands and fisheries, killing almost all of them. This angered the god and "he took away their wings and commanded that the lands and fisheries should be common to all who lived upon them. That they were never to be marked off or divided."

Though this story is set in the time of creation, it is clearly a story about the oppression that Smohalla and the Indians suffered at the hands of American settlers and government authorities. It directly reflects the situation at the time of the storytelling. Not only does it make their oppression meaningful by incorporating it into the story of creation, but it also offers the hope that, as in the story, God will eventually punish the oppressors and command that the lands and fisheries be common to all.

The European-American story of Mother Earth must also be seen in its historical and cultural context. Beginning as early as the first voyage of Columbus in 1492, the European-Christian world faced constant challenges to its most basic beliefs concerning the shape and extent of the world and nature of humankind. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, with the rise of anthropology and comparative studies of culture and religion, thinkers and writers have been challenged to comprehend patterns, themes, and ideas that would enable them not only to understand the hundreds of newly emerging or discovered cultures but also to interpret them in Western terms.

Smohalla lived in a world collapsing from the unwelcome presence of others. Europeans and Americans, in their turn, found their concepts and knowledge of the world threatened by their encounters with strange and exotic peoples who were unlike themselves.

The story of Mother Earth as told by Europeans and Americans is a story of the development of human religiosity and culture. It is a story of the evolution of religious structures and forms, a story enriched by the patterns and categories derived from Western antiquity. It is a story of society's growth from the simple to the complex, from the primitive to the civilized, from a nonliterate to a literate culture. It is a story in which native Americans, by virtue of the statement made by Smohalla in 1885, could be placed at a very early stage of cultural and religious development. The story of Mother Earth helps resolve the crises of Western worldview by providing it a basis on which to incorporate the worldview of these Others.

Surprisingly, when the two stories are compared, they share more than might at first be expected. Both stories respond to a situation of encountering some "others." Both expand and develop an existing view of the world so that those others might be understood in such a way as to make the relationship with them meaningful, if not manageable. Both respond creatively to an encounter characterized by dominance and oppression. It is clear that both stories serve the most basic needs of the story creators and tellers. And it is clear that both articulate foundational values—unquestionable assumptions and perspectives that underlie all that is seen and done.

According to these observations I would suggest that myth should be thought of as the story on which truth is based, rather than thinking of myth as a true story. Myths are stories that articulate that which is itself not subject to verification or validation. This is a logical definition of myth, positing that in questions of truth there must be some base on which truth-judgments are made. If one could isolate that base, it would necessarily not be subject to a demand for validation. For if it were, another unquestionable base would have to be posited. If this base for truth is called *myth*, we could not ask if myth was a true story. We would assume rather that myth is the foundation on which truth is based. Given this view of myth, we may understand why myths are set in the primordium. This kind of story has nothing to do with the historical past. The temporal setting of "in the beginning," or "long, long ago" marks the mythic quality of the story—the quality of articulating that which is beyond question most fundamental.

It is commonly thought that myths provide for humans a vehicle by which they may return to the paradisiacal conditions of primordiality, to be refreshed in the pristine conditions of the newly created. Perhaps a complement to this view is to understand that myths function as a means by which human beings can articulate that which is most fundamental to them through the revision and re-creation of their stories, a kind of eternal renewal. Rather than returning to the primordial era of creation, the condition of primordiality may be carried along through history firmly grounding that which, in the present, is deemed by a people to be most fundamental, to be beyond doubt. Myth thereby serves as creative means of effectively responding to crises and change while maintaining tradition and identity. The word *return* suggests a connection between the primordial setting, which is essentially a mythic marker in a narrative, and history—a return in time to the beginning, a reversal or annihilation of history. I do not think history is reversed or destroyed in myth; rather the experiences of history are digested and recreated through the ongoing mythic process of producing newly vitalized articulations of that which is most fundamental to any people.

It is because of mythic qualities that the validity of neither story we have considered is subject to question. Smohalla's story has obvious Christian influence and is clearly shaped, if not wholly formed, to meet the crisis situation being experienced. But it would be senseless to argue that the story could not possibly be correct in its assertion about the creation, because it can be historically documented that the story was formulated in the nineteenth century. From the point of view of Smohalla and his followers, this story articulates the grounds upon which they can in a crisis retain any meaning in life, which means that their very lives depend upon the story.

Likewise, in terms of the Mother Earth story that emerges from European and American writings, although our first question is whether or not they are historically and ethnographically accurate, it is in one sense an inappropriate question. Were these writings primarily scholarly in character, the question would be appropriate, but they are mythic. To even suggest that Mother Earth might not have existed in the religious traditions of native Americans or other tribal peoples throughout the World constitutes heresy. It challenges the very foundations of one of our important beliefs of the world. For Westerners, Mother Earth is not a hypothesis: She is a figure whose existence, structure, and character is the basis on which many of the disparate and diffuse cultures cohere. She is of our myth; she is primordial; and her story is not subject to questions of historical or ethnographic accuracy.

While it is clear that those writers who created the theology of Mother Earth had no ill intent toward native Americans (indeed, there is abundant evidence that the opposite was often true), they nonetheless participated in what can only be termed a logic of dominance and conquest. Native Americans have been forced to participate in this same logic. This may seem harsh, but the fact cannot be ignored.

In the story told by Smohalla, the message of dominance is clear. The story was told in the midst of a history of oppression and is about oppression. The Indians are oppressed, and Americans are the oppressors.

In the European-American story of Mother Earth the logic of dominance appears under the rubric of the dichotomy between primitive and civilized. Here the theme of dominance may be more subtle, but it is also more sinister.

Each taken in the context of its own historical background, both stories show the creativity not only of human, but of the genre and process I am identifying as myth. These stories not only share a common history, they have a common landscape and characters. The characters are not fictitious imaginings, but living human beings. Seen in this light, this logic of dominance, oppression, and conquest is not confined to the innocence of interesting stories idly told. Rather, these stories, especially the European-American Mother Earth story, articulate unquestionable principles and assumptions that have been fundamental to a long history of U.S. government policy towards Indians (characterized at best as paternalism), to a long history of missionization (that denied the religious freedom of native Americans), and to the military and legal enforcement of the removal of native Americans from the lands they occupied when they first came under American jurisdiction. This mythology has articulated the categories and theories that have also shaped the academic study of native Americans and more broadly the religions of others. It must be acknowledged that a logic of domination and conquest has motivated and shaped even this supposedly detached and objective study.

This last point is conclusively demonstrated by Anne Doueihi in her article "Trickster: On Inhabiting the Space Between Discourse and Story" (1984). She focuses on a century of academic study of native American stories in which the protagonist is a trickster, a fool, a buffoon. These stories include Coyote (popularized in the "Coyote and Roadrunner" cartoon), Raven, Raccoon, Spider, and many others. For a century, Western scholarship has posited a common figure as appearing in all of these stories. They called this figure Trickster. The intellectual problem has been to explain how Trickster can be both wise and foolish; a player of

malicious tricks as well as a hero; the epitome of rudeness, yet considered sacred. The following is Doueihi's startling conclusion to a review of twentieth century scholarship on the Trickster:

> The traditional discourse about Trickster is a discourse which reflects a cultural bias; by imposing on Indian culture its own frame of concern, Western culture turns the discourse about Trickster into a discourse by Western culture about Western culture, with Trickster serving only in a nominal function so that the discussion may begin. This is a form of domination and repression of which any discourse about any "Other" must be guilty unless that discourse is self-questioning, that is, unless it involves a questioning of the very language it itself uses and a questioning of the discourse of which that language is a part. (Doueihi 1984: 297)

Mother Earth and Trickster both owe their existence to a logic of conquest and dominance; they are characters in a mythology of dominance, in "a discourse by Western culture about Western culture." In a sense, so too does the modern use of the word myth, for in its principal use as a category by which to understand the Other and in our tendency to characterize myth as archaic, it participates in the logic of domination. The advice of Doueihi is well put. In a modern pluralist world, a world obviously shaped by the logic of conquest and dominance, it is essential that the language used in discourse about every Other be analyzed. The word *myth* has become increasingly important to this discourse, and, in many of its uses and implications, it has not escaped the logic of dominance. Western scholars and writers, in their study of myth and in their creation of such figures as Trickster and Mother Earth, have been creating their own mythology. Yet they have steadfastly refused to apply the category "myth" to their own work.

Perhaps the simplest way to avoid the logic of conquest and dominance is to apply the categories usually reserved for dealing with Others also to the task of understanding ourselves. This is what I have attempted to do, both in the way I have suggested the term *myth* be understood and in viewing as myth a lineage of Western writings on the figure Mother Earth.

Now, throwing caution to the wind, risking serious emotional reprisals, knowingly committing the act of heresy, I ask the question: Were the European and American writers correct in a historical and ethnographic sense? There are many rich and wonderful female figures known in native American stories. Some are related to the earth, but most are not. Almost none are understood as the earth personified, and those who approach this do not have a developed story tradition or ritual presence. This should not be surprising, since there were hundreds of distinct native peoples in North America, each with a different language, religion, and culture. How could anyone expect to find a goddess or figure of any kind common to all in such diversity?

While in terms of the story of Mother Earth this observation is insignificant, it is important to show conclusively that Mother Earth in North America is of the mythology of creative encounters, not a historical and ethnographic reality to native North Americans. But upon applying the term myth to our own mentors, some complex questions arise. These scholars have been authoritative because they were believed to have acquired their knowledge of Others through careful observation, and to have based their conclusions on plentiful and carefully documented sources. What is shown in the case of Mother Earth is that no North

American evidence exists. Mother Earth emerges not from ethnographic documentation but from an imaginative construction stimulated by encounter. What scholars have been writing about was not the Other at all, but about their own views of human history.

As a result, the general populace and most contemporary Indians, as well as scholars, now accepts without question Mother Earth as a historical and ethnographic fact in native North America and throughout the world. This raises the most fundamental questions about what constitutes responsible scholarship. What is the difference between scholarship and mythmaking, between fact and fiction? Is there a connection between some styles of scholarship and writing, some ways of seeing the Other, and oppressive political and economic perspectives? Is not the formulation of self-expression in the guise of stating knowledge about some Other a powerful form of dominating them? Is this activity not somehow participating in the political, social, and economic oppression of the Other while being presented as objective observations motivated only by a humanistic interest?

A final issue is perhaps most remarkable. Among native Americans today there is much evidence of a deep and abiding belief in a figure they identify by the name Mother Earth. She is often paired with Father Sky, the Great Spirit, or the Creator. Examination of the history of this figure shows that she arose in the process of the formation of the pan-Indian or pantribal alliance among native Americans who, in this century, have increasingly forged a common identity in the face of a common experience of oppression and loss. As the Indian peoples lost the land base on which their various group identities depended, the Mother Earth figure grew in importance among them.

What seems to have happened is that the oppressed native Americans have appropriated the mythology of the oppressors. Indians acquired what they knew to be expected of them, a belief in a figure known as Mother Earth. But, as often happens with the oppressed, the Indians transformed the Mother Earth concept through their own creative mythic processes to articulate for them what was most fundamental; that has been essential to the survival of their separate identity as Indians even without tribal lands, without continuing political institutions or shared images and meanings, and without traditional languages.

Mother Earth arose, in part, among Western writers so that native Americans could be understood and somehow likened to European-Americans. By identifying Mother Earth as a major figure in Indian mythology, these writers were able to place native Americans in a schema of the evolution of cultures and religions in which those representatives of Western civilization stood at the top. In contrast, Indians in recent decades have, through their appropriation of Mother Earth, attached to her the qualities that articulate distinctively "Indian" in contrast and clearly superior to "white" American, attributes. Indians are of the earth (specifically of the American soil); they care for and nurture Mother Earth, who in turn cares for and nurtures them. They do not plow or mine, tear, waste, or desecrate the earth as they see "white" Americans doing. Thus, Mother Earth helps Indians retain their identity, their pride and dignity; even a sense of superiority. By holding Mother Earth as their goddess, native Americans have articulated what is most distinctively Indian, and they have done so by appropriating and transforming the myth of their oppressors.

Mother Earth, as she currently exists in Indian religions, is primordial, a creator, a nurturer, a bona fide goddess in every sense of the word, even though we may understand that historically her origins are not only recent, but doubtless owe much to the creative encounter with Americans whose heritage is Europe.

7: Creative Encounter Stories

In my studies of the coordination dynamics[53] of self-adjusting complex networks including everything from neurological functions to complex societies, I have been fascinated and intrigued by the identification of the importance of randomness and metastabilities, the presence of opposing forces that cannot be simply and rationally or objectively resolved. We tend to live in a world where it seems important to eliminate the random and to resolve the metastabilities. We enter labs, or academic institutions, that we might have a controlled environment allowing us to objectively understand something; we attempt to eliminate the random and accidental. Yet, labs, as academies, are, by design, apart from our subjects of interest.[54]

I have always been fascinated by how the occurrence of seemingly random factors often has an overwhelming impact in shaping, and especially distinguishing, history and people. It is these accidentals, these confoundments, that I believe are the basis of interest and drama and creativity and innovation. Most interesting to me is how the people who live the stories recognize and respond to the presence of these unexpecteds, these surprises. In his life-long study of abduction, hypothetic inference, Charles Sanders Peirce understood the presence of "surprise," notably not objectively measurable but felt, that gives rise to something new, advancing knowledge and creativity.

Encounters of most any kind provide the highest probability for creativity and this is simply because difference is the fundamental condition of encounter. Following are two brief stories of creative encounters that hinge on the presence of the unexpected and unpredictable yet have a remarkable reach in their subsequent influence on the course of the world.

Tecumseh and General Harrison[55]

This story focuses on the early-nineteenth-century encounter of two powerful figures-General William Henry Harrison, then governor of the Indiana Territory, and the Shawnee warrior and native spokesman and leader Tecumseh.[56] The political and historical background to their meeting is long and complicated, but the issue that divided them, yet brought them to encounter, may be summarized in a single word, land. Land had been the central issue since the time the first European placed his foot firmly and irretrievably upon this continent. Story after

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[53] Coordination dynamics is a remarkable and important, yet to humanists little known, field. See J. A. Scott Kelso and David A. Engstrøm,

[54] We might call them "profane" which means "outside the church." In the academic study of religion this designation is of particular interest since I believe that the greatest challenge to having an academic study of religion it to abide by a moral principle that it be strictly profane, that is, not shaped by influence from the church (not based on some religious belief no matter how tacit and covert.

[55] This story was originally published as part of my article "'And he took away their wings': Story and History in American Folk Traditions" In *Native American Religious Action*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1987, pp. 76-88.

[56] For a full bibliography to the history of Tecumseh's encounter with Harrison as well as the story traditions that are associated with it, see Sam Gill, *Mother Earth: An American Story* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), chap. 2.

story might be told to document the shift of land from Native Americans to European-Americans, and in the early nineteenth century the land story came to focus on the real estate bordering the Wabash River in what we now know as Indiana. By treaty with various Indian chiefs in 1805 prime land along the river was opened to settlement. Tecumseh, who was not a part of these treaty negotiations, insisted on his right to the land under the principle he so often and so clearly stated; that the land belonged to no single Indian or tribe, but rather, if it could be said to be owned at all, it belonged in common to all Indian peoples and therefore could not be sold without the consent of all Indian peoples. Throughout the first decade of the nineteenth century Tecumseh traveled constantly and widely among the tribes in an attempt to form an alliance among them to repel the advancement of American settlement. The Wabash was the last stand east of the Mississippi and south of the Great Lakes.

Harrison was an ambitious man. Indeed, his ambitions led him to the presidency. As governor of the territory and administrator of Indian Affairs, he was personally involved in treaty negotiations for lands. Tecumseh's refusal to vacate the land and the threat of the alliance that he was forming disturbed Harrison. in his efforts to resolve the matter, Harrison invited Tecumseh to meet with him in Vincennes, the territorial capital. The meeting was set for mid-August, 1810.

Accompanied by three hundred painted warriors floating down the river in eighty canoes, Tecumseh made a grand entrance at Vincennes. He camped just outside the town and spent several days preparing for the meeting with the governor. Meanwhile, Harrison, who had built a governor's mansion called Grouseland, prepared it for the meetings. He arranged seating on the portico of the mansion and invited dignitaries to be present during the meetings. On August 14 Tecumseh, accompanied by a number of armed warriors, approached the mansion. After some negotiations regarding the physical arrangements for the meeting, opening speeches were made by Tecumseh and Harrison. They continued to meet until August 21.

No agreements were made. Harrison and Tecumseh not only spoke different languages, they lived in different worlds. They held conceptions of land and land use whose only point in common was the physical land itself. This meeting, though colorful, was unremarkable and would not seem to be of interest to us now. But the meeting became the setting for a story; a story that appeared in several versions; a story that was told widely throughout a good portion of the nineteenth century; a story that has played a surprising role in the history of scholarship; a story that has made its mark on the history of Native American religions. I'll get to these things, but first the story.

One version of the story appeared in Henry Rowe Schoolcraft's Travels in the Central Portions of the Mississippi Valley. Describing the character of Tecumseh, Schoolcraft recounted the story.

> The spirit and fearless energy of this man's character shone throughout his actions. In one of the councils held by General Harrison with the Indians at Vincennes, previous to the commencement of hostilities in 1811, in which Tecumseh was present, this chief, on concluding a long and animated speech, found himself unprovided with a seat. When this neglect was observed, General Harrison directed a chair to be placed for him, and requested him to sit down. "Your father," said the interpreter, "requests you to take a

chair." "My father!" replied the haughty chief, "the Sun is my father, and the Earth is my mother, and on her bosom I will repose." So saying he sat down suddenly, in the Indian manner.[57]

I have located nearly thirty published and manuscript accounts of this story. They may be sorted into several clearly distinguishable versions. All, however, contain a statement attributed to Tecumseh and presented as an exact quotation: "The earth is my mother and on her bosom I will repose."

I want to consider this story in light of what we can document as history so that we might understand more fully the dynamic interrelationship of story and history. Important to our consideration is that the story is not an Indian story; it is a story about an Indian.

Notably, the first published appearance of the story was in 1821 in the National Recorder, followed by the account published by Schoolcraft in 1825. Evidence suggests the story was widely told in Indiana when Schoolcraft visited there in 1821. When the eyewitness and historical accounts of the meeting are considered, those that appear before the 1830s do not make the slightest allusion to the famed statement of Tecumseh. Even after that date there is commonly only a brief reference to the statement among the historical accounts. In the histories the basic concern with the initial meeting at Vincennes is with the negotiation and political maneuvering of the parties present. The published stories of Tecumseh's remark to Harrison reflect and evidence what I would call a folkloric strain. These story accounts do not consider to any extent the historical details of the meeting, yet they invariably cite the meeting as the historical setting for the story. They invariably tell the story to demonstrate the character of Tecumseh.

Weighing all available materials, I have concluded that there is absolutely no documentation of any kind for Tecumseh having made the statement about his desire to repose upon the bosom of his mother, the earth. Upon a careful review of the many speeches of Tecumseh that have survived and of what is known of Shawnee religion and culture at the time, I have further concluded that there is very little possibility that Tecumseh would have held the notion of earth-sky parentage either in a theological or metaphorical sense. Nothing remotely associated with it can be found in any of these historical materials.

What then accounts for the genesis of the story? What was the function and significance of the story? We need consider more about Tecumseh and the history of the Indian-white affair.

After Tecumseh met with Harrison in 1810, he immediately left for a long journey among southeastern tribes to continue his efforts at developing an Indian alliance. Harrison, doubtless encouraged by Tecumseh's absence, engaged the Indians at Tippecanoe in the battle for which he became so famous. Upon his return Tecumseh saw that the Indian cause was lost unless, through alliance with the British, the Indians could recover the territory from the Americans. Therefore, Tecumseh and other Indians played an active role in the War of 1812. During these

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[57] Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, *Travels in the Central Portions of the Mississippi Valley: Comprising Observations on Its Mineral, Geography, Internal Resources, Aboriginal Population* (New York: Collins & Hanney, 1825), pp. 144-45.

many campaigns, Tecumseh proved his character, his military genius, his skill at leadership, his courage and bravery in battle.

In 1813, in battle against his old adversary Harrison, Tecumseh was killed. His body was never found. The mystery of his death accented a fascination that grew around Tecumseh. He was quickly and widely lauded as a noble Indian, a great leader and eloquent spokesman for peoples who had become landless and downtrodden.

At this particular moment in this history of conflict we glimpse something vital to human life: the dynamic process in which history engages the imagination driven toward the creation of meaning through the formation of story, a story expressible by that most magical of all human capacities, the power of the spoken word. The story of Tecumseh is an American story, and examining the interrelationships between history and story reveals to us something of our own character.

What is important is how the Harrison-Tecumseh story functions in the context of history. It reflects and effects a change in the image held of Indians, a change from an image of them as a savage people so void of rights and brains that their lands may be taken from them for a token payment or by military force, to an image of them as noble people of natural dignity, honor, courage, leadership, and eloquence. The story reflects, and doubtless helped to effect, a change in attitude toward native peoples; a change easily made once these peoples were either dead or without any claims to the coveted American lands. To appreciate the nobility of Indians by lauding the characters of a few outstanding leaders and figures was widespread in America in oral traditions widely told after the War of 1812, and in literary accounts beginning in the third decade of the nineteenth century and persisting for decades.

The story is told as history by its association with a historical event and historical figures, and therefore it is validated and authenticated. Yet, knowing that the story is not historically factual, we may see that the story actually serves to interpret history. The story corrects history by attuning past events to perceptions and sensitivities current to the time of the storytelling. The story makes history by presenting a new and different image of Indians, authenticated by its documentation in a past event. No longer bloodthirsty savages murdering innocent settler families, the Indians become figures capable of nobility, dignity, intelligence, and humanity, traits based on a simple and natural primitiveness, traits that flow from the bosom of the earth. A more surprising impact I believe this story has had must await our consideration of the second story situation.

Irbmangkara: The Crossing Place of Many Storytracks

It was raining when I arrived in Alice Springs in July 1996. The vast desert immediately exploded into bloom in every direction I traveled in my visits to the many historic places in that region. What a rare treat! I visited the house at the gap along the dry Todd River bed south of town where William Wilshire had established the first police station in Central Australia. The old telegraph repeater station which was the most prominent European-Australian outpost in Central Australia, still stands north of the current day Alice Springs. Francis Gillen was the station manager when Baldwin Spencer stopped by during his travels with the Horn Expedition. They became close friends and forged an alliance that led to now-classic publications. When I visited the station, I walked to the top of the little nearby hill to overlook the little valley I knew

to be the location of the multiple month-long performance of Arrernte ceremonies in 1896. It was here that, in temperatures hovering around 120 degrees, Spencer and Gillen recorded vast ethnographic material subsequently published in their Native Tribes in Central Australia *(1899). In 1913, Bronislaw Malinowski referenced primarily this book when he wrote of Spencer and Gillen that "half of the total production in anthropological theory has been based on their work, and nine-tenths affected or modified by it." Standing on that hilltop recalling Spencer's sepia photos as well as his rich descriptions, I could almost see and hear the unfolding events that had occurred exactly a century before.*

Yet, this performance was not one that occurred in the normal course of Arrernte life; it too was the result of a vast complex of creative encounters. The several month-long performance was staged as a show of respect for Gillen because he had defended Aboriginal interests in the official arena of Australian law. For purposes of telling the story, the encounter can be located at a place called Irbmangkara 30 miles south of the old Hermannsburg Mission Station, itself about 60 miles west of Alice Springs. Here I'll include only the few most relevant strands, and these from only one of several known perspectives, of the tracks that ran through this place, but there are many more.[58]

Irbmangkara[59] is a four-mile stretch of pools fed by a spring bubbling out of the Finke riverbed thirty miles south of the old mission station at Hermannsburg. Because of the dependable supply of water; the surrounding lush vegetation; and the abundance of fish, animals, and birds, Irbmangkara is well suited to support the extensive activities of a major ceremonial center, which it probably has been for a very long time. European-Australians know this area as Running Waters. Irbmangkara is the intersection of many storytracks.

Irbmangkara is located on the south side of the Krichauff Range at the intersection of Western, Southern, and Central Arrernte territories and a short distance from Matuntara[60] territory. The journeys across the landscape of the ancestors, with which several contemporary Arrernte groups identify themselves, intersect at Irbmangkara. It is the home of the duck (ibiljakua) ancestors. Groups of duck ancestors traveled in several directions from Irbmangkara. One group followed an ancestral leader named Remala (crane) to Nunta, his home to the north. They traveled through Rubula, Lalkarintinerama, Pmaletnama, Ntarea, Jikala, Rama, Ulbmantaljerra, and Erulba.[61] Another group of duck ancestors was led by Ankebera, a

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[58] The full story is told in my *Storytracking: Texts Stories Histories in Central Australia* (1998). This selection is pp. 65-68.

[59] The word *Irbmangkara* is the composite of *urbma*, meaning "pod," and *Ankara*, meaning "broad"; thus it means "the borad [acacia] pod" Carl Strehlow, *The Aranda and Loritja Tribes of Central Australia* [*Die Aranda-und Loritja-Stämme in Zentral-Australien*], translated by Hans D. Oberscheidt, (Frankfort am Maln: Joseph Baer, 1907), vol. I, Part I, p. 82, n. 3.

[60] Aboriginal people living to the southwest of the Western Arrernte.

[61] See Strehlow, *Aranda*, vol. I, Part I, pp. 94-96, for a full account. Theodor Strehlow, in *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1969), indicates that one group of duck ancestors followed "Remalarinja north-west through Western Aranda territory to Kularata, a place situated in the floodout swamps of the Dashwood River, north of Ulaterka" (p. 35).

cormorant ancestor, to Tnauutatara, which is located on the middle Palmer River.[62] Irbmangkara was linked to Walbmara (known also as Tempe Downs) in the Matuntara area by a cormorant ancestor from Irbmangkara who stole mulga[63] seeds from ancestors at Walbmara. The snake ancestor at Walbmara pursued the cormorant back to Irbmangkara and decided to stay there forever. Traveling in a flood, the fish ancestors came from Ankurowunga to the south. They passed through Irbmangkara and broke through a fish weir set to catch them. This broken weir came to be a section of the Krichauff Range. The gap through which the fish escaped is called Iltjanmalitnjaka ("where the crayfish had dug"), also known as Parke's Pass.[64] The Upper Southern Arrernte tell stories about nditja tara ("two young men") who hunted kangaroo near Irbmangkara. One of the curlew ancestors of Ilkakngara (Northern Arrernte) died but attempted to rise from his grave. This angered a magpie ancestor from Urburakana (in the Central Arrernte territory) who stamped the curlew back into his grave. Seeing this, the other curlew ancestors fled to Irbmangkara.[65]

Groups of Arrernte identify themselves with groups of ancestors and travel these storytracks to perform rites at the places where the ancestors stopped and camped. The people of each of these groups belong to the country traversed by their ancestors, and they own the songs, rites, and stories of their ancestors. When rites are performed at a ceremonial center by any of these groups, all other groups who share this ceremonial center have the right to come as visitors. Thus Irbmangkara, located at the intersection of storytracks from every direction, is a place where Western Arrernte, Northern Arrernte, Central Arrernte, Upper Southern Arrernte, and the Matuntara people have encountered one another, probably for centuries.[66]

Irbmangkara is the physical setting of another story, this one with a specific historical setting. It is a story of murder, revenge, and counterrevenge. It was accompanied by gossip, complaint, and official report. It involved the encounter-the intersection of the story tracks-of aborigines from several regions, missionaries, mounted constables, cattle ranchers, and a justice of the peace. The following account is drawn from Theodor Strehlow.[67] It intends to present Strehlow's point of view.

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[62] The structure of each of these stories is an itinerary in which the group of ancestors moves from named place to named place, at each of which they perform ceremonies and rites. The stories here are indicated only by their origination and/or destination places, as well as their connection to Irbangkara. Only these places are indicated by Theodor Strehlow in his sketch of the storytracks in *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* (p. 36). The fuller texts of some of these stories, such as the duck ancestors, are available in Carl Strehlow's work.

[63] Mulga, also malga, is a small tree or shrub (*Acacia aneura*) The name is derived from a word in central New South Wales aboriginal languages that loosely means "the bush."

[64] The name suggests another story about crayfish.

[65] Strehlow, *Journey to Horseshoe Bend*, pp. 35-36.

[66] Ibid, p. 36.

[67] This story is recounted by Strehlow in *Journey to Horseshoe Bend*, pp. 36-48, supplemented by his accounts in "Geography and the Totemic Landscape in Central Australia: A functional Study" in *Australian Aboriginal Anthropology: Modern Studies in the Social Anthropology of the Australian Aborigines*, edited by Ronald M. Berndt (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal

In 1875,[68] before European-Australians had come to this area of Central Australia,[69] Kalejika, a middle-aged Central Arrernte man, reported to groups surrounding Irbmangkara a serious ritual crime. He said that while visiting Irbmangkara he saw the ceremonial leader, Ltjabakuka, giving uninitiated boys blood to drink from a ceremonial shield.[70] This act was part of a rite reserved for the fully initiated. Because of the secrecy of the rite and its importance, the ritual crime was most odious and called for the severest punishment, death. This punishment had to be administered by members of a group story-linked (perhaps dream-linked) to Irbmangkara.

The people at Tnauutatara[71] refused to take action against the Irbmangkara group because they were too closely related. The people at Kularata found Kaleika's story "an empty fabrication of malicious lies." But the Matuntara people, linked to Irbmangkara by their snake ancestor, agreed to punish the Irbmangkara community.[72]

Led by Tjinawariti (which means "Eagle Foot"),[73] fifty to sixty Matuntara warriors, supplemented by a few men from the Upper South Arrernte area, headed for Irbmangkara. They found the people camped at Urualbukara, the southernmost pool of Irbmangkara. The avengers divided into three groups; two took positions on the hill slopes above the encampment, and the third hid in the underbrush in the river below the camp. At dusk, when they believed that all the people had returned from hunting and gathering, they swarmed the camp, killing everyone encountered. They broke the limbs of the infants to let them die a natural death. With their spears they prodded the 80 to 100 people killed to make certain there would be no survivors to identify them.

During the attack, one of Ltjabakuka's wives, Laparintja, in the effort to save herself and her baby, fell across her baby, feigning death.[74] She was able to remain silent when prodded. When

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Studies, 1970), pp. 124-126, and *Central Australian Religion: Personal Monotheism in a Polytotemic Community* (Adelaide: Australian Association for the Study of Religion, 1978), p. 37.

[68] In another recounting of these events, Strehlow indicates the date as "somewhere about 1876." See *Central Australian Religion*, p. 37.

[69] The German Lutherans founded Hermannsburg mission to the north of Irbmangkara in 1877, and cattle stations in the area were established soon after.

[70] Strehlow considered the accusation false, at least according to his account in "Totemic Landscape," p. 124. In the same account, he describes the crime as "having given uninitiated boys blood drawn from the veins of initiated men to drink, in mockery of a particularly sacred initiatory rite" (p. 124).

[71] In *Central Australian Religion*, Strehlow identifies Tnauutatara as a ceremonial center to both Southern Aranda and Matuntara groups (see p. 37).

[72] Strehlow indicates that groups linked to a common totemic center had the "obligation to guard the sanctity of the various centres." Ibid, p. 63, n. 21.

[73] Strehlow says that he was told that Tjinawariti was a ceremonial chief (*ingkata*) with a great reputation as a warrior and that he was assisted by Papaluru, ceremonial chief of Akaaua, an important native car site on the Palmer River. See "totemic Landscape," p. 125.

[74] In "Totemic Landscape," Strehlow indicates that the baby was an infant boy named Kaltjirbuka (p. 125).

the camp grew silent, she escaped with her infant north to Arbanta, where other Irbmangkara were camped.

As the warriors were leaving the camp, they encountered two hunters, Nameia and Ilbalta, returning late to camp. The warriors pursued them to eliminate the chance of being identified. Suffering an old wound that slowed his flight, Ilbalta was soon brought down. Nameia managed to escape, though wounded, even resorting to picking up and returning spears thrown at him that had missed. Most of the avengers were well known to Nameia. Their effort at anonymity had failed.

Upon hearing the story of the massacre, broadcast by Laparintja and Nameia to nearby camps, mourning ceremonies commenced and soon acts of revenge were planned. It was decided[75] that to avenge this massacre a small, highly select party lead by Nameia would take as their task the killing of every man identified. Knowing that they would have to travel singly through the territories of these enemy peoples, the task not only would be difficult but also would probably take years to accomplish. Rites were performed for this group to make them impervious to enemy spears and to endow them with stealth. This revenge party did not return until 1878, having completed their task without a single casualty. They even managed to kill Tjinawariti and Kapaluru, both important Matuntara leaders.

The Matuntara wanted to counteravenge these killings, but they were hampered by the growing presence of European-Australians. The Hermannsburg missionaries had arrived in 1877, and in 1878 cattle were being introduced to the Finke and Palmer river valleys. The Matuntara decided that at least one Irbmangkara death was necessary, and they chose as the victim Nameia, They were patient and awaited the opportunity to take action.

Twelve years later—in 1890— a police outstation had been established at Alitera a few miles north of Irbmangkara on the Finke River. It is also known as Boggy Waterhole or Boggy Hole, Mounted Constable William H. Willshire was in charge. The police station had been established to protect the cattle industry from aboriginal poaching, an act commonly called "cattle spearing." To be effective, the constables hired aboriginal trackers to help them survive in the severity of the landscape and to help them find and punish poachers. Among the trackers hired by Willshire was Aremala, Nameia's eldest son, who had survived the massacre years before because he had been in Arbanta at the time. In January 1890, Nameia came to Alitera to visit his son. He planned to stay for some time.

The Matuntara soon learned that Nameia was at Alitera. They took advantage of Alitera's proximity to Matuntara territory to gain their final act of revenge. Stealing to the Alitera camp by moonlight, several Matuntara awaited Nameia to arise and tend the fire. When he did they killed him and disappeared into the night. Willshire recorded in his police journal that the "old man Naimi" had been murdered at his camp "at midnight on 9th January, 1890," by a party of "Tempe Downs blacks."[76]

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[75] In "Totemic Landscape," Strehlow indicates that the revenge party was organized only because it was believed that Ltjabakuka and his elders were innocent of the ritual crime of which they were accused (p 126).

[76] Ibid, p. 45.

The Hermannsburg missionaries disapproved of Willshire, while the cattle ranchers were grateful for his presence. Complaints lodged with the authorities in South Australia by the missionaries reported that Willshire used brutal and unnecessary force to discourage cattle spearing. They accused him of responding to reports of cattle spearing by killing every aborigine he could find in the area. The complaints spawned an official inquiry of Willshire that was scheduled to take place in July 1890.

When Nameia was killed at the Boggy Waterhole police camp, Willshire was incensed, believing the killing offensive to his trackers. He wanted to go to Tempe Downs in pursuit of the murderers, but under the heat of the upcoming investigation he bided his time. The July enquiry found no wrongdoings committed by Willshire, but it recommended that the police station be moved farther down the Finke River from Hermannsburg.

The following January, when the manager of the Tempe Downs cattle station complained of cattle spearing in his area, Willshire got his chance to get in on this long history of violence. He armed four of his trackers with rifles and led them to Tempe Downs. On the morning of February 22, under his direction, the trackers attacked the aboriginal camp near Tempe Downs and killed a man as he arose from sleep. Others escaped before another man was also killed. Willshire and his trackers had breakfast at Tempe Downs before they took the bodies to separate locations and burned them, with the help of a local station hand, William H. Abbot.

The news of this killing soon reached Francis J. Gillen, the justice of the peace in Alice Springs. Believing that these senseless killings of aboriginal people had gone on long enough, Gillen, accompanied by Mounted Constable William G. South, went to Boggy Waterhole and took Willshire with them to Tempe Downs to investigate. Believing he had sufficient evidence, Gillen committed Willshire for trial in Port Augusta on the charge of murder. Willshire spent seventeen days in jail before the northern cattlemen could raise his bail. During his trial, he was supported by friends, among them Sir John Downer, Q.C., who had been premier of South Australia from 1885 to 1887 and would be premier again in 1892 and 1893. Willshire was acquitted, but he was not reassigned to the same region.

The Arrernte were impressed with Gillen's courage in acting on their behalf against Willshire. Years later, in 1896, the Arrernte were able to express their gratitude by holding a ceremonial—the secret cycle of Imanda—at Alice Springs, allowing Gillen and his friend Baldwin Spencer to be the first nonaborigines to witness these rites.

At this juncture the Irbmangkara story track crosses the Numbakulla and the Sacred Pole story track. Were it not for the Irbmangkara track, Spencer and Gillen probably would not have witnessed any aboriginal rites in 1896, and consequently their Native Tribes and its revision, The Arunta, might never have existed.

III: Aesthetic of Impossibles

8: Story and an Aesthetic of Impossibles

I accepted the invitation to revise *Native American Religions* largely so that I might add a little section including my own stories. In my long interest in cultures that do not have formal religious texts or written scripture, the story genre has been to me persistently fascinating. In my revision I wrote, "I particularly like the ambiguity of the word story. It is commonly used to refer to myth, folktale, anecdote, history, as well as out-and-out lie. Often we never know." (Gill, *Native American Religions*, 2005, p. 129) The term myth has often been contentious in the study of religion since the heritage of Western religious traditions is founded on scripture, on the translation and interpretation of texts, scripture and theological. The fixedness of written word in scripture affirms its stability and status as bearer of god's truth, as somehow the actual word of god. Indeed, the words "scripture" and "truth" are near synonymy. Story tends to invoke myth and folktale and these terms can be and often are used to indicate something made up, something that mistakes a falsehood for the truth, and the entertaining tales of common folk that are often characterized by their fancifulness and incredulity. Traditionally, the academic study of religion has studied scripture and other texts leaving to anthropology and folklore the study of story, myth, and folklore.

The term myth has had some stature in the academic study of religion perhaps largely due to the discussion of myth by Mircea Eliade who was influential in the mid-twentieth century establishment of the academic study of religion. His understanding of myth is presented in, among other places, his chapter "The Morphology and Function of Myths" (Eliade, *Patterns of Comparative Religion,*1958). Myth, for Eliade, is archetypal, a "record" of the actions of the gods *in illo tempore*. The events recounted in myth are not of human time or space, but of the creative formative actions of the gods before human time began. Myth lays down the creative actions that account for the way things were established by god for the coming human world. Because myth deals with first events and godly actions, it establishes the criteria or model for truth and reality in the world whose creation it documents.

Eliade seems uninterested in the origin of myths themselves, though he sees myth as always cosmogonic, as an account of the origin. Myth, as narrative, seemingly comes along as god's handbook or a reporter's account of the originating events. Eliade, as often noted, has a decided disdain for history since it is the story of human action that he considers prone to variation and violation of the originally created perfect world. He understands ritual as functioning largely to expunge the impacts of history though the return to mythic times accomplished time and again through the repetition of rituals that reconstitute the world of mythic origination, the pure or religious time and place. Thus, it is not particularly surprising that he has no interest in the historical origination of myth or in the history of the development of myth or in how the application of myth varies with existential circumstances and feeds back into the evolution of traditions of mythology. It is no surprise that he found so important to his persuasive presentation of religion Australian Aborigines precisely because he considered them

ab origine.[77] He can speak of the degradation of myth, but he cannot speak of the evolution and creative emergence of myth over time. Myth simply is; something always already there.[78]

In one key passage in his "Morphology" that seems an unusual variation in his discussion, Eliade offers a view of myth surprisingly contemporary; one that even Francis Crick would have likely endorsed. Eliade writes, "myth is an autonomous act of creation by the mind. It is through that act of creation that revelation is brought about—not through the things or events it makes use of." (p. 426) Eliade's statement aligns with a contemporary position that offers primary agency to the brain and central nervous system, alternately the mind. In neurological terms Eliade's view of myth would be efferent, or conducting outward. This statement offers a rare hint of Eliade's understanding of the origination of myth. Perception, experience, the senses, and the environment play but a secondary role to myth; these all would be afferent. These unusual comments come in the context of his discussion of vegetation mythology and his following sentence, assures us that this efferent pattern is indeed intended. He writes, "The drama of the death and resurrection of vegetation is revealed by the myth of Tammuz, rather than the other way about." (p. 426) Were Eliade around today (he died in 1986), he'd land in the midst of some rather fascinating debates at the core of cognitive science, neuroscience, and phenomenology; well it is doubtful that he himself would have, because such contemporary discourse would have been alien to him.

Given Eliade's sense of the primacy of myth, the functions of myth follow. Myth is the model for human action. Myth is the means that guides perception and makes meaningful what is perceived, what is experienced with the senses. Myth is the template that identifies truth and even reality. Without myth, sensory experience, indeed the environment, would simply be without significance. I believe Eliade meant this view profoundly, that is, literally. Myth is the paradigm for perfection. Myth is the explanation and grounding for what is truth (often by the odd logic of tautology; in folklore, this condition is referred to as "just so"). Myth is the ultimate defense against relativism, the equivalent of the absence of value and meaning. Myth explains and provides the instructions for ritual. Ritual functions under the direction of myth. One need not even study the performance of rituals since they are done to bring about the meanings and forces of myth. And, quite remarkably, the study of ritual has seriously lagged in the history of the academic study of religion. Even in the peculiar paradoxes that Eliade acknowledges are fundamental to myth, myth functions largely to establish unity and perfection (the center and the origin are coincident with unity and perfection), resolving the oddities that come with creation such as separation and diversity and, of course, history. Myth

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[77] Remarkably Eliade's *Australian Religions* (1973, originally published as a series in *History of Religions*) is among the singular books on aboriginal religions, yet Eliade never went to Australia.

[78] I rather like this phrase "always already there." Think I got it from Erin Manning or Brian Massumi. Yet, it is most valuable when referring to a naturalist base for our studies, which I think is promising and I am pursuing related to my study of perception, and the phrase suggests an appropriate procession of our considerations from an understanding of the neurobiology that has come to us, and that is thus "always already there," through the process of evolution. Dewey is surely a forerunner in this perspective.

seems to heal and to resolve what it appears Eliade finds rather embarrassing about the very results of creation: division, separation, time, history, sex, knowledge, will.

Without developing Eliade's understanding of myth further I hasten on to my point that his understanding of myth is through and through efferent by which I mean that the master plan of myth, which he equates with mind and with the gods, has primacy and overwhelmingly so over perception, experience, history, environment, human plasticity and creativity.[79] Even when Eliade occasionally refers to "experience," he invariably refers to something like discovering meaning in an intellectual or mental sense of the term under the influence of myth. For example, when Eliade says that one experiences perfection in the paradoxical character of deities, he means that by exemplifying the unity and singularity of a single being with opposing traits such as male/female, creator/destructor, benevolent/vengeful, the deity demonstrates a perfection that is beyond division or opposition. The assumption is that any sensory human experience related to paradox would simply be a meaningless experience outside of the higher order, a mental order, a divine order, given it by myth.

While much has changed in the half century since Eliade's publication of *Patterns*, while references to Eliade have become increasingly rare, I'm not so sure the academy or in the academic study of religion has made all that much progress beyond this strongly efferent oriented approach to the study of religion that echoes the fundamental ways we understand such religious phenomena as myth and ritual; even our general understanding of religion; even our understanding of the academic that is grounded in the intellectual or mind or brain. I sometimes refer to Eliade's program on religion as an academic theology. While perhaps increasingly unhooked from explicit Christian theology, there remain residual assumptions of a givenness (Eliade's *hierophany*) on which academic studies proceed.

Perhaps a more promising possibility for the way we understand religion is by appreciating that our human vitality, as biological processes and certain forms of self-adjusting networks, exists as dynamic efferent-afferent looping structuralities. Such an approach—one that is focused on process, perception, experience, plasticity, dynamics, self-movement, proprioception—can be taken whatever one's basic sources or objects of study. Perception and experience must be recognized as essential even to language acts and intellectual/mental constructs. As animate organisms, all our various constituent systems are necessarily interdependent, none dispensable or secondary, none debodied.

With respect to myth this approach, this understanding, might be accomplished by focusing on a marker of myth, its impossibles, and on the way that myth makers and myth users experience these impossibles. Myths are about gods and spirits and monsters and dragons that we don't actually see, that we don't live among; that in our human world are "impossibles." Myths are set at times and in places that are not of our experience and that we can't simply journey to

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[79] That Eliade allows myth to be a creation of mind reveals a difficult, and to his view I think damning, issue if one understands "mind" to refer to human creativity. I would rather guess that Eliade likely intended something more like spirit or universal mind. To me, this mind origination of myth is the most fascinating issue raised by this current reading of his discussion of myth.

under the arrangements made by our local travel agent. The distinctive powers and behaviors of the characters in myth are outrageous and impossible for us, yet there they are. These impossibles are, I suggest, the main attraction of myth and perhaps its principal marker.[80]

I can't see any alternative to understanding myth, a language-based form, other than as a human creation, a genre of oral and sometimes literary[81] tradition with its own history and with given examples, specific myths, having their own histories, their own traditions. Therefore, these "impossibles" must occur so commonly as characteristic of this genre only because the human myth-makers and human myth-modifying-tellers constructed them that way and reconstruct them that way through retellings time and again. I can't imagine an alternative. Frankly, I think for most who have told and heard myths these "impossibles" are fundamental to their abiding "interest." Myths are interesting and fun because they are fantastical.[82] The unexpected and the unexplainable are what delight. What I think academics have ignored, and I think we inherit this from an oddly Christian-beholden heritage, is that the myth-makers, myth-tellers, delight in creating and embracing precisely the construction and elaboration of impossibles that defy resolution. This is precisely the art of myth, myth is the practice of an *aesthetic of impossible*s. Academic students of religion, devoted to the same efferent intellectual sedentary ecclesiastical male power based model so central to Christian intellectual/church history,[83] have given attention largely to making sense of, giving reasoned meaning to, myth in an attempt to resolve those attributes of myth that their human creators so delightedly and artfully interwove into them.[84] And, of course, to render myth into a textual

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[80] While I am not dealing here with Barthes' piece, I do note that he doesn't even recognize the "impossibles" character of the phrase he so often repeats, "my name is lion." A great many cultures use as a marker of myth "the time when the animals talked" and they also often acknowledge as of special religious status those humans that can "speak to the animals." To have an animal speak, "my name is lion," is to invoke an irresolvable impossible: animals don't speak, this animal speaks. Barthes doesn't even notice and frankly this relates to why I don't find his work of sufficient interest to spend much time on.

[81] Walter Ong has the greatest insight on this matter in his *Orality and Literacy*.

[82] Kurt Andersen's recent book *Fantasyland: How we* …. (2017) has an assumed disdain for fantasy which is often equated with those who deal in any reality he considers beyond reason.

[83] Doubtless many of you better informed about Christian history than I am, which I suppose is all of you, will surely want to kick my ass for this broad generalization; have at it. Should I include all the polite and appropriate academic qualifications, I'd lose the emotional point of it.

[84] This comment is placed in a footnote only because I don't have the time to work it into the above narrative in anything like a graceful way, but what students of religion seem to fail at miserably (my view of course) is that religious folk simply love to recite and listen to these stories; they can't hear them often enough and it ain't, as Barthes seems to imply if I understand him at all, that the overplus of myth, its repetition and endless redundancy, is to make it finally possible for the auditors to "get" the message (suggesting inherent stupidity perhaps), but because it is fun and entertaining and delightful and poetic and also because for myth-tellers and myth-listeners it is "our story;" this story is "our story!" Maybe I should invert

form is to stop the organic social creative process and render it into a quite different genre. It is little wonder that Christianity has had such a difficult time trying to determine if it even has myth and what to do with it if it does.[85] In the Christian context myth tends to be an embarrassing and shockingly primitive (irrational), phenomenon.

Eliade included what I'm calling "impossibles" in his understanding of myth. He used such terms as "paradox," "*coincidence oppositorum,*" and "one and the many." These were for Eliade markers of myth. For the academic study of religion, what I'm referring to as impossibles are often the focus for the construction of explanation and interpretation; to solve the impossibles is the academics job. Yet, it is also a retrograde action that stops the play and vitality of myth itself. What seems essential is to find a way to embrace the aesthetic of impossibles without seeking resolution or explanation or signification or even meaning,[86] and to appreciate how impossibles are experienced. One sort of impossible involves holding that things that are exclusive to one another, even in the sense of oppositions, are also identical (or inseparable). It is the impossible holding at once both "is" and "is not," a categorical anomaly taken for granted. To identify a figure as both male and female, as both benevolent and malicious, as both god and human; to say that death is life, that rich is poor, that bread is body, and so on, these are all impossibles of this type. Linguistics has long held that we understand words as much in terms of what they are not, what they exclude, as in terms of what they are, what they include or reference. I like to refer to this structurality of impossibles as the interplay of a twoness and a oneness. Even the places and characters of myth are experienced as fantastical because they are what they cannot be.

This conjunction constituting impossibles is one of the principal markers of myth, yet I think it ubiquitous actually to human perception and to human distinctiveness.[87] Myth presents impossibles in a narrative style with particular and distinctive traditions of conventions. Yet, impossibles also are the core structurality of so many things human such as play, metaphor, dancing, seduction, art, language, ritual, and so forth. Metaphor, for example, which many

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this narrative device and make this footnote the main text of this essay with all the rest a footnote to it; that could be fun too.

[85] See for example the debate between Karl Jaspers and Rudolf Bultmann on this topic as collected in *Myth & Christianity: An Inquiry Into The Possibility Of Religion Without Myth* (2005)

[86] There is, I believe, a major difference between something that is meaningful, that is full and overflowing with meanings, and meaning in this big M sense of "the meaning" which is always reductive and, to me, dismissive and disappointing.

[87] Applying the efferent/afferent looping structurality at every concern, I find myself increasingly interested in both the sameness of humans among all animate organisms (because we are all movers and proprioceivers) as well as in what distinguishes us humans among our brother and sister animate organisms. The first arc of the loop places us in the fellowship of enormous diversity while the second arc moves in the direction of establishing a "naturalist philosophical" basis for cultural/religious comparative studies that must be grounded on some common neurobiology. Importantly, as a looping structurality, this approach to study is not directed to some end, but rather to the constantly creative oscillating movement that is satisfying.

argue[88] is the underlying experiential basis for all conception, is commonly described as "understanding one thing by equating it with another thing, *which it is not*." Metaphor, more common than dirt, is the equation of two things that we know full well are distinctly not the same. Myth uses the same strategy. In all of these forms, we declare in all seriousness that something is what, in the simplest and most elemental terms, we know it is not and cannot be.

In my Chicago graduate school days, there was a hint of embarrassment in talking of myth. When talking among non-academic friends we constantly had to distinguish it from that irritating quotidian usage that myths are there to be busted; things we think are true but are actually not. I now appreciate that my annoyance about this common understanding of myth is likely an outgrowth of the academics and Christians insistence on truth and meaning and explanation. What I didn't appreciate, that I do a bit more now, was that myth's vitality is as an aesthetic of impossibles. In my Christian influenced, though tacitly so, academic perspective I couldn't comprehend that, far more fun than being set straight by having a myth explained or its impossibles swallowed like medicine, is to continue to hold the "impossibles" simply because we get something out of doing so; the delight, the joy, of holding two opposing things together as identities. There is something unquestionably profound in comprehending and experiencing this aesthetic of impossibles.

Twoness necessitates a separateness, a distance, a gap, a synaptic gap in some sense while this distance does not at all have to be physical or temporal or even have dimension (it can be virtua). Oneness cannot tolerate any gap, any distinction, any non-coincidence, any differentiation. The conjunction of twoness with oneness holding both forever present engenders a need, an urge, an incipience, a desire toward action, a longing for resolution, a reaching toward connection. This desire is a virtual in that it is an incipient quality or tendency; it precedes and anticipates agency, yet cannot fully manifest (to do so would collapse the structurality). It can be described as a reaching or a touching or a groping or, in Erin Manning's term, a "preacceleration;" a desire to cross a virtual distance, what Merleau-Ponty would likely have called "pure depth" or "flesh" or "chiasm." And pure depth, which he effectively demonstrated to be the grounding of perception, is based in movement and surprisingly boldly he understood this structurality ontologically as "the ultimate reality." Developing on Merleau-Ponty, Renaud Barbaras described living movement in the very terms of desire and distance (see Barbaras, *Desire and Distance*, 2005). Living movement is not only primary to perception, but perception simply doesn't occur without movement; dramatically it is shown in lab experiments that vision in newborn kittens does not develop without their experience of proprioceptive self-movement.

Impossibles constitute the structurality that underlies the basis of perception itself. Merleau-Ponty understood perception in quite similar terms to the impossibles, invoking such images as chiasm, both a crossing place and a gap where identity and distinction are mutually assured. He also discussed perception in such useful terms as flesh, reversibility (especially "incomplete reversibility"), dehiscence. For Merleau-Ponty percipient and perceptible are both the same (one) and also distinct (two), self and other. For him perception arises, as do animate beings, in

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[88] See in particular George Lakoff's and Mark Johnson's many works on metaphor, but also Zoltán Kövecses, *Metaphor and Emotion: Language, Culture, and Body in Human Feeling* (2003).

the chiasm of a twoness that is always also a oneness. Barbaras developed this in terms of living movement. In my studies of perception, I have come to understand living or self-movement and touching (understood in the complexity of both exteroception and proprioceptive inner touch or coenaesthesis; another twoness that is one, a reversibility) to be so related and intertwined as to be two ways of describing the same dynamic.

The power of myth is in the movement/touching engendered in the embracing of the dynamic of the twoness that is always also a oneness, rather than in the resolution of impossibles into some possible or likely which is invariably accomplished by overpowering the efferent/afferent loop with an efferent proclamation that posits some turkey-bacon[89] style explanation for something being what we all know full well it is not.

It is my sense that the myth-makers and the myth-players delighted in impossibles, not to resolve them, but rather to be "moved" and "touched" by them. Ah, and this conjunction shades us into another aspect of these impossibles, the emotional/feeling part. From the chiasm of impossibles, from the yawning, yet ever so tantalizing, gap arises emotion and feeling; poignancy and pain, longing and love; yes, lust too. Just think about that quintessentially Christian term "love" for a moment. In whatever of its forms, love can mean little outside the poignancy of the conjunction of the two—implying separation and distance and longing and loneliness and lust—and the one, the desire, the urge, the need to be one rather than two. The immenseness of the feeling associated with love is that the creative connection, the unity, is always in some sense unfulfilled; the twoness always persists in the oneness. Love is simply lost in total singularity or identity or unity. Love then is an emotion of a twoness that is always also a oneness.[90]

What is so remarkable about inner touch, proprioception, living movement, self-movement, that I'm identifying as the very quality of the experience of "impossibles," is that these are experienced as a feeling kind of knowing. We know things based on moving because of the accompanying feeling of moving (kinesthesis). We actually feel the self-moving rather than the backfilled task accomplished by an account of an act of movement or an event. Myths move us at our core; myths evoke our vitality, our self-moving feeling kind of knowing. Our stories, our own stories (especially those stories so richly laden with impossibles that we call them myths), move us, affect us so profoundly, unlike the stories of others that we might occasionally encounter, because in the familiar and often repeated tellings and hearings, in the retellings and rehearings, in the repetitions and recitations where telling and hearing become inseparable, in the storytellings/story-hearings that are also actings and gesturings and dancings and ritualings and socializings and mournings and celebratings and commemoratings,

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[89] This term is inspired by the Christian theological efforts to explain the presence of the body of Christ in the host of the Eucharist in the terms that hold that while it may look and taste and smell and feel like bread, it is really really the true body of Christ; turkey bacon.

[90] Another quick and obvious example of the most quotidian variety is the attraction we have to riddles. We delight in riddles not to resolve them like problems so that we might move on, but because of the duplicity and misdirection that always forces us to find ourselves delightfully imposing impossible frames on one another. Jokes work in a similar way. And on and on and on . . . .

in the richly synesthetic experiences drenched with smells and tastes and sounds and sensations that fill our lives, in all these ways and so many more, our stories become implanted deeply in muscle and ligament and nerve as the rhythms and flows and movements of our gestures and postures and feelings that make us who we are.

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Geza Roheim was a neo-Freudian who did field research in Central Australia. When I studied the materials related to this Australian context I persistently ran across Roheim's work, yet tended to ignore it because virtually everything I read about him from other scholars who did work in the area panned his work, often because of his connection with Freud. His fundamental position was that, prior to doing field research, an ethnographer must undergo psychoanalysis. His reasoning was that since the relationships formed in field studies would produce images of the "others" that were largely projections on them, then the least one should do to prepare, by undergoing psychoanalysis, so as to understand the sorts of projections that one is likely to make. Eventually I began reading Roheim and found his works to be the most interesting, insightful, and even objective of all the materials on the subject. In particular, he spent much time with women and children. He used play as an important ethnographic method. Notably most other ethnographers of his day ignored women and children entirely. Indeed, there is some sense of women being somehow lower, more akin to animals, than men. Roheim learned about sexual relationships and family dynamics, yet he also gained access to so much more.

Baldwin Spencer was trained as a biologist and went to Australia to establish the study of biology in this new land, the land of enormous potential because it was so little known. Spencer wound up being one of the renowned ethnographers of the late nineteenth century, writing, along with Francis Gillen a station manager in Alice Springs, *Native Tribes in Central Australia*, the book that was used by so many as a source for examples on which to support the founding of theories in psychology, sociology, and anthropology.

While Spencer was carrying out his biological project in Central Australia, it seemed a small extension to include the people he encountered there. He collected information, took photographs, observed rituals, and collected objects. His efforts to make scientific sense of these encounters was based on his application of morphological and evolutionary perspectives that were developing at the time. While it seemed a mere scientific procedure to give order and access to the collected materials, later analysis—as provided in the following article "Making Them Speak"—shows the extent to which Roheim was correct. The results were something of a creative concoction of an aboriginal pre-history in the form of mythology.

9: "Making Them Speak": Colonialism and the Study of Mythology[91]

A century ago Baldwin Spencer and Francis Gillen were camped over the hill west of the Alice Springs telegraph repeater station in central Australia observing a series of rites performed by the Western Arrernte. The performance had been arranged by Francis Gillen, postmaster and telegraph operator, whom Spencer had met two years before during his travels with the Horn scientific expedition. The records made during the nearly three months Spencer and Gillen observed aboriginal ritual and interrogated aborigines[92] about their culture, supplemented by the records regularly made by Gillen from 1894 through the fall of 1897, constitute the field materials that Spencer edited, organized, and presented as *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* published in London by Macmillan in early 1899. This volume was the principal work that Bronislaw Malinowski referred to when, in 1913, he wrote of Spencer and Gillen that "half the total production in anthropological theory has been based upon their work, and nine-tenths affected or modified by it."[93]

Now, a century later, we have yet to fully appreciate the accomplishment, the continuing impact, and the method of this work. I want to examine Spencer's presentation of Arrernte mythology in *Native Tribes*. I am interested in how Spencer's training as a biologist influenced his study, how his approach exemplifies the colonial discourse at the time, and, most importantly, how the general study of mythology and culture were broadly shaped by the milieu typified by Spencer. Also, ultimately it must be acknowledged that these studies have impacted and continue to impact both aboriginal peoples and the general study of mythology.

I

In chapter ten of *Native Tribes* Spencer turns from descriptions of Arrernte ritual to the presentation of their mythology. He begins by describing its overall organization:

> We have hitherto spoken of the Alcheringa in general terms, using the word to denote the whole period during which the mythical ancestors of the present Arunta [Arrernte] tribe existed. In reality the traditions of the tribe recognize four more or less distinct periods in the Alcheringa. During the first of these men and women were created; in the second the rite of circumcision by means of a stone knife, in place of a fire-stick, was introduced; in the third the rite of *Ariltha* or sub-incision was introduced, and in the fourth the present organization and marriage system of the tribe were established. The second and third periods are, however, by no means sharply defined, and to a certain extent they are contemporaneous, or rather they overlap one another.

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[91] Originally published in *Journal of Religious History* (vol 22, no 2, June 1998), pp. 168-82. Minor corrections have been made to the original publication.

[92] I am choosing not to capitalize the term "aborigine" as part of my critical concern with categories. The term aborigine is a generic term designating peoples "from the origin" and was applied by Westerners encountering people in what came to be known as Australia. While those peoples have appropriated the term to designate their common identity (and in this usage would require capitalization), the term as used in this paper identifies the culturally other and carries extensive colonial expectations. By using lower case I want to remind us of this different use.

[93] Review of *Across Australia* in *Folk-Lore* 24 (1913): 278.

We may speak of these periods as the early, the middle (comprising the second and third), and the later Alcheringa.[94]

In this introduction to the myth accounts, Spencer, the scientist, appears to be assisting his readers by revealing the results of his investigations and examinations of Arrernte mythology. Spencer explicitly presents as an ethnic system of classification both the distinction of a "whole period during which the mythic ancestors... existed" as well as the periodization of the mythology into the early, middle, and later alcheringa. A close comparison of the texts published in *Native Tribes* with the unpublished field notes, primarily Gillen's, shows that this system of classification could not possibly be derived from the extant data. Rather, the system of periodization represents Spencer's expectations. Furthermore, as revealed in the same comparison, wanting empirical evidence to support his periodization, Spencer manufactured some myth accounts. I will discuss these myths themselves, but first I must attempt to determine why Spencer believed the periodization he proposed existed and to discuss the implications of his work. I think Spencer's training as a biologist, characteristic in many respects of the intellectual milieu of the time, was of importance in this regard.

II

Spencer was educated at Oxford from 1884 to 1886. This was a formative period in the advancement of science under the influence of theories of evolution. Creation did not take place in one moment as the sudden act in which god carried out his universal design. The world was not created whole and complete to remain unchanged and unchanging forever. Yet the older morphological methods of comparative anatomy under laid the new evolutionary ideas. While still at Owens College, before attending Oxford, Spencer's professor Arthur Marshall required his students to dissect a series of animals whose anatomies were increasingly complex. This technique in comparative anatomy advanced morphological methods to demonstrate the evolution among species. The comparative study of anatomical structures at various life stages in a single species was also important to Marshall's teaching, Spencer's first publication, co-authored with Marshall, described one of the cranial nerves of a series of dogfish from embryos to adults, a contribution to comparative neurology.

At Oxford, under the direction of Henry Moseley, Spencer continued comparative morphological studies writing, for example, a descriptive atlas of the embryology of the chick illustrated by a series of drawings of the stages of development from incubation to hatching. In a short paper in which Spencer described his system of nomenclature of the various stages of the developing embryos, he rejected the standard methods of using clock time to designate developmental stages. He argued that this method was unsatisfactory because there was too much individual variation in the rates of development of different eggs. His proposed method, apparently influenced by Henry Balfour's descriptions of dogfish embryos, was to designate stages on the basis of morphological criteria. Taking this position is notable in showing that Spencer understood the orderly sequence of distinctive morphological stages as ontologically more fundamental than objective clock time. In a work published in 1887, completed while at Oxford, Spencer used a comparative morphological approach to study the parietal eye in reptiles. From Spencer's 1887 arrival in Australia through the end of the century, he continued

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[94] Baldwin Spencer and F. J. Gillen, *Native Tribes in Central Australia* (London, 1899), 387-8.

biological studies on this model, presenting series of morphological descriptions to demonstrate evolutionist principles.[95]

Should we be surprised by Spencer's periodization of Arrernte mythology? The alcheringa is a period homologous with the period of incubation and that period is further sub-classified in terms of morphological distinctions: the creation of people, circumcision, subincision, and the establishment of social organization. While this schema may seem to take the development of the Arrernte into full adulthood, well beyond any incubation period, we need only recall that the Arrernte are termed aborigines, that is, people designated as "from the origin." To the evolutionists aborigines represented the incubation period of human culture. Linking these several assumptions, we arrive at the relational series: aboriginal mythology is to aborigines as aboriginal culture is to human history as embryology is to biology.

III

Before I look at Spencer's presentation of the creation mythology of the Arrernte there are a number of observations to be made related to the implications and consequences of using a late-nineteenth-century biological model as the basis for shaping a theory of mythology.

Morphology was the predominant theory underlying the comparative anatomy that Spencer learned as a student. Morphology, a term introduced by Goethe and underlying Linnaeus's system of classification, provided a closed system that reflected the world of nature describable in terms of a taxonomy with a hierarchy based on organization and complexity. It was not intended to be a temporally based schema; the hierarchy did not imply evolution; it was fundamentally ahistorical. The organization was a logical-formal sequence. This atemporal morphological system was important in Spencer's training and in his studies of comparative anatomy.

Yet Spencer was a cultural evolutionist influenced by Edward B. Tylor and James G. Frazer among others, which meant that he combined the older morphological system of comparison with the emerging evolutionary perspectives that introduced temporal sequencing as the measure of interpreting the significance of the morphological hierarchy. There are potential problems with this peculiar hybridity. While time (understood as a sequence of interconnected developmental stages) is the fundamental grounding for the evolutionist perspective, in the study of culture the perspective was applied without regard to actual temporal markers. The method was/is simply to fuse onto the supposed morphological series an imagined set of corresponding temporal values. So, for example, the morphological evaluation of aborigines corresponds, in the conjoined temporal terms of the evolutionary scheme, with the designation "from the origin." The problem is reflected in aborigines being at once earliest in a temporal stage and historically contemporary. More explicitly, the Australian aborigines filled the

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[95] For information regarding Spencer's scientific education and research I have relied upon D. J. Mulvaney and J. H. Calaby, *"So Much That is New": Baldwin Spencer, 1860-1929. A Biography* (Melbourne: University of Melbourne Press, 1985), especially chapter eight, 136-61.

peculiar role of being contemporary stone age people.[96] The problem is that there is no assurance that the results of morphological ordering actually identify a particular stage in evolution. The conclusions cannot be made without historical evidence which is usually lacking.

In the biological realm, the compatibility between morphological and evolutionary systems is assured because of reproduction, but the two systems of comparison remain, in theory, distinct. Whereas the morphological method is synthetic, structural, synchronic, and phenomenological, the evolutionary method is analytical, functional, diachronic, and historical.[97] By conceiving a structural typology for Arrernte mythology, Spencer was applying a morphological model. Spencer introduced an evolutionary frame by placing mythology at the time of origination and by placing the Arrernte people as the earliest people. There is also the indication of development in his periodization of myths. Spencer, like his anthropological mentors Tylor and Frazer, combined evolution, a temporal and historical model, with an ahistorical morphological method. Rather than a high yielding hybrid, the combination suggests something of a monstrosity, a patching together of two quite different species of comparison and interpretation.

The study of mythology, to Spencer, was rather like the microscopic and dissection methods of the laboratory that reveal otherwise hidden structural sequences. The study of mythology thus has implications for the evolution of culture. Mythology provides something like the images revealed by dissection at different stages of development. Mythology provides a window inside the egg. For Spencer, the study of mythology is a dissection of the past. But, empirically, there are no clear temporal markers in Arrernte mythology, neither as mythology, in the narration of mythology, nor within the categories of mythology, at least none that corresponds with Spencer's interpretation. Since time is the ontological grounding for the evolutionary aspects of Spencer's model, he had to invent time as an element in Arrernte mythology. Once invented, time has served as its most distinctive feature and its organizing principle.

There is a certain irrationality introduced in Spencer's shift from biology to culture, a kind of giving way of scientific method. It amounts to an abandonment of the comparative method in the sense of comparing empirical data.[98] Spencer does not describe the structures of all extant Arrernte myth and then use comparative methods to establish an evolutionary series. Rather, as evident in his prefatory schema, he projects expectations, formed outside of his experience with the Arrernte, onto Arrernte cultural materials that he recognizes as mythology and then presents his collection of myths grouped according to period. The meaning of myth is, for Spencer, adequately understood by temporal and morphological classification. Importantly, though it cannot be determined from the published accounts, as I will show Spencer had no

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[96] Of interest in this respect is the subtitle of the revised version of *Native Tribes*: Baldwin Spencer and Francis J. Gillen, *The Arunta: A Study of Stone Age People*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1927).

[97] From Jonathan Smith's "Adde Parvum Parvo Magnus Acervus Erit" in his *Map is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978), 254, based on the observations of Karl Mannheim.

[98] For an insightful discussion of evolutionary methods of comparison see Smith, *Map is Not Territory*, especially 259-64.

empirical examples for the early *alcheringa*. Yet he felt no compunction in concocting and publishing without qualification myth accounts to represent this period.

In both imposing his temporally based taxonomy onto mythology and in manufacturing evidence where it was lacking, Spencer participated in the initiation of a practice, a way of being in the world, that has come increasingly to characterize the modern West, Jean Baudrillard describes it in the terns of a "precession of simulacra," that is, the practice in which the map (models or abstract conceptions) precedes, rather than reflects, the territory (the empirical, cultural, and historical subject) resulting in the disappearance or discounting of a reality independent of these self-referential academic hyperrealities.[99] The territory, in this case Arrernte mythology, is simulated—that is, concocted where absent—to satisfying the needs of the preceding abstract model, that of evolution so firmly established at that time upon biological authority.

Because it may provide insight into standard academic methods and interpretive categories as well as into the study of aboriginal peoples, I am interested in what motivated Spencer, the scientist, to set aside scientific method. Simulation, as a method of prediction, is an important aspect of scientific method. However, simulation, of the sort Spencer engaged in, is not scientifically legitimate because it is never held empirically accountable. His map creates, rather than represents, his territory. And more remarkably, in the cultural setting, simulations are soon absorbed by reality, that is, they quickly lose their distinction as simulations by being taken for the empirically real.[100] Their power is in providing what is lacking. Once what is absent becomes present, reality claims it as real, despite it being a hyperreality, that is, a reality whose only referent is itself. Once Spencer establishes the meaning of Arrernte mythology in temporal developmental terms, it becomes the Arrernte meaning of myths. Once Spencer presents simulated myths to meet the expectations of his typological schema, they become Arrernte myths. And, yes, in time, even to the Arrernte.

I suggest that Spencer's abandonment of scientific method was due to the broad confidence in the universal applicability of the morphological-evolutionist theory. At that time it was being so powerfully demonstrated in nature and applied to the study of cultures around the world. As applied to cultures it characterizes colonialism at the time. Orientalism has been given extensive attention.[101] Spencer's methods of constructing realities to fit the broad systems of classification were so commonplace at the time in the British Empire that it would likely have seemed incomprehensible to question them. Yet the unthinkable may also have been feared, that is, the possibility that this explanatory approach might not apply to native Australians. From Spencer's point of view any alternative to this temporal-based progressive ordering of reality is unthinkable or thinkable only in the terms of monstrosity. Nothing must escape the empire of meaning. In pathology "monstrosity" is a technical term denoting a malformed fetus.

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[99] See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 1-43.

[100] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, l9-20.

[101] See the studies of Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978) and Timothy Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1991 [1988]) on Orientalism as applied to Egypt.

Perhaps when Spencer introduced the confusion of two analytical schemes, involving two conflicting concepts of time (as I will show), as the basis on which to understand Arrernte mythology and when he concocted myths to simulate evidence for the categories by which he classified aboriginal myths, he did so out of the fear of confronting monstrosity in the fetal stage of human development. So-called primitive peoples had made this threat to the closed morphological system as early as the time of Linnaeus. While native Australians came to the attention of Europeans too late for Linnaeus to classify them, he did propose classifications for native Americans: *Homo americanus*, *Homo monstrosus patagonici*, and *Homo monstrosus plagiocephali*.[102]

<div align="center">IV</div>

In the application of comparative biological methods to culture, the introduction of time spawned the insatiable quest for origins. The temporal placement of mythology as representing "the beginning time" gave it a crowning role in the quest. The introduction of time to mythology parallels the designation of native Australians as *ab origine*, as "from the origin," as "primitives." The identity of the timeless morphological structure designated as simplest was joined with an evolutionary schema that placed both mythology and native Australians as chronologically early or first. Thus in the frame of evolution, it seems, affirming chronological antiquity was a method of assuring morphological authenticity. One current manifestation of this monstrosity is the obsession with increasing, to an ever-greater extent, the length of time native cultures have occupied Australia. This obsession with antiquity is clearly linked with the quest for authenticity and is now often cited even by contemporary indigenous peoples in their attempt to gain authenticity by participating in the hyperrealities created by outsiders that have effectively displaced them.[103]

In the evolutionary biological scheme, time is continuous: incubation concludes with hatching which is continuous with the life of the chicken; evolution is charted along a continuous developmental series interconnecting the various levels of biological growth in a temporal sequence independently established. But the monstrosity is apparent when applied to mythology as Spencer conceived it. In the mythological scheme time is, in some senses, discontinuous with, yet overlapping, independent temporal sequences such as those of biological evolution. Mythic time is at once the long long ago and the present. Despite Spencer's periodization within mythology as early, middle, and later, all mythology remains temporally distant and vague. Mythology is quite distinct from the sequence of stages of human biological development charted by evolutionary biologists. Though biological ideas attempt to draw aboriginal mythology into the realm made meaningful in terms of biological assumptions—that is, by accounting for its sensibility in terms of the designation of developing stages—the effect is an awkward patching together of two species of time, one with a religious

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[102] As indicated in Jonathan Smith, "What a Difference a Difference Makes," in "To See Ourselves as Others See Us," in *Late Antiquity*, ed. Jacob Neusner and Ernest S. Frerichs (Chicago: Scholars Press, 1985), 47.

[103] Given the argument that Tony Swain made in *A Place for Strangers: Towards a History of Australian Aboriginal Being* (Cambridge, Mass.; Oxford University Press, 1993), that aboriginal cultures traditionally had spatially based ontologies, these sincere testimonies seem ironic.

and ideological heritage, the other with a scientific and objectivist one. The result, though largely unacknowledged, is a monstrosity. As in the example of Frankenstein's creature, a monster is made to appear as a joining together of parts from different animals or species. But then, too, monsters are usually created from fear of the unknown, the fear of the monstrosity within.

<div align="center">V</div>

In *A Place for Strangers* Tony Swain argues convincingly that pre-contact aboriginal life was based on a spatial, rather than a temporal, ontology.[104] With these several concerns, I accept Swain's analysis as powerful in that its effect is to radically challenge Western perspectives as even being capable of imagining indigenous ontologies (though I recognize this as in some senses a contradiction of what I have argued, yet I find it experienced this way). While I do not actually believe it is possible to recover pre-contact world senses as other than some form of colonial projection, I still believe, as Swain has shown, there is powerful heuristic value in the exercise. But clearly we have not thought enough about all this yet. He holds that aborigines operated from an understanding of "rhythmed events" and that there was nothing beyond or pre-existing these events. The most fundamental statement is that "events occur." Swain does not deny time to aborigines. He simply holds that they do not give "sovereignty to time." The abiding law is a geosophy, a belief that all knowledge and wisdom derives through abiding events from place.[105]

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[104] While I do not want to detract from Swain's work, which believe to be one of the most important studies of aboriginal cultures, I remain bothered that the distinctions between aboriginal and European world senses, spatial and temporal ontologies, are products of the colonial discourse. And that the subjects of these distinctions are themselves products of the encounter. I believe that Swain does much to demonstrate that what we understand as aboriginal identity was constructed in the experience of colonial encounter and that the features that distinguished this new identity derived largely from colonists. Further, colonists developed these expectations based perhaps less on encounter with indigenous peoples than from projections from basic-level experiences structured by what George Lakoff in *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal About the Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) calls "kinesthetic image schema." The particular operative schema, not discussed by Lakoff, was what I would term, following Jonathan Smith, WE-THEY, articulated more precisely in this cultural and historical situation, from the colonist point of view, in the version Smith rendered as THEY ARE NOT LIKE US.

   As I follow this reasoning out, I am concerned that Swain's analysis is as much a reflection of the power of colonialism to shape everything as it is an accurate reconstruction of pre-contact indigenous ontology. Certainly all of the descriptive terms are colonial and every one depends for its meaning on a contrasting counterpart. In other words, Swain cannot be convincing re# aboriginal pre-contact ontology in the absence of the contrasting example of Western ontology.

   Another associated issue concerns me. Though Swain does not suggest this, one implication of reconstructing pre-contact indigenous ontology is that pre-contact peoples are the only authentic, true, pure, real aborigines. It may suggest that their experiences in the colonial setting have been degradations,

[105] Swain, *A Place for Strangers*, 23-5.

Even a commonsense ecological view of aboriginal life suggests that time is less a concern than space, than land. In central Australia, there are seasonal differences, yet they are unpredictable and irregular. While the celestial movements are obviously regular with respect to an objective sense of time, the patterns of rainfall, temperature, plant growth, and animal behavior are often not. There is little if anything in the experience of aboriginal life that establishes enduring markers for large processes of developmental change. They created no enduring architectural forms or other human works. No sign of abandoned camps could be found after a brief interval. Methods of reckoning time as reflected in aboriginal languages are rudimentary. Native terms for ordinals end at five. They designate time in the simplest relational terms of today, yesterday, tomorrow.

Aborigines living traditional lifestyles know a world founded upon the direct experience always within the setting of an abiding landscape. Every hill, water hole, group of rocks, and tree is significant. The meaning of place is articulated in terms of the events involving figures known to aborigines in many ways: stories, dance dramas, and visiting the places where the events are linked. The figures of these events are identified with plants, animals, and natural (to us) phenomena. The itinerary of the travels and camping places of the protagonists, the list of places where events occur, is a method of articulating human identity and meaning. That these events in some sense preceded the present is of far less significance than their role in identifying and giving meaning to country and to aborigines. What matters is that the events and the country with which they are synonymous abide. It is the dependability of the features of the land and the associated significance articulated as event that is most fundamental to traditional aboriginal world senses. It is event/place, not time, that is most fundamental.

If we can allow, though we may not be able to fully comprehend, the possibility that traditional aboriginal ontologies were more spatially than temporally based, we can see that Spencer's periodization, intended to reveal certain aspects of aboriginal life and culture, also hid other important aspects of aboriginal cultures from him and, in turn, from his readers,

While early in this century the implications of cultural evolutionism were largely abandoned, the patched-together morphological-evolutionary model and the associated objectivist world view continue to inform[106] our theories of myth and some of our most fundamental cultural categories and theories, including even our theory of category, as George Lakoff has so powerfully argued.[107] We have not been able to sever our expectations of myth from these assumptions. We invariably demand that cultures have mythology and that it be connected with an explanation of origination.[108] We usually date myth as arising in antiquity and consider it as though it has somehow survived without change. Myth is expected to function as charter, as primitive explanation, as descriptive anatomy of chronological development particularly at the creation and embryonic stages.

<div align="center">VI</div>

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[106] Or I suppose all of these factors more accurately constitute a collection of interdependent ideas and concepts.
[107] Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*.
[108] Jonathan Z. Smith's view of myth as application is a refreshing exception.

I suspect that much of what we presently consider to be aboriginal mythology derives not from aborigines, but from the urgency and methods of ethnography. In the process of picking over Spencer and Gillen's works to establish his belief that religion is synonymous with "the sacred center," Mircea Eliade noted that "the myth relates in seemingly endless detail the wanderings of the first Achilpa Ancestors."[109] Indeed, anyone who has attempted a reading of the mythology Spencer presented in the classifications of early, middle, and later wanderings will doubtless have experienced a good bit of mind wandering. Page after page these myths are but lists of place names; itineraries of the protagonists as they travel, camp, encounter other people, and perform ceremonies. Everything is told briefly, without detail. They seem scarcely myths in the sense of engaging narrative. European Australian place names are often added to aboriginal names, otherwise there would be little familiar to grasp at all.

The bulk of aboriginal ritual in central Australia is the performance of what might be termed totem-locality rites. These are ritual-dramas that present in song and dance the actions of totem figures at specific geographical locations. They are usually not performed in the sequence of the itinerary, but apparently for pragmatic purposes such as forging relationships among peoples of different totem groups in order to acquire access to land areas for hunting and gathering, to educate members of culture about the land, to initiate youth, and to increase the supply of plants and animals. Spencer and Gillen did not know Arrernte language well and did not recognize that the songs that accompany the ritual-dramas tell, in detail, the actions of the totem figures at specific locations. The dances dramatically enact what the songs describe. Spencer and Gillen had to make sense of the rites by asking their informants to tell them what was going on. They also often asked for accounts of the travels of particular ancestral figures. It appears that when asked these questions their informants satisfied them by giving them itineraries, lists of interconnected places that constitute the tracks across the land that define specific totem regions. Spencer and Gillen took these lists, these itineraries, to be myths. The question is, why? The protagonists were not deities, but ancestors (though, of course, they are usually identified with or as a plant or animal). The setting was not fantastic or mythic, but the surrounding landscape. The events were not presented as occurring at the beginning of time or even necessarily in the remote past. They have no explicit temporal markers.

It is well known that aborigines trace their relationship to country by listing the itinerary of place names where events occur interconnected by the travels of the figures with whom the country is identified.[110] An itinerary is synonymous, though elaborated, with designating

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[109] Mircea Eliade, *Australian Religions: An Introduction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), 52.

[110] This observation has been documented so many times as to scarcely need support, however. See, for example, Theodor Strehlow, *Aranda Traditions* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1947); Diane Bell, *Daughters of the Dreaming* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press [1983] 1993); Michael Jackson, *At Home in the World* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995); and W. E. H. Stanner, "Religion, Totemism and Symbolism," in *Aboriginal Man in Australia*, ed. Ronald M. Berndt and Catherine H. Berndt (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1965), 137-72.

country by the identity of the travelling figures. By taking itineraries for myths a lack is made present and it is quickly assumed to be a cultural reality.

From the perspective of aborigines, as many scholars have shown, it is country that is fundamental and to know one's country one must know the places at which abiding events occur. The events are important primarily to serve the practical needs of people forming relationships and transmitting culture. Presenting itineraries is not at all a ruse cooked for anthropological consumption, yet it still does not constitute a mythology.

Spencer identified these lists as myths because the apparatus by which he was equipped to understand the world demanded it. To him all things are ultimately understood in terms of their origination. That aborigines should escape this method was unthinkable; indeed, their identity with the beginning made the presence of myth the more unquestionable.

There is a more recent and clearer example of how some of our accounts of aboriginal mythology may come about. In the early 1980s, Diane Bell did field studies at Warrabri, a temporary community (now transformed) established north of Alice Springs for aborigines of several language groups who had been displaced from their ancestral lands. Bell presents for her readers what she terms a myth. Describing how she came by her myth, she writes:

> In extracting the story line from the ritual performances and presenting it in the form of a myth which has a beginning and an end, I am doing violence to the cultural conception. My justification for such a representation is that, short of a lifetime spent as a woman in women's camps, it is impossible to comprehend the kaleidoscopic range of nuances, ramifications and elaborations of the behavior of the Dreamtime ancestors who acted out yilpinji myths.[111]

But Bell would presumably not have needed to extract this story if aboriginal women actually told myths.

Aborigines show no need for the kind of atlas we call mythology to chart their own creation and developmental progress. It is country that is fundamental to them and if called upon they can provide outsiders with an itinerary, fragmented outlines of events that demonstrate the meaning and identity of country. They tolerate outsiders' attempts at constructing myth. Bell writes that when she read her narratives to aboriginal women they "nodded assent but declared my version to be a written text which constitutes another form, one peculiar to whites. Their telling of the myth in ritual emphasizes the richness of country rather than the development of plot or character."[112] Though certainly more self-conscious, Bell repeats Spencer's approach; she not only created a narrative but, by identifying the story as myth, she temporalized it on evolutionary-morphological criteria. As myth, the narrative she constructs appears to hold the authority, the model, the charter, and the key to the meaning of the ritual she actually observed.

Whereas the aborigines seem to be able to graciously accommodate the differences they experience in our understanding of their culture, it seems that to Europeans difference has

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[111] Bell, *Daughters of the Dreaming*, 174.
[112] Bell, *Daughters of the Dreaming*, 174.

typically hinted of the unthinkable, suggested our inability to comprehend. Our evolutionary-morphologically based theory of myth has been one of the strategies for avoiding an encounter with the unthinkable.[113] But, as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* shows us, once the enterprising scientist creates the monster he cannot be free of it. It seems to always turn up demanding that he create more of its kind. I am not convinced that mythology, particularly in its necessary identification with origination, is a useful category by which to attempt to comprehend aboriginal culture.[114]

<div align="center">VII</div>

In his presentation of Arrernte mythology, Spencer was faced with the issue of finding examples for the first period, the early wanderings. He had called for these myths to be distinguished by the creation of human beings, thus of the early period. Following immediately his description of the classification schema, as quoted above, Spencer wrote:

> The earliest tradition with which we are acquainted is as follows. In the early Alcheringa the country was covered with salt water (*Kwatcha alia*). This was gradually withdrawn towards the north by the people of that country who always wanted to get it and to keep it for themselves. At last they succeeded in doing so, and the salt water has remained with them ever since. At this time there dwelt in the *Alkira aldorla*, that is the western sky, two beings whom it is said that they were *Ungambikula*, a word which means "out of nothing," or "self-existing." From their elevated dwelling-place they could see, far away to the east, a number of *Inapertwa* creatures, that is rudimentary human beings or incomplete men, whom it was their mission to make into men and women.

> In those days there were no men and women, and the *Inapertwa* were of various shapes and dwelt in groups along by the shores of the salt water. They had no distinct limbs or organs of sight, hearing or smell, and did not eat food, and presented the appearance of human beings doubled up into a rounded mass in which just the outline of the different parts of the body could be vaguely seen.

> Coming down from their home in the western sky, armed with their *Lalira* or great stone knives, the *Ungambikula* took hold of the *Inapertwa*; one after the other. First of all the arms were released, then the fingers were added to make four clefts at the end of each arm; then legs and toes were added in the same way. The figure could now stand, and after this the nose was added and the nostrils bored with the fingers. A cut with the knife made the mouth, which was pulled open several times to make it flexible. A slit on

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[113] In the social context there is an interesting parallel. Miscegenation was considered by European-Australians as highly offensive. Mixed racial people, invariably the offspring of caucasian men and aboriginal women, were considered mongrel and monstrous. They were not recognized by their fathers. They were accepted by their mothers. The monstrosity of mixed race was based in the seeming unnatural conjunction of peoples of different times, different rungs on the ascending ladder of evolution.

[114] I am not denying that the huge number of stories, including those that present basic itineraries, that have been collected are useful or important, The question I am raising regards them being considered myths and given the temporal ontological baggage that accompanies this term.

each side separated the upper and lower eye-lids, hidden behind which the eyes were already present, another stroke or two completed the body, and thus, out of the *Inapertwa*, men and women were formed.

These *Inapertwa* creatures were in reality stages in the transformation of various animals and plants into human beings, and thus they were naturally, when made into human beings, intimately associated with the particular animal or plant, as the case may be, of which they were the transformations—in other words, each individual of necessity belonged to a totem the name of which was of course that of the animal or plant of which he or she was a transformation.[115]

This account is a dream come true for a biologist turned anthropologist. From the pre-existence of life in the sea to the morphological stages paralleling the embryonic or fetal stages in the transformation of plants and animals into human beings, how could an account of the origin of human beings fit biological evolutionist expectations more closely? The problem is that the account is largely concocted by Spencer. He created this account by selecting bits from two of Gillen's journal accounts: one collected in 1894 that was labelled "Traditions of Origin"[116] the other a fly-catching lizard totem story that Gillen collected in 1897.[117] By contextualizing his selected elements in the framework of the creation of human beings, a concern of neither source account, and by providing his own strong interpretative statements in the final paragraph (as quoted above), Spencer created an example for his category of "early wanderings" where he otherwise had none.[118]

It is of further interest that when Spencer returned to the field in 1926 to collect information on which to base a revision of *Native Tribes*, published in 1927 entitled *The Arunta*, he collected materials on which he concocted another example for the "early wanderings" period.[119] While in a footnote to this revised edition Spencer disavows the usefulness of his periodization schema for the myths (a brief emergence of the scientist), he nonetheless retains the classifications in his text presentation. Comparison of Spencer's field journals[120] with his publication shows that he conflates and broadly misrepresents two stories told to him at a two-week interval by his principal informant, an aboriginal police tracker named Charlie Cooper. The result is the publication of a narrative attributing world creation to a sky god named

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[115] Spencer and Gillen, *Native Tribes*, 388-9.

[116] Francis Gillen, Journal, vol. 1, 39-40, Barr Smith Library, Adelaide. A version of this account was published as "Notes on Some Manners and Customs of the Aborigines of the McDonnell Ranges belonging to the Arunta Tribe," in *Report on the Work of the Horn Scientific Expedition to Central Australia*, Part IV - Anthropology, ed. Baldwin Spencer (London, 1896), 184-5.

[117] Gillen, Journal, vol. 3, 616-7, Barr Smith Library, Adelaide.

[118] A fuller presentation of this comparison is available in my book, *Storytracking: Texts, Stories, and Histories in Central Australia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[119] Spencer and Gillen, The Arunta, i:355-60,

[120] . Baldwin Spencer, Field Notes, "Notebook: Alice Springs, 1926," located at the Museum of Victoria, Melbourne.

Numbakulla. Furthermore, ethnographer Theodor Strehlow has indicated that Charlie Cooper told him that he created the stories in order to please Spencer.[121]

<div align="center">VIII</div>

Spencer considered aborigines to be human, yet he approached what he collected of them in much the same way he did his biological specimens. His business as a biologist was to make the animals speak.[122] The biological method of extracting a confession from the beasts is to collect them, kill them, dissect them, describe them, and finally place them in some system of classification that, because it surpasses the particular, implies a kind of explanation. It is an abstract system of meaning existing apart from, independent of, local phenomena. Aborigines and the elements of their cultures were objects to be collected, described, and classified. Spencer was a zealous photographer, taking hundreds of photographs to document every aboriginal cultural practice, physical feature, and rite. Dispassionately and impersonally he described in remarkable detail everything he witnessed. The cultural elements presented by means of these photographs and text descriptions parallel dead biological specimens collected in order to be given meaning through classification based on careful laboratory analysis.

By Spencer's approach it appears he understood aborigines as close kin to animals, directly transformed from them, and still self-identified with them as confirmed by his understanding of their mythology. Gillen contributed to the field collection of aboriginal cultural specimens which were analyzed by Spencer in his study in Melbourne, where (at least in the case of mythology) he filled in the gaps in the morphological series with imaginative constructs, and then presented the specimens in the classificatory schema that gave them meaning. He made the aborigines speak. The parallel to Orientalism persists. Edward Said wrote: "Orientalism is premised upon exteriority, that is, on the fact that the Orientalist, poet or scholar, makes the Orient speak."[123] Biology and anthropology are servants of colonialism.

The silence of the animals and the aborigines is troublesome to Western observers. It challenges the empire of meaning where nothing is permitted silence. Thus, the aborigines, like the animals, were, indeed they are still being, made to speak by being fit into categories whose organization is considered an adequate presentation of meaning.

But, like the animals, and especially because of the way they were seen, the aborigines have remained largely silent. The collection, classification, and concoction of myths are ways that the aborigines have been made to speak, to speak forced confessions we have needed to hear regarding their origins and natures. The simulacra through which they have been heard gave them what we jealously regard and experience only through nostalgia. I suspect the bulk of our interest in mythology has ventured little from meeting these needs. But, as I have shown, what we hear them say is, to an extent, self-referential hyperrealities created to serve Western

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[121] Theodor Strehlow, "Geography and the Totemic Landscape in Central Australia," in *Australian Aboriginal Anthropology*, ed. Ronald M. Berndt (Perth: University of Western Australia Press, 1970), 138-9 n. 25.

[122] A fascinating correlate is to be found in Jean Baudrillard's essay, "The Animals: Territory and Metamorphoses," in *Simulacra and Simulation*, 129-42.

[123] Said, *Orientalism*, 20.

perspectives. Threatened by their silence, supported by our science, we speak for the aborigines by constructing systems of classification that gain such ontological force that we feel compelled to concoct examples where empirical evidence is missing. But this process always says at least as much about us as about our subjects.

I do not want to be misunderstood. I am not damning Spencer or any other scholar for being shaped by the milieu in which he lived, for using the categories by which he could make sense of the world, or for construing (even concocting) evidence to fit his expectations. That would be to damn the entire academic (even the entire human) enterprise. Yet we cannot simply ignore the tacit interpretive operations that I have documented, nor can we simply set them aside as rare academic mistakes. This would be too simple. Rather, we must recognize that even the classic ethnographic works on which we so heavily rely are not themselves objective presentations of subjects but rather are complex interpretive works (though the interpretive apparatus remains largely tacit) in which markedly contrasting world senses had to be negotiated. Spencer's accomplishments are unquestionably remarkable, yet we have nothing but to gain by a careful and critical study of the ways he interpreted his subjects. This kind of analysis is to honor him and his work and to appreciate that his understanding of the aborigines is an interactive one, the product of a complex creative and interpretive work, rather than the result of a passive objective lens to the truth. The larger questions this process of self-consciousness raises do not pertain to Spencer, but rather to us. Gaining a measure of self-consciousness about the interpretive and comparative enterprises of scholarship, we must now ask new questions and demand that we be evaluated by measures heretofore uncalled for. Not the least among these troubling questions is how the category myth (and, for that matter, religion, ritual, and culture) shapes what we see, expect, and find among our subjects of study.

IV: Gesture

10: Gesture Posture Prosthesis

As a misfit student at the University of Chicago so many decades ago, while I realized that I could not return to my career in business, I hadn't a clue what might be my path forward. By accident I found myself on a track labeled the "history of religions" and of that field about all I knew was that the subjects chosen by my fellow students in this field were associated with places, languages, and histories remarkably exotic to a Kansas farm boy. Pushed to select my area of specialization, I felt no guidance beyond chance itself; take a map of the world, close my eyes, let my finger drop on it randomly and that would be my choice. Couldn't do it. Then, the only places on world maps familiar to me were those in the surround of my mid-western upbringing. The only non-random choice had to be the people and cultures that had once, if no longer to any physical extent, occupied the territory of my homeland. When I announced to my advisors that I wanted to study American Indians (surely that was the term I then used), they told me that it was a choice that would not succeed. Still, with no alternative I had to stick with my choice. It had all to do with territory, land, country, story, costume, home, familiarity.

Years later, I remember having a chat with Donald Lopez about his fascinating book *Prisoners of Shangri-la: Tibetan Buddhism and the West* (1998). We talked of how the choices we make of subjects upon entering the academic study of religion are based on ideas, feelings, and information that often turn out to be strikingly different from what we eventually learn. The title of Donald's book reflects his demonstration that it is the romanticism of Tibetan Buddhism that often attracts new scholars and overly shapes their studies before they have even begun. In my comparable experience, the romantic and generally superficial level of understanding was even more profoundly complicated by what was an obvious limitation of which my advisors persistently reminded me: These people have no texts!

My strategy was to use ethnographies as well as the orthographic records of spoken words as my "texts." My study of Navajo prayer, the subject of my PhD dissertation,[124] amassed a rich collection of ethnographies that included what I calculated to be roughly 15,000 lines (an interesting measure for an oral genre!) of prayer. I went to Arizona and hung out on the Navajo Reservation meeting Navajos and talking with them about their lives and stories and religion and territory. What was immediately clear to me was that prayers were not for Navajos merely texts in the sense of language-based objects that record, preserve, communicate, or capture statements of belief, theology, ideology. For Navajos, prayers exist only in their being prayed and they do not exist as objects to be preserved or studied or read. Prayer, for Navajos, is action and agency and force. But then isn't it also that for most religious people? Navajos speak of prayer in such subjective terms as to suggest they consider prayers as persons.[125]

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[124] Published as *Sacred Words: A Study of Navajo Religion and Prayer* (1981).

[125] See my "Prayer as Person: The Navajo Conception of Prayer Acts." *History of Religions* 17:2 (1977): 143-157 and "Prayer as Performance: A Navajo Contribution to the Study of Prayer." In *Native American Religious Action*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1987, pp. 89-112

An academic option for my study was to draw upon my skill as a systems analyst and computer programmer; skills that prepared me to see complex repeating patterns occurring within the collections of the recorded Navajo prayers I had amassed. These skills allowed me to correlate structural patternings that occur in the language of prayer with the actions and objects used in the rituals that provided context for the prayers. The patternings also extended to Navajo stories (which I called myth) and to Navajo history, kinship, lifeway, and cosmology.

As a study of corresponding patterns, my approach contrasted with the patternist approach of my mentor Mircea Eliade. His patterns were in a sense top down. He came to his subjects with something like an academic theology of religion using it as a means external to his subjects to reveal the hidden commonality within the apparent diversity of patterns. My approach, if in some senses equally impossible, was to find within the Navajo materials the inherent patterns and to discover how layered interactive patterned behavior and objects served in agentive ways to create, communicate, and impact cultural and individual identity. The formation and use of these patterned behaviors were, I proposed, what amounted to Navajo identity at any point and over time.

To articulate what marked these patterns and patterned behavior as religious was not much of my concern then (it seemed obvious), yet as I reflect on it now I realize that it was the recognition of what now I'd call the presence of an aesthetic of impossibles that marked these particular cultural actions and objects. The stories, the masks, the rituals, the characters, the understanding of the complexity of territory far surpassing the obvious and observable; all these were markers of this aesthetic. I can now see that prayer itself was a prime action based on this aesthetic in that it invoked characters, the *diyin dine'e* or holy people, of an entirely different order of reality. Prayer is the action complex that conjoins what cannot be conjoined.

Still, in all this, I was not able to comprehend how one might be able to articulate the value and significance of these utterly complex acts that were considered by the Navajo actors as requiring great precision in preparation and execution. I often felt the pathetic inappropriateness of asking "so what does it mean?" The few times I actually asked this question, the evidence of incredulity at my utter ignorance was unquestionably present on the faces of those I asked. I stopped asking, yet how to perform my role as an academic if I didn't somehow discover the "meaning" "behind" the objects and actions of these people who, it seemed unavoidably as an assumption, were somehow incapable (why? because they didn't write?) of articulating this for themselves. I think that my own frustration and feelings of guilt (in several respects) are not unrelated to why in the academic study of religion, prayer and even ritual have never developed in any way comparable to the obvious role these actions play wherever we identify something as religious. We have never been able to get beyond the limitations of our own expectations related to an overly intellectual word-bound approach to studying religion. This front-loaded complex of academic expectations has not only limited our appreciation of cultures that do not write down their words, it also leads us to ignore the extensive domains of those religious traditions that do write down their words—including our own. We have relegated even the awareness of this aspect of religion to the fringe and niche studies identified under such labels as lived religion, body, practice, everyday religion, and folk religion. Yet, for the full histories of these traditions with written words, only the tiny minority could read or write, and these few remained unknown to most all others of the same religion.

Further among the actions of the literate, reading and writing have most often played a small role. And further yet, the very actions of reading and writing are often performative acts in themselves that are valuable apart from the written content. What we have missed in our academic study of religion are not just those cultures relegated usually to anthropology because they don't have texts (or occur widely throughout the world), we have also missed the religious lives of almost all the people identified with those cultures that do write (or whose languages have a strong written form). Even more we fail to recognize that reading and writing and associated acts—that is, everything to do with what we call texts—are themselves actions and behaviors that should be appreciated apart from the content of or interpretation of the written words. It seems we've got the thing turned upside down, yet we haven't even realized it perhaps because we haven't been able to imagine an alternative.

The challenge is, how do we approach the actions and behaviors, the makings and the experiencings, the ritualing and dancing, the practicing and repeating, the goings and comings, without either asking these folks what all these goings on *mean* or perhaps just offering a general description and nothing more? In an academic setting the long-established method is to interpret intellectually accessible materials. The most natural object of interpretation is natural language. Should the subject of interest be in a non-western language then a principal academic method is to translate the subject texts to a more academically accessible language.

Academically more difficult is what is involved in what I call transduction. This is the conversion of something of one form of existence into an entirely different form. Such a conversion is remarkably common in technology, accomplished by what we refer to as an interface. We touch a key or a screen and the interface transduces organic (the touching action) into electronic (the binary informational counterpart in a silicon reality), analog into digital, action into information. Science is based largely on the transduction of a subject of study into information, typically into numbers; numbers, in turn, find a place in mathematical formulas and in statistical analysis (and eventually in charts and graphs). Science is also based on a normalization of subjects of study; that is, upon the consideration of an individual subject in the context of an informational community of similar subjects in which various traits have been analyzed to determine "normal," numerically described, statistical probabilities calculated; a transduction of the organic into the statistical. Laboratories eliminate a range of natural variables by placing the subject in a controlled environment. Academic methods transduce a subject to an objectified (words or numbers) form that normalizes it by the reasoned examination of information.

The challenge the academic study of religion faces, should it want to actually study the practice and performance of things religious however that is identified, is to appreciate that the subject is remarkably complex comprised of sensory rich interwoven networks of moving and acting in intricate emotional registers. Even to offer the most basic description is a transductional challenge on a grand scale. Yet, even if this challenge were sufficiently met, what do we do with a technical description of a four-hour dance done in costume involving song and rhythm and objects and variation among say forty dancers? This is the situation I was in when I stood atop a roof of a Hopi pueblo in Hottevilla. Stirred by a full day of enthrallment by kachina dancers and the entire village involved in so many ways in the dance event, I slipped back into

my academic training and heard myself ask the Hopi man whom I had stood near much of the day, "So what is this all about?" His simple response was, "To make it rain."

Notably over time, not at all disconnected with my own personal development, I became all the more interested in dancing. I became fascinated with all cultural forms of dancing and was stunned to find that, quite in contrast with western religious cultures, dancing was quite often considered nearly synonymous with religion by the people involved; although I suspect that these folks recognized both terms (religion and dance) had a different sense to me than to them. I traveled to Bali, Java, Ghana, Mali, Australia, Puerto Rico, Costa Rica, Thailand, and Nepal to observe and learn dancing and music. I also observed dancing and music in ritual settings throughout the American Southwest. To ninety students I taught yearlong courses on religion and dancing that included two dozen cultures around the world and the students took studios to experience these dances themselves taught by people from these cultures.

Still, the question remains, how do we academics do justice to the sheer sensory richness and complexity of these ritual dance drama events? In most of these cultures I visited, I was astounded by the effort and resources expended in the preparation and performance of these events. In Bali, for example, it would be, if anything, an understatement to say that the preparation for and performance of dance, music, drama, ritual events occupies the largest portion of their wealth and use of their time. And the Balinese are but a little more devoted to such things than those in most of the other cultures where I have spent time.

In my academic studies of dancing and dance theory I found that many scholars often refer to dancing as gesture. In terms of my understanding of gesture at the time, basically that gesture is unspoken communication, I strongly opposed the association. My feelings were that to consider dancing principally as an act of communication needed be followed by asking of any given dance what is the message communicated? Such an approach suggested that elements of a specific dance technique—hand positions, step patterns, angle of elbow, attitude of head, for example—correlate with vocabulary. Indeed, is it quite common for the specificity of a particular dance to be described in terms of its "vocabulary." Following this approach then the choreography and technique would need somehow to be understood as constituting a grammar. Yet, no matter the detail by which a particular dance tradition articulates these constituent elements of technique, there can be no grammar that allows the transduction of defined elements of movement technique into a message captured by natural language. The result is a reduction that insults the sheer richness and complexity of the dancing. Dance forms such as bharata natyam and ballet have long histories each with a remarkably complex and formal terminology for articulating elements of movement. In bharata natyam for example there are fifty-five one and two hand mudras (hand positions) each named (in Sanskrit) and each with a common set of ways the mudra can be used to illustrate things specific such as flying birds, a flag, an arrow, a crescent moon, and so forth. Seemingly like words, mudras may illustrate a variety of story elements depending on context and the associated movement. In my observation of these mudras, they illustrate the story that is recounted in the lyrics of the song to which the dance is performed. A sequence of mudras apart from dance and song may comprise a practice (the studied critiqued repetition of the full set of mudras, rather like the hours of repetition of technique of ballet at the barre), but not an act that communicates a specific message that can be articulated in detail and complexity by natural language.

Over the decades of my struggle with these issues, I finally came to appreciate that it was impossible to dismiss the practiced repeated codified acts of body movement and that gesture (and also posture) has the potential as a way of analyzing and articulating this appreciation. What I needed was a richer and more appropriate understanding of gesture. Such an understanding would, I came to realize, not come easily. It would require a broad reconsideration of what it is to be human, which included understanding being human in the context of all animate organisms (developed by Husserl) who hold in common the performance and practice of gesture. To develop a suitable understanding of gesture required the shift away from the received understandings of human in the context of the assumptions about religion, particularly those espoused by Eliade's academic theology of religion, that in my view, despite the waning of reference to Eliade, continue to inform academic and popular understandings of religion as being grounded primarily in some spiritual realm of otherness only partially revealed to, understood, and comprehended by human beings. I did my best for a while to actually abandon the whole study of religion because I felt these assumptions to be spurious. My preference has been to focus as much as possible on the nature of being creative and vital human beings based as much, if not more so, in biology and in philosophy than in theology (an academic theology). In the contemporary world, I think this effort at a biology of humanity, in the largest sense, is essential, if not entirely adequate. I found that my fascination with the aesthetic of impossibles that marks religion to be essential to my efforts to appreciate the distinction of human beings among animate organisms. Yet, I had to find a way to comprehend this aesthetic in biological processes. Gesture as patterned human movement has offered me that opportunity.

I articulate some aspects of gesture in articles that follow, yet there are several areas that deserve mention here. First, I came to understand that gesture may be appreciated in some respects in terms similar to the acquisition and use of skills. Gesture is biologically based patterned movement that is acquired, not natural. Gesture is developed through repetition, often extensive repetition over a considerable period of time, and is always being refined, honed, adapted; no gesture is perfect. Gesture may be gained through carefully studied and critically guided practice as in the sets of gestures that comprise techniques or skills. However, a great many gestures are gained through the more or less unconscious and informal imitation of other persons in social contexts. We imitate parents and siblings in the processes of socialization and enculturation. We imitate members of peer groups. We imitate, mostly without full awareness, models in gender, culture, religion, age, occupation, and most any way of distinguishing identity. As acquired through extensive repetition mirroring the world in which we are immersed, our gestures come to be naturalized; the specificity of any gestures feels simply obvious, natural to us. The processes of acquiring a complex set of patterned movements that we refer to as gesture is similar to the acquisition of skill. Musicians, dancers, athletes, artists, and workers gain the gestural techniques that define them as musicians and dancers and workers and that are the basis for their performance of their identifying activities. These skills are gained through repetition, practice, critique, effort over time. The acquisition of skill includes feelings of the ease and confidence of performance. Acquired skill comes to seem effortless with a shift of intention beyond the details of the specific patterning to a more general and inclusive concern or even to a felt sense of rightness and enjoyment.

Second, I came to understand that gesture does not exist in isolation from the *postural* aspects of body understood as the dynamic foundation that enables, reacts to, and distinguishes all human movement. I came to understand that gesture is always an interaction with the world beyond the body. In this capacity, it extends the body into the world and it transforms the body into tools that amplify agency (*prosthesis*). There is an interrelationship among these three distinct, yet inseparable, terms—gesture, posture, prosthesis—that provides a nexus by which we enact our human identity. This nexus comprises the core human skills of creating, expressing, and developing/modifying human identity (including the body at the very level of tissue) through the creative encounter with the environment, with the other. This prosthetic aspect of the gestural nexus enables the extension beyond and connection with the environment beyond the physical limitations of the human body. The nexus is an interface in this respect that reaches out to interrogate (perceive) and grasp (know) and express and shape as it also enfolds that which is beyond the body into it in biological processes that both shape the physical body as well as construct concepts. Our identity and our sense of the world is constructed through this interactive performance of gestural techniques. The gestural nexus is comprised of the complex of interactive sets of skills we use to create in specific terms our own identity as well as the shape of the world we live in. As a skill complex it is always practiced to incorporate change and to gain acuity.

Further, I came to understand that the question "what does a gesture mean?" or "what does this gesture communicate?" is a retroduction, a movement away from the vital active aspect of gesture/posture/prosthesis, an imposed halt, as Bergson noted, to the most distinctive aspect of the subject of our interest, that its value is inseparable from its moving. Such questions commit the murder required to dissect. They reflect a preference for autopsy over kinesiology. The better inquiry relates to coherence/incoherence rather than meaning or message. Coherence/incoherence are not objectified properties of gestures, they are felt responses to the performance or to the observation of gesture/posture/prosthesis practice. We feel at home in a place not because of any specific objective qualities of place (were this the case we could simply define home in universal terms; we'd all live in objectively similar places and structures), but rather because of the feeling of coherence/incoherence we experience in our actions related to the space. House becomes home by acts of making, that is, engaging the space with identity forming gestural practices. A house becomes a home when it invokes in its inhabitants, through gestural compatibility, a feeling of coherence that we describe by such terms as comfort, cozy, safe, ease.

Gesture/posture/prosthesis can be described and analyzed in great detail as process of creating patterns of identity. Gesture/posture/prosthesis vary from person to person, community to community, identity factor to identity factor. Gesture/posture/prosthesis may be valued in terms of how it creates feelings of coherence (or disturbs them), if momentary or how it serves to shift beyond feelings of incoherence.

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Ungambikula is an Arrernte adjective indicating something like "self existing" or "out of nothing." When referring to the characters in the stories of those who marked the tracks (countries) that are a fundamental basis for Arrernte identity, it has frequently been translated

as "they jump up of themselves." While this term might indicate something of an ontological concept, it also is descriptive of gesture. Jiri Kylian, a choreographer from The Netherlands visiting Central Australia, indicated how astounded he was at the "jumping" dance movement; it seemed to him the dancers jumped without preparation, the jump seemed to occur without anything preceding it. In the selection below "They Jump Up of Themselves" the gestural patterning that is evident in both Arrernte mythology and ritual dancing is considered in some depth to demonstrate the advantages of focusing on gesture in the study of religion and culture. This selection also outlines the complex of creative encounters that led to the invention of and wide use of Aboriginal religion and spirituality commonly referred to as Dreamtime.

Returning to my study of Navajo prayer after nearly 50 years, I approach it in the selection below "As Prayer Goes So Goes Religion" from the perspective of gesture, posture, prosthesis. The idea is to consider prayer less in terms of the content of message communicated foregrounding prayer as a repeated gestural ritual speech act that constructs the patternings that correspond with the environment of health and wellbeing. Prayer is understood as the developing skillset of the creative encounter of humans and "others." The details of the gesture posture prosthesis approach are outlined and an effort is made to indicate the advantages of this way of appreciating religion.

11: They Jump Up of Themselves[126]

The Arrernte word "*altjira*" is the crossing point for a complex series of histories and stories that played out in Central Australia beginning in the late nineteenth century and continuing right up to this consideration. *Altjira* has been rendered in many ways—dreamtime, ancestors, the Christian God, for starters—with results that have had widespread and deep impact. The Hermannsburg missionaries arriving in Central Australia in 1877 understood the importance of using local languages to present Christianity to Aboriginal peoples. A. L. Kempe acknowledged the extreme difficulty of learning Arrente language with no common language bridge, yet by the mid-1880s he had identified what he believed were five Arrernte gods. He then wrote, "All of them, the good supernatural beings, they also call 'altgiva,' [later standardized as *altjira*] …the word … signifies that these had an everlasting existence."[127] Kempe adapted this adjectival term for the missionaries to use as the word for God. These early difficult years exhausted the several missionaries who finally abandoned the station in 1891. In 1894 Carl Strehlow arrived to resume the work and quickly began a major ethnographic study of these aboriginal cultures, though he never attended any of their cultural or ritual functions. His multi-volume work published in German, *Die Aranda* (1907-1920), began with a section titled "*Altjira*" in which he reported that the Arrernte have "a being, called Altjira, who embodies the highest good (*mara*)"[128] showing no awareness that this figure had likely arisen in the vocabularies of his informants at the instigation of his predecessor Kempe.

Baldwin Spencer a young London biologist who had been appointed by the University of Melbourne to establish the study of biology in Australia was hired by the Horn Expedition (1894), the first great scientific expedition to explore and document life in Central Australia. Spencer saw little if any difference between the human and the plant and animal life and soon became an ethnographer contributing one of the most influential ethnographies of the late nineteenth century, *Native Tribes in Central Australia* (1899).[129] His co-author was Francis (Frank) Gillen a telegrapher operator and station manager at Alice Springs. During this crucial period from 1894 into the first several years of the twentieth century, Spencer was in regular contact with Sir James George Frazer in London who was embroiled in the controversies that would establish the basis for twentieth century anthropology. One of the major areas of debate at this time was the presence of the "high god" among "primitive people" because of its decisive role in determining when religion appeared in the evolution of culture. Strehlow's identification of Altjira as the Arrernte high god was not welcome to Frazer's view on cultural

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[126] Originally published in *Dancing Culture Religion* (2012), pp. ?????

[127] F. E. H. W. Krichauff, "The Customs, Religious Ceremonies, etc. of the 'Aldolinga' or 'Mbenderinga'Tribe of Aboriginies in Krichauff Ranges, South Australia," Royal Geographical Society of South Australia 2 (1886-88): 33-37. Quoted in Sam D. Gill, *Storytracking: Texts, Stories, & Histories in Central Australia* (Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 87.

[128] Carl Strehlow, Die Aranda Und Loritja-Stämme in Zentral Australia, edited by Moritz Freiherr von Leonharde, translated by Hans D. Oberscheidt (Frankfurt am Main: Joseph Baer, 1907-15), vol. I, part I, p. 1. Quoted in *Storytracking*, p. 98.

[129] W. Baldwin Spencer and Francis J. Gillen, Native Tribes of Central Australia (London, Macmillan, 1899).

evolution which placed magic as a stage prior to the development of religion. Writing to Frazer in 1903, Spencer reflects his obvious sympathy and support,

> Twenty years ago a man named Kempe, one of the first missionaries, seized upon the word Altjira (= our [i.e., Spencer and Gillen's] Alcheri) and adopted it as the word for "God." He knew nothing of its significance to the natives, or of its association with the word "Alchiringa" (Acheri=dream; ringa=of, belonging to) but he saw that it had some special and sacred significance. Now after these twenty years (when the station has not been closed or the missionaries away) of endeavouring to teach the poor natives that Altjira means "God", Strehlow comes forward with the momentous discovery that in the Arunta, "there is a Being of the highest order called Altjira or Altjira mara (mara=good); … that Altjira is the highest divinity; he is the creator of the world and maker of men" …. The paper … has more utter misleading nonsense packed into a small space than I recollect having come across before."[130]

The connection made between the term *altjira* and dreams and dreaming which Spencer refers to in this letter was expanded by Frank Gillen to the term "Dreamtime" which has, despite many deconstructions and criticisms, entered the vocabulary of twentieth century Aboriginal self-understanding and remains today a distinctive marker of self-identity to many Aboriginals.

Kempe later confirmed in a 1910 letter to Spencer that he remained well aware that *altjira* is not 'God' in that sense in which we use the word—namely, as a personal being—but it has a meaning of old, very old, something that has no origin, mysterious, something that has always been so, also always. … We adopted the word [*altjira* for] 'God' because we could find no better and because it comes nearest to the idea of 'eternal.'"[131]

Spencer himself was not innocent of such manipulations. In *Native Tribes* he relied on two sets of Frank Gillen's field notes to describe the "Origin of the Alcheringa Ancestors." Comparing Spencer's text as it represented Gillen's unpublished notes I found that his selection, combination, and presentation of Gillen's notes almost wholly construct the results. Of most relevance here, Spencer combines different figures from Gillen's notes and attributes them with the origin of ancestors. He renders the Arrernte word *ungambikula*, an adjective meaning something like "they jump up of themselves" or "out of nothing" or "self-existing" as the class name *Ungambikula* designating these figures.[132]

Then, in Spencer's 1927 revised edition of *Native Tribes*, which he completed years after Gillen's 1912 death, published under the title *The Arunta*, the same sort of text manipulation reoccurs. Spencer, still bitterly hostile to Carl Strehlow's constructive ethnography, ended up repeating the same maneuver that seems the common thread in all these stories of observers of Aboriginal cultures, the rendering of an adjectival term into a noun and then allowing that to

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[130] ·Spencer's Scientific Correspondence with Sir J. G. Frazer and Others, edited by R. R. Marrett and T. K. Penniman (London: Oxford University Press, 1932), pp. 95-97. Quoted in *Storytracking*, p. 99.

[131] W. Baldwin Spencer and Francis Gillen, The Arunta: A Study of a Stone Age People (Lonton: Macmillan, 1927), p. 596. Quoted in *Storytracking*, p. 100.

[132] See discussion in *Storytracking*, p. 13.

use it as a proper noun. Spencer's principal aboriginal consultant for his extensive field study in 1926 was an English-speaking tracker with the English name Charlie Cooper. During their conversations, Cooper told Spencer a creation story for the *tjilpa* or wildcat people, a division of the Arrente, which featured the figure Numbakulla as a creator; Numbakulla now a proper noun based on the adjective *ungambikula*. This story features, among other things, Numbakulla erecting a pole, painting it with blood, climbing the pole and telling the *tjilpa* man to follow. The man tried to climb the pole but slipped down and then Numbakulla drew the pole up after him and was never seen again. Spencer added a whole new chapter to *The Arunta* that was not in *Native Tribes* presenting this material and, unwittingly it seems, offering his own evidence of an aboriginal "high god." There are a number of concerns about the credibility of Cooper. Theodor Strehlow, the son of Carl Strehlow and himself a noted scholar, later reported that Charlie Cooper had told him that he had contrived the story for Spencer's benefit. Theodor Strehlow was about as critical of Spencer's work as Spencer was of his father's, that is, Carl Strehlow's. Still, it is relatively clear that Numbakulla is a transformation that occurred during the first forty years of European contact with Aboriginals rendering the adjective *ungambikula* that describes the non-origination feature of figures known to the Arrernte into a class noun and eventually into a proper noun naming a creator figure, that is, Numbakulla.

The term *numbakulla* eventually enters the field of the academic study of religion mid-twentieth century when Mircea Eliade began to regularly use an example formalized in a narrative I call "Numbukulla and the Sacred Pole," which he took wholly from Spencer's *The Arunta*, as the prime and often single example by which to establish his understanding of religion, which turned on the valuation of a world axis that connected humans with deities and that held that myths of origination offered the pristine religious condition. The study of religion again turned on Jonathan Z. Smith's critique of Eliade's use of this example and Smith then offered his own understanding, developed upon his careful reading of the story traditions of the *tjilpa,* or wildcat people, as the basis for establishing an alternative theory of religion. Thus, since mid-twentieth century this example has played a significant role in the defining discussions of the study of religion.

In the recording of the Arrernte story traditions, less contested but no less divisive, was to use the terms *altjira* which was an adjective describing something about the figures in these stories, as the noun rendered in English "ancestors" to name this class if figures. The term *ungambikula* could also describe them. Géza Róheim reports that Aboriginal elders assured him the term *altjira* means "the eternal ones from the dream" or "the eternal people who come from dreams."[133]

This stream of Europeans performing the magic of turning adjectives into nouns, even proper nouns, makes for an engaging story of which I have given the barest outline.[134] My discerning the events and telling the story shows, however uncomfortably, that the academic study of other cultures, other people, is an interactive process in which certain projections, effected by

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[133] Géza Róheim, The Eternal Ones of the Dream: Psychoanalytic Interpretation of Australian Myth and Ritual (New York: International Universities Press), p. 211. Quoted in *Storytracking*, p. 105.

[134] I dealt with these matters as exhaustively as I possibly could in *Storytracking*.

theories, classifications, translations, and expectations, occur that result not only in the creative construction of the other on paper, but also in reality. Spencer indignantly recognized the process a century ago when he accused Carl Strehlow of discovering the "high god" only because his own missionary precedessor had introduced the idea years before as part of their process of proselytization. Géza Róheim recognized this process when he went to Australia to do fieldwork in 1929. His objective was to establish the subfield of "psychoanalytic anthropology" in which extensive psychoanalysis would be part of the preparation of an ethnographer for fieldwork because, Róheim argued, most of what occurs is "projection" anyway, so best to know what is being projected.

What I am doing here certainly does not escape this loop and accepting the implications of this process, in the spirit if certainly not the categories of Róheim, is how I hope to remain responsible.

First, I want to note that the ontological core value for all of the non-aboriginal renderings of *altjira* is time. From Kempe's "eternal" and "everlasting existence" to Gillen's "dreamtime" to Spencer's concern with cultural evolution (interestingly the term religion does not appear in the index of any of Spencer's books), to Eliade's *in illo tempore*, to Smith's event/memorial; all of these perspectives are based in an ontology that holds time sovereign.

In his 1993 book, *A Place for Strangers*, Tony Swain offered an alternative to this assumption of the appropriateness for Aboriginals of temporal ontology by presenting evidence and argument that at least at the time of contact, the Aboriginal ontology was based fundamentally on space, rather than time. While, he noted that Aboriginals experienced time, he believes it held no sovereignty for them. Swain proposed that it is more appropriate to understand "dreamings" as *abiding events* which "are characterized by the fact that they take shape and are maintained as world-form."[135] He calls upon the work of Nancy Munn to articulate the basic tenet of abiding events as that something came out of, moved across, and went into, the earth … Graphically, Desert societies render this by employing two basic iconic elements: the concentric circle representing sites and lines standing for tracks between sites. In the boldest of terms, Aboriginal ontology rests upon the maxim that a place-being emerged, moved, and established an abode.[136]

While I am convinced by Swain's argument, I empathize with the difficulty he has had trying to describe a space-based ontology against the established language of ancestor, mythology, and dreamtime, all evoking a strong temporal dimension. The term "abiding" denotes qualities like permanent, unshakable, and steadfast as well as long-lasting, enduring, and surviving all of which have a temporal implication.

I want to return to several aspects of Arrernte culture for another look. I want to reconsider the stories that are associated with the land, the stories that provide identity to the tracks of land by which Arrernte identify themselves. Contemporary Aborigines commonly refer to these tracks as their "dreamings," but alternatively as "songlines," "country," and "track." I want also

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[135] Tony Swain, *A Place for Strangers: Towards a History of Australian Aboriginal Being* (Cambridge, Mass: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 28.
[136] Swain, *A Place for Strangers*, 32.

to look briefly at the Arrernte understanding of how this land-based identity is bestowed upon a human being. And finally I want to look at the distinctive features of Aboriginal ritual dancing, here finding only contemporary examples available.

I am inspired by the phrase "they jump up of themselves" which is used to describe some aspect of the figures in the stories. I think the phrase likely to be an Aboriginal-inspired casual description of an aspect of these story figures that I believe to be equivalent to the term *unbambikula* and also related to the term *altjira*. This homely phrase has similarities to the adjectival understandings of these terms as they have been understood since Kempe, "something that has no origin, mysterious, something that has always been so, also always." What is for me so interesting about the insights suggested by this English language phrase is that it points to an action distinctive of these figures, a type of movement, a gesture that is distinctive to them. To me this attention to movement inspires the consideration of an interestingly different approach to these stories than has yet been taken, to the cultural practices associated with identity, and more. My approach here is to focus on gesture as inseparable from agency and identity. It is to focus on the living bodies rather than a territorialization, a fixing in time and space that necessarily requires the removal of living movement and gesture.

I want to reconsider the terms *ungambikula* and *altjira*, not as the names of the figures in these stories or any class of beings, but rather as designating a gestural movement that distinguishes these figures. As I have said, it is difficult for us to avoid introducing temporal reference, yet the rendering of these terms as "they jump up of themselves" suggests that there are no predecessors, no others directing their movement, that they are "it." I'll return to this a bit later, but here I want to ask, what do these figures do once they are about? In other words, what other gestures do they practice? Following Jonathan Smith's critique of Eliade, I have carefully analyzed the body of stories that are associated with *tjilpa* identity (the wildcat people). In this series of stories there are 90 places designated, most by name. The basic gestural patterns are these. Once the figures in the story are present, having "jumped up of themselves," they travel as groups from one geographically designated location to another. The names used to designate these places are known geographical locations. The 90 story segments track the movement of four different groups. The gestures or gestural patterns that designate what occurs at these locations are notable. At all 90 locations they erect a pole. They perform ceremonies of various types at 54 locations. Circumcision as part of initiation is done at 21 locations. Other gestures that were performed at but a few locations include changing language, drinking blood, sexual intercourse, and painting bodies. While not obviously gestural the presence of sexually transmitted disease was indicated for a few locations. The sequence or itinerary of these locations becomes tracks across the geographical landscape identified with the traveling figures. The travels are often referred to in ethnographic accounts as "wandering" without adequate justification for the implications of randomness. The travels are on some few occasions indicated as occurring underground.

Now before doing some additional analysis of these gestural patterns and movements, I want to briefly discuss what has long been a controversy in anthropology, the sex education of Aboriginals at the time of contact. While much ink has been shed over this matter, it is not the sex education matter that interests me here, but rather the cultural practices that motivated

the anthropological discussion. I am much more interested in the gestural aspect associated with how aborigines acquired identity with specific land tracks, countries, or ritual organizations. I am carefully avoiding calling these "totems" because this term too has been the subject of an energetic discourse in anthropology that is not relevant here.

The gestural practice I am referring to is that identity is bestowed *in utero* when the Aboriginal woman first feels herself pregnant. Here is how it works: as the woman travels about the landscape gathering, when she feels herself to be pregnant, she considers that a *karuna*, usually understood as a spirit child, residing in the land associated with those who "jump up of themselves" selects her and jumps up into her, thus impregnating her. The land identity of the *karuna* gives an essential identity to the fetus. I suggest that we might well be justified in removing the temporal marker that indicates that these *karuna* were at some time before left behind by those beings that are identified with the land and simply settle ourselves to be comfortable with a non-temporal understanding that identity is gesturally connected with the land, specifically the gesture is described as a "jump up without preparation or motivation." So there is a gestural homology between the stories of the identification of particular tracks of land and the beliefs of how individual Aboriginals gain identity in terms of the land. There is nothing I see as essential to adding any sort of temporal markers to these events.[137]

Okay, leaving this idea regarding acquisition of individual identity hanging for a bit along with its obvious connection to the *ungambiukula* "jumping up" gesture, I want to return to those other gestural practices that occur at the various locations as described in the stories: the gestures of erecting a pole, performing ceremonies, performing circumcision (the practice is actually subincision), and so on. As Erin Manning has shown, gesture is a means of creating space and time, that is, creating a world.[138] This certainly aligns with the motivation that was pursued by the early missionaries, the ethnographers, and the students of religion. Yet, there is an important difference. Gesture is not a creator of space and time and world on a single one-time basis performed by deities *in illo tempore* or by deities at the *axis mundi* who then disappear into the sky. Rather gesture is by its nature a repeated and repeating chain of actions, a looping or reciprocation that delimits space and time but is also constantly reaching out to contact the given environment to adjust and respond to exigencies. Gestural patterns are then the means by which identity and value and meaning are constructed through interaction with features of the environment, yet they always are also a reaching out to adjust and respond to the exigencies in the changing environment.

The gestures that are described in the stories that give identity to the land share attributes with the gestures practiced in Aboriginal ritual. Aboriginal rituals are performed at these locations enacting the identity-creating gestures of the location by the people who share identity with the land-track identified with these places. It is supposed that both the stories and the rituals

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[137] I am aware that "without preparation" suggests an awareness of a causal sequential and thus a possible temporal reference. This may be introduced in the rendering of Aboriginal concepts and terms into English where temporal references are extremely hard to avoid. It may reflect some aspect of Arrernte perspective. My guess is that we likely no longer have the means to determine decisively which.

[138] Erin Manning, *Relationscapes: Movement, Art, and Philosophy* (2009), 15.

change through the repetition of gestural practices. These gestures then constitute an important agentive aspect of Aboriginal culture as they constitute techniques of body that are the basis for identity, that constitute identity.

I want now to circle back to pick up the gestural designation as *ungambikula* of the story characters, the jumping up of the *karuna*, and add to that the distinctions of Aboriginal ritual dancing. This analysis is based on contemporary examples of Aboriginal dancing. A few years ago Jiri Kylian, choreographer from The Netherlands, observed Aboriginal dancing and he describes the remarkable way in which these dancers jump. He says "they jump without preparation" a gesture that he finds quite remarkable, so remarkable indeed that he says it may take a lifetime for him to understand it. Aboriginal dance movement inspired his acclaimed dance, "Sinfonietta, Symphony in D, Stamping Ground." Looking at a wide variety of contemporary Aboriginal dancing, while this jumping up without preparation is certainly not present in all dances, a common and distinctive style of Aboriginal dance movement is a whole bodied forward jump or a sudden bringing together of open knees. These movements are characteristically done rapidly seemingly without preparation; they just suddenly occur.

Gestural practice as I have shown actually insinuates itself on the tissues of the practitioner. To jump without preparation, to snap one's knees together without preparation, is not simply a movement that one learns to do, although it is learned in the process of enculturation, it becomes a technique of body inscribed by cultural practice onto the very tissues of the person. One's identity is, through gestural practice, literally bodied at the level of muscle tissue and sensorimotor neurological loops that connect neurons, muscle, skeleton in ways that shape movement and posture. Physical identity, movement, posture are constructed gesturally based on cultural, historical, and psychological environmental factors.

Now I want to think more about the implications and valuations of this gestural patterning. To understand the gesturing that we refer to as "they jump up of themselves" or "they jump without preparation" we need to understand that this movement is not about accomplishing some results, as in designating space. Perhaps other gestures do so such as erecting a pole. Nor is this jumping gesture about the trajectory of the movement on a grid, as in moving from one location to another through a designated path. Rather, I think we must understand that "they jump of themselves" is more about the movement itself. It is about incipience, movement about to happen, living movement. It is about potential, or better, potential energy. It is about the vitality factor of self-movement. It is about movement that is always process, always on the brink of moving elsewhere, engaged but at the point of not quite yet. These qualities correlate with life-force or vitality and thus seem entirely appropriate for understanding both the figures active in stories associated with tracks of land, as well as the *karuna* that vitalize new life in a woman, as well as the enactment of ritual and ritual dancing. This gesture is about the quality we can identify as vitality.

To understand the Arrernte in terms of gesture has a number of advantages.[139] We no longer need attempt to negotiate that unfortunate and uncomfortable placement of "ancestors" in

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[139] Brian Massumi offered insights into this shift in his provocative 2002 book, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. His book explores the "implications for cultural theory of

some mythic past, indeed, in any time at all. We can understand that the ritual performances are characterized by the same gestural patternings with the same vitality affects as are the story figures. We can avoid the Eliadian understanding that perfection and order were established by the gods in the beginning at the center of the world and that all movement since is somehow a descent into chaos, a loss of order, a degradation by history; that ritual is primarily a method of eternal return. The study of religion exemplified by Eliade, on the one hand, and Smith, on the other, is at stark tension in most respects, yet the both share the importance of "place." To know the character of the place on which one stands is to know that person's religion. Smith frequently invoked Archimedes' dictum, "Give me a place to stand and I'll move the world." Interestingly, we have all heard this but we, like Smith, have devoted ourselves to territorializing the place rather than recognizing that Archimedes was focused on movement. Smith often cited Levi-Strauss making a similar point that meaning correlates with having a place and being in it. In contrast to this emphasis on place, a concern with gesture and movement and dancing places emphasis on self-movement, on incipience, on dynamics and energetics, on change and it does so without dismissing the momentary importance of place in either time or space. Gesture joins the visible and invisible, the real and virtual, in an intertwining paradoxical unity that is chiasmatic. Gesture, like dancing, as dancing, opens the gap for movement. The space/time distinction is significant only in that they are negotiated in the gestural and postural patterns that both express personal and group identity and that also offer the forms in which change can be absorbed and initiated.

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this simple conceptual displacement: body—(movement/sensation)—change." He shows that cultural theory has tended to bracket the middle term—that is, movement/sensation—and thus it "has significantly missed the two outside terms," that is, body and change. His work is to add movement itself back into the picture, yet it must be movement as "qualitative transformation" rather than simply "displacement." While Massumi does not identify his exploration of movement in these terms as gesture, it is clearly consistent with the notion I have been exploring. And the implications of this perspective which he develops in some detail are clearly important.

12: As Prayer Goes So Goes Religion

A blast of cold air from the grey snowy winter afternoon enters with the group of *diyin dine'e*[140] as they push past the blanket covering the east-facing door of the hogan. The heat quickly wins back the close space. Artisans have worked much of the day on ritual preparations especially the process of strewing colored sand layer by layer making a large sandpainting (*iikaah*). Filling much of the packed dirt floor it features depictions of the same *diyin dine'e* as those entering. Sitting in the middle of this complex design with her legs and bare feet stretched to the east is a middle-aged woman. Her greying hair hangs about her shoulders rather than being tied up in the chignon typical for Navajo women. She wears only the tiered skirt of traditional dress. The "singer" (*hatałii*) or medicine man has just stood up from his position sitting facing the woman; together they have finished reciting a long prayer. The frequent performances of prayer rituals are essential to this Navajo Holyway (*diyink'ehji*) healing ceremony[141] that lasts nine nights and the intervening eight days. The sandpainting rites including prayers are major rituals performed on each of the last four days. The *diyin dine'e* walk on the sandpainting where the one-sung-over (*bik'i nahagha*) or patient sits and in a ritualized sequence of body parts—feet, legs, body (torso), mind (head), voice (mouth)—they touch the figures of themselves appearing in the painting and transfer the sand adhering to their hands moistened with a medicine concoction to her corresponding body parts. Once this identification accomplished both in prayer and the ritual touching with the *diyin dine'e* is complete the one-sung-over is assisted off of the sandpainting and the sands of the now much-blurred painting are scrapped together and transferred to a blanket to be, finally, taken out of the hogan and ritually deposited in an appropriate place.[142]

Navajo prayers (*sodizin*) are typically composed of modular patterns of familiar constituents with extensive and systematic repetition within the phrases making up each constituent,[143] whole sections or constituents, as well as entire prayers. Repetitions are marked by key word changes, each repetition corresponding with an item in a traditional sequence. For example,

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[140] *Diyin dine'e* is a term commonly translated to English as "Holy People." Since there are many named figures of story and ritual this term serves as a generic for them. They are addressed in prayer and are characters in stories. I am not convinced that it is appropriate to simply identify these figures with such English terms as "spirits" or "gods" or "deities." Such terms might have the effect of wrongfully skewing far from the way such figures are understood by Navajos. In the Holyway ceremony Nightway the *diyin dine'e* are a specific grouping known as *ye'ii* or *yeibichaii* referring to the grandfather *ye'ii*.

[141] For fuller analysis of Nightway sandpainting rituals, see Gill, "Whirling Logs and Coloured Sands." In *Native Religious Traditions*. Edited by Earle Waugh and R. Prithipaul. Waterloo, Ontario, Canada: Wilfred Laurier Press, 1979, pp. 151-163. Revised in Gill, *Native American Traditions*, pp. 71-77.

[142] See Gill, "Whirling Logs" for both sandpainting and for Nightway.

[143] In an examination of over 20,000 prayer segments or lines (though this wrongfully suggests that Navajo prayer is written) I was able to identify only 20 distinct constituents for the many hundreds of Navajo prayers that occur in the context of many different healing rituals and other rites. See Gill, *Sacred Words: A Study of Navajo Religion and Prayer* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981).

common sequences recite such lists as the proper order and divisions within the human body (as above), the distinctive features of Navajo country, and formulaic sequences that pervade Navajo tradition and story. Most Navajo prayers are recited in the context of complex healing rituals, yet almost every need and concern recognized by Navajos is traced in some way to issues of health. Health is fundamentally a matter of proper relationship among people and between people and elements in the environment and the *diyin dine'e*.

Prayer recitations are formal with the singer repeating a prayer phrase by phrase with but a brief gap following each phrase. The one-sung-over repeats each phrase with the same timing. Since there is not quite adequate time in the singer's gap for the completion of the phrase by the one-sung-over the resulting sound of Navajo prayer is flowing and resonating. Praying requires vast memory by the singer and intense concentration by the one-sung-over necessary to hear and repeat a phrase while listening to the next one and so on and on often for extensive periods of time. Navajo prayer is almost always recited in the context of larger ritual processes and the structural composition of the prayer—the selection and organization of the various constituents (groupings of related and often repeating phrases)—corresponds not only with the patterns of ritual processes being performed but also with the vast body of Navajo mythology, song, and the causal factors attributed to the illness being treated.[144] Studies of the parallels among these various ritual constituents demonstrate that the repetition is not confined to the words of the prayer but is also replicated to resounding effect in song, mechanical ritual processes, and ritual materials, all invoking, but usually without reciting them, specific stories in the vast bodies of mythology commonly known to Navajos.

While it is rather evident that Navajo prayer is essential as a speech act to all Navajo ritual and that the rhythms and complex patternings of Navajo prayer correlate with the order of ritual, song, story, land, history, and origination, we non-Navajo academics nonetheless seem to want more in terms of a comprehension of Navajo prayer as we do also of other prayer traditions. Perhaps this is a desire born of the history of the study of religion that has so often simply ignored prayer despite its rather powerful and unavoidable identity with religion. For one thing, it seems we academics don't quite know what to do with repetition, with actions like applying sands to sick peoples' bodies, with rhythms of repetition in song and story and prayer, with manipulating material stuff[145] like sandpaintings, prayersticks, and the endless physical bits of ritual processes or even land. We sometimes satisfy our felt obligation to do something with prayer acts by simply describing these things. A favored approach is to consider aspects of prayer/religion in terms of symbols which we try to correlate with "meaning." Most usually we confine ourselves to the word aspects of these complexes because we best know how to approach the interpretation and explanation of words; and if we include the repetitions of

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[144] Gill, *Sacred Words*. Based on the analysis of over 20,000 lines/phrases of recorded prayers in Navajo ethnography. See also Gill, "Prayer as Person: The Navajo Conception of Prayer Acts" *History of Religions* 17:2 (1977): 143-157 and "Prayer as Performance: A Navajo Contribution to the Study of Prayer" in *Native American Religious Action* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1987), pp. 89-112.

[145] See Manuel Vasquez, *More than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

words we likely invoke poetry to provide understanding. Even repetition, we reason, becomes comprehensible only when rendered into an explanation of doctrine, belief, theology or at least poetry.[146]

While one can comprehend secular ritual, see it even as commonplace;[147] one can scarcely comprehend *secular prayer*. Prayer marks religion distinctively. Thus to comprehend something of prayer is to comprehend something of the elusive distinctiveness of religion.[148] The promise and potential for our pursuit of the study of prayer must be: *as prayer goes so goes religion*. We can scarcely understand prayer without also revealing some important insights about religion. It is rather odd that within many of the literate based religious traditions that include prayer, the literature on prayer (what elsewhere I've called "metaprayer")[149] is typically extensive. These writings offer guides to praying, collections of prayers, occasions for praying, and discussions of outcomes. Yet, the academic study of religion has few efforts at a rich comparative study of prayer.[150] At best the study of religion usually remains satisfied with the descriptive account of a single tradition. Perhaps the reticence to the comparative study of prayer and the development of theories[151] of prayer is rooted in the early history of our study where distinctions were made in the stages of the evolution of religion; that is, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when academic accounts were defended in terms of the old battles over magic and high gods.[152] The very repetitive and

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[146] As its very title suggests, my *Sacred Words*, was an example of such an approach. However taking something of a structuralist approach vogue at the time I attempted to demonstrate correlations among vast structures distinctive to Navajo culture as well as to at least intimate that the performance of all this was the most important.

[147] For example, *Secular Ritual* by Sally Falk Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff (Uitgeverij Van Gorcum, 1977).

[148] I commonly make the distinction between religion (singular) by which I indicate the scholar's invention of the human category (the notion is also present among folk in modern cultures) and religions (plural) by which I mean the practices, doings, and stuff found in cultures under various names yet somehow familiar to us as religious. I do not see these terms as but separate or unrelated or a duality, but rather an interacting relationality I tend to discuss in terms of copresence or play. If we use one term, we are always already implying the other. The same distinction should be made of prayer/prayers or better prayer/prayings.

[149] Gill, "Prayer" *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1987)

[150] One of the few is the old Frederick Heiler, *Prayer: A Study in the History and Psychology of Religion*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1932, orig. 1928),

[151] I increasingly prefer alternative terms like "accounts of religion" to suggest their openness to development and transformation, whereas "theory" suggests a hypothetic inference that is subject to testing and verification; a retrograde movement.

[152] E. B. Tylor's ten-page discussion of prayer in *Primitive Religion* (London, 1873) offers a fascinating example of the confusion that surrounds this cultural evolutionary expectation of the development of religion as it implicates prayer. Tylor felt that "primitive prayer" was heartfelt and that only with the rise of formal religions broadly practiced did prayer become formulaic and repetitive, loosing its spontaneity and directness of connection between person

formulaic character of prayer was one of the primary markers of magic making prayer seem, uncomfortably to align with magic, rather than religion. Prayer has, until quite recently everywhere been the recitation of repeating formulas and it even continues to be so more than we might think; the number of repetitions is often high and the formulaic content is mostly invariable. Such speech acts seem, god forbid, much more the marker of magic than religion and furthermore, given these structural and performative characteristics, how on earth does one "interpret" the "texts" of prayers? The very repetitive formulaic character distinctive of prayer, like the "bar bar bar" stammering childspeak of barbarians and primitives, seems to defy the very idea of "meaning" because of its predictability and redundancy, yet meaning[153] is the goal commonly sought by our retrograde backfilling external academic techniques. Indeed, to anticipate my discussion of gesture, I believe it is clear that we academics do not study religion in any sense wherein our interests are even open to the full range of human religious experience and actions. Rather we recognize as religious and thus of interest to our study primarily those things that most closely correspond with our own gestural/postural composition.[154]

There are a couple other expectations that seem to thwart our approach to comprehending and appreciating prayer. One of these is the character of the "to" component that seems distinctive to prayer. Prayers seem necessarily spoken or addressed or directed to some "other," that is, some one or thing beyond the praying "self." Yet, the other is no ordinary existent in the banal environment. Prayers are addressed to gods, deities, spirits, the cosmos, figures in stories, animals, mythic beings, even abstract ideas—all characterizable as of an order apart from the ordinary plane of human reality or at least inaccessible through quotidian channels of human communication (i.e., email or texting). Prayer seems to be addressed to someone or something and the identity of the "to" is often indicated right there in the words spoken. Yet, the "to" is invariably *theós* or *numina*, that is, a being of another world or dimension or even an abstraction. I identify/label this "to" using the generic word "impossible" on the grounds that there are no banal means of contact or communication. It is, I suggest, the very impossibility of commonplace connection or communication that marks prayer. Perhaps, surely, this is why prayer is such a strong marker for religion. This is why the notion of secular prayer is so difficult to imagine.[155] I'm invoking the hopefully provocative term "impossible" to avoid any obvious

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and deity. This of course is the opposite of what prayer should have been in terms of magic, comprised of highly repetitive formulae. Gladys Reichard's 1932 study of Navajo prayer was titled *Prayer: The Compulsive Word* (New York: J. J. Augustin, 1944) indicating her understanding of the "magical" power of Navajo prayer acts.

[153] In an account of "coherence" in my forthcoming *Movement: A Philosophical Neurobiology of Vitality* I argue that coherence is a much more satisfying concern than is meaning.

[154] Put more plainly, we are most comfortable studying white guys that read and write.

[155] I certainly anticipate considerable challenge to this distinction, with efforts made to come up with exceptions. Whatever. Certainly there can be little that is contentious about this claim for every prayer tradition in every religious tradition I've ever encountered; so some posited exception seems significant only on the grounds of attempting to determine how such an example could still be clearly identified as prayer.

specifically identifiable theological projections onto prayer although this effort itself seems almost impossible for academics to avoid.[156] Perhaps a slightly more sophisticated way of presenting this attribute as an important marker of prayer/religion is that prayer makes the unapologetic proclamation of what, in an attempt to avoid theological predisposition, I call "possible impossibles." Using words and actions, praying makes present (or possible) what is distinguished, in part, as of a reality or order inaccessible (or impossible) by banal communication methods.

Since prayer appears to be directed to or at some radical other, a whole range of academic issues is bound to arise. Who or what is this other? Why do repetition and formulae appeal to it? Why are these prayer attributes somehow distinctively appropriate to this impossible other? What about the implication of the commonly expected "return" aspect of the prayer action; that is, is there anything like an answer or evidence of justification for the speech act? Is anybody or anything listening and responding? In general terms what I'm attempting to describe is what some traditions often refer to as the effectiveness of prayer captured in phrases like "Prayer really works." Minimally "why pray?" Prayer results were the concern of Huck Finn,

> Miss Watson she took me in the closet and prayed, but nothing come of it. She told me to pray every day, and whatever I asked for I would get it. But it warn't so. I tried it. Once I got a fish-line, but no hooks. It warn't any good to me without hooks. I tried for the hooks three or four times, but somehow I couldn't make it work. By and by, one day, I asked Miss Watson to try for me, but she said I was a fool. She never told me why, and I couldn't make it out no way.[157]

One would think that this concern with the results or effect of prayer is nearly essential to include in a general account of prayer, despite the risk of being a fool. We're often in Huck's place wondering about the effect. Usually we try, perhaps in our efforts to demonstrate the sophistication of our understanding of religion, to separate ourselves from admitting the importance of the effect as a significant aspect of the prayer (seems embarrassingly crass and materialistic);[158] we do this even though we all know that among the greatest motivators for

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[156] I'm now fondly calling this near impossibility by the term "the Humpty Principle" which I introduced in *Dancing Culture Religion* (Lexington Books, 2012). It refers to the near impossibility of avoiding something we set out to avoid. Should we not wish to prejudice a study of religion with the history of our own beliefs (religious or worldview) we just can't do it. The very statement of the issue already invokes the issue we wish to avoid. I derive the name of this in my discussions of how impossible are such tasks as solving the "mind/body problem." The point here is that in setting it forth as a split that needs to be healed we are attempting the same task as did all the king's horses and all the king's men. And we know how that came out.

[157] Mark Twain, *Huckleberry Finn* (1884).

[158] We often reject this pragmatic question of prayer because to do so places us firmly in the uncomfortable understanding of the "impossibles." How can a god give us fishhooks because we pray for them? Such issues force together aspects of practicality that we carefully try to keep separate. Yet, I would suggest that the very distinction of prayer is to address the impossibles as possible and to do so unapologetically. We have such trouble studying religion

extemporaneous prayer is the urgent beseeching that one not be visited by some impending doom. Again, since such repetition of formulas with an expectation of something to this-worldly and banal to happen seems more in the realm of magic, at least in the way the study of religion has come to terms with such things, so it seems that the academic study has come to pretty much the same conclusion as did Huck, "at last I reckoned I wouldn't worry about it any more, but just let it go." Yet here we are back at it, hoping that Miss Watson or our own academic wits might help us to "make it out."

In a lecture "'Now you see it, now you won't': The Future of the Academic Study of Religion over the Next 40 Years" delivered at the University of Colorado in 2010 Jonathan Z. Smith listed gesture studies as one of five areas he believes will be central to the upcoming generation of religion scholarship. Smith's statement related to gesture shocked me largely because it seems so unexpected in not being based exclusively on text materials and it excited me because it connects so closely to the long history and current interests of my own work in ritual and dance and performance. In my 2012 book *Dancing Culture Religion* I suggest the inadequacy of our most common understanding of gesture as "visual action as utterance" based on a communication model.[159] Clearly this "poor" understanding of gesture will not work for broader culture studies. In that book on dancing I developed an expanded or "rich" understanding of gesture that gave me opportunity to explore the potential of such a view for the application to and analysis of religious and cultural actions; I find the results to be happily exciting. Since beginning to explore the implications of gesture, richly conceived, I have found that the power and insights gained through the consideration of gesture are deeply enhanced when seen as copresent with posture and prosthesis, when both of these are also richly conceived. The three together form a theoretical complex and heuristic nexus and in the present context of the study of prayer I want to use it to offer a hopefully novel and insightful perspective on prayer (and as prayer so religion); I'll refer to Navajo prayer to illustrate.

This nexus of gesture posture and prosthesis deserves an extended account that engages the many nuances of not only each term but also the copresent implications of the three pairs. While an extended account must be done later, here I want to at least sketch a few core ideas.

Both the plasticity and stability of all animate organisms is an affair of self-movement. Through evolution self-movement is copresent with the emergence of the distinctive morphology and motility of the animate species. Repetition and seeming redundancy are essential to the skillful acts of perception and knowing, that is, the transcending power of the organism to interconnect with its environing world. Self-movement, corresponding with the living force, is not acquired; it is inseparable from life itself engaging the whole organism, not simply some of

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because we don't acknowledge that the impossibles are there purposefully to create chiasm, to establish copresent implication, to distinguish the uncrossable/crossable gap that forever energizes vitality, movement, tradition. I anticipate the outcome of the proposition: as prayer goes so goes religion.

[159] Adam Kendon, *Gesture: Visual Action as Utterance* (Cambridge University Press, 2004).

its parts (body or mind).[160] It is the very nature of, as it is essential to, this organic living movement to be distinctively routinized and patterned and resounding and skillful and seemingly, through endless repetition, experienced as natural, though of course it is not. Organisms are distinctive (both species and individuals) in terms of the characteristic patterns of self-movement; in the broadest terms think quadrapedal and bipedal. As perceiving knowing living beings inseparable from their connections with their environment (the essential other in their midst) animate organisms[161] are distinguished by gestures, acquired skillful distinctive patterns of self-movement. Gesture is posturally based both in the sense of the neurobiological core that enables the distinctive patterned self-movement (upright posture corresponds with bipedal motility) as well as in terms of the more abstract value attributes (concepts, beliefs, images, memories). Gesture, as all self-movement, can occur only in relation to some other (not simply an ether) that enables moving; the relational aspect of movement is described by Renaud Barbaras in the terms of "desire and distance."[162] That is, self-movement must always be in the process of self-transcendence in that it is inseparable from becoming some other or a there. Moving is never in any place, but is always an entwining of or the copresence of here and there. It is in the transcendent power of gesture/posture that is at the core of perception and knowing, both sensible only as the copresence of self and other, here and there.

Carrie Noland's 2009 book *Agency & Embodiment: Performing Gesture/Producing Culture* offers insight and inspiration as she articulates "gesture" as key to understanding agency. Noland's observation that Maurice Merleau-Ponty and André Leroi-Gourhan both "viewed the body as a sensorium extending itself prosthetically through gesture into the world"[163] is important to understanding the architecture of human connections with and actions on the community and environment. These two scholars among others considered the living moving body as a sensorium, that is, as the hierarchical composite of sensory capacities. They consider the body as existing always in the process of encountering the world through gesture, that is, skilled processes that require the extension or prosthesis of the body beyond it physical perimeters. The term prosthetic suggests a means of supplementing and extending the biological body beyond its mere physical limits. This extension suggests that we are able to use aspects of the body, themselves, as tools in some sense to extend ourselves into the world, to know it and ourselves, and to have an impact on the world. Prosthetic here suggests an extension beyond self, a transcendence beyond biological limits, beyond the recognized boundary marked by our skin, by the "self" that we feel as movement.[164] Yet, of course, we know that we are through

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[160] See Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, *Primacy of Movement* (John Benjamins Publishing Company; 2 edition, 2011) and Renaud Barbaras, *Desire and Distance: Introduction to a Phenomenology of Perception* (Stanford University Press, 2005).

[161] Husserl's term and a good one.

[162] Barbaras, *Desire and Distance*.

[163] Carrie Noland, *Agency & Embodiment: Performing Gesture/Producing Culture* (Harvard University Press, 2009), 5.

[164] Of course, in common reference prosthesis is very closely associated with amputation and loss. This immediate connection surely dates from the American Civil War when tens of thousands of amputees survived the war and the development of prosthetic limbs gained

and through biological. The prosthetics of the animate body, its capacity to use itself or parts of itself as a tool, are highly interesting in that prosthesis must exist if we are to avoid total containment, isolation, separation, immobility; in psychological (perhaps also philosophical) terms aloneness.[165] Yet, this insight related to prosthesis is but a restatement of the radical view of self-moving; that self-moving essentially requires a moving in the context of "other," that environment is copresent with self. Moving implicates a "there" that twines as moving with "here"; a virtual distance of separation that is also connection; a horizon always beckoning yet always receding.

Gesture is the sort of movement, as Marcel Mauss so effectively showed, that is invariably stamped by the distinctive markers of culture, environment, history, psychology[166] that enables us to not only take in the world but also to act on the world, which we'll see is to understand sensation/perception/knowing as agentive, as a force acting on and in the world. Mauss, referring to gesture as "techniques of body," held that there is no natural or perfect gesture; the contextual skilled practicing of living always shapes it. Thus the sensorium is connected with culture, history, and psychology by means of gesture, the sort of movement that interactively engages the sensorium prosthetically with the environment, both a discovery and a worlding.[167] Gesture (inseparable from the sensorium) is the prosthetic (the extension beyond the organic confines of the body, that is, beyond the skin) that extends the body beyond itself in an interaction with the world. Gesture is the looping reversible circulating chiasmatic interconnection among people (and animate organisms generally) and between people and the environment; it is by means of the movement of gesture that we are imprinted with, constantly absorbing, the influences of culture, history, environment, experience; it is by means of the self-movement of gesture that we have agency, power, effect on the world we live in. We create and discover ourselves and the other in the gestural/postural/ prosthetic actions of self-moving always shaped by and, in turn, shaping culture, history, psychology.

I know this introduction to gesture/posture/prosthesis is far too dense and I have yet to consider prayer in these terms, yet to help prepare for that discussion I'll iterate, repeat, in variant terms. An academic gesture or a practice of magic? Gesture enables the body or parts of the body to become prosthetic or mechanical extensions to the body thus expanding the body into the space beyond the body's sensate limitations. This prosthetic capacity of the body is the opening towards the construction of tools of every sort from spear points to tablet computers. All tools, some of which are body parts (Leroi-Gourhan believed the hand to be the

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greater attention. In the more philosophical sense, there is often a sense of loss that is connected with the notion of prosthesis, yet it is my intention to avoid this implication at least here.

[165] Not loneliness because that implies a longing for a missed other. By aloneness I want to try to imagine a world with no other.

[166] Marcel Mauss' classic 1934 essay "Techniques of Body" lays the groundwork for demonstrating that "gesture," that is, techniques of body, are never either "natural" or "perfect," but always formed in the influential context of culture, history, and psychology.

[167] Worlding is Erin Manning's term, see her *Relationscapes: Movement, Art, Philosophy* (MIT Press, 2012).

first tool; I believe it the finger, more fun) extend the body prosthetically into the world for purposes of connecting with, palpating if you will, the world about us. Gesture then can be characterized as groping. Noland discusses Leroi-Gourhan's use of the French term *tâtonnement*, which means trial and error, but also refers to the groping movement of the hand/finger or other body part as prosthesis.[168] But this groping is not simply random. Sensorimotor programs, synaptic criteria demanded by coordination dynamics, and developing proprioceptive-muscular acuities, direct it. Maxine Sheets-Johnstone suggests that we come into the world moving, groping, as the means of discovering the world and ourselves.[169] This process continues on throughout life in all gestural actions in that they are skillful sensorimotor/muscular movements. Even more importantly, gesture is self-adjusting, self-correcting, progressively refined, based on experience. Repetition has a central and crucial value to accumulating experience.[170] Gesturing does something to effect the world; it has agency. It explores the world in the same way a physician palpates a patient's body. Not only does gesture do simple things like get attention or offend others, but also, as Leroi-Gourhan believes, the development of gestural patterns leads to the invention of tools; this was a central contribution to his work in paleoethnography.[171] Movement, he argues and it seems obvious, necessarily precedes the development of tools. It is the movement of the body and the use of the body or its parts as tools that is then extended beyond the body with the invention of tools. The body's movement is projected prosthetically beyond the body in the creation of tools. Where the fist can serve as a ram or a hammer, the invention and construction of material tools, wooden rams and steel hammers, has the effect of amplifying and multiplying the gestural effect, multiplying gestural agency.

The invention of speech and writing and print are examples of tools. One aspect common to all gesture is the agentive concern of interrogation or exploration. As in palpating, we reach out with hand or tool or voice to learn about our environment. We can understand the interrogative aspect of gesture (tool use) in terms of proprioception or kinesthetics. As we move and encounter the environment, our proprioceptors register the effect of performing the gesture both as "feel" and as musculoskeletal feedback that impacts our biology to the extent of changing our tissues (I mean this completely literally). As the ram encounters the wall, as the hammer encounters the nail, as the speech act is uttered in a cultural context (the encounter is perhaps dialog) we learn many things (actually everything)—the consistency and composition of the wall, the reaction of the ram to hitting the wall, the specific parameters of identification with our speaking community, and so forth, all as feelings and motor-responses sensed and recorded by our proprioceptive system. Even our brains, Leroi-Gourhan argued and Noland found it supported, developed in evolutionary terms in response to the advancements in

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[168] Noland, *Agency & Embodiment,* 105

[169] Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, *The Primacy of Movement*, 139.

[170] Experience is accumulated as synaptic criteria and forms neuronal groups based on reentrant neurobiological coordination dynamics.

[171] See Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech* (The MIT Press, 1993).

motility, thus gestural acumen, rather than the other way around.[172] Gesture is always encounter; always complex loopings and twinings. Encounter is always felt proprioceptively. Proprioceptive experience provides modifications via adjustments to synaptic criteria, sensorimotor programs, memory, and concepts; stated alternately, modifications to proprioceptive-muscular acumen. Gestures are skillsets and the repeating performance of the action increases the level of skill. Gestures are not only what we do, how we move; gestures are also who we are in that they are inscribed in our biology involving muscle, proprioceptor, neuronal grouping, and coordination dynamics—all aspects of moving.

Clearly no skillful palpation is possible with a single iteration. There is an implication in the nature of palpation itself, the exploratory repetitive aspect of groping. Yet, perhaps the reason that medicine is referred to as "art" and as "practice" is because it depends on methods that always continue to improve with repetition and experience (present and accumulated). Repetition functions to improve the skills of palpation in at least two ways. As the physician, in this case, knows from textbooks and anatomy classes what her palpating is "seeing" in some touching sense, subsequent surgery allows the confirmation or adjustment of what is actually there. Secondly, like a ballerina at the *barre* repeating designated movements thousands of times under the critical direction of a ballet mistress, the act of palpating a patient under the careful supervision of an experienced physician, leads to building skill residing as accumulated experience in sensorimotor programs, neuronal groupings, and perceptual/knowing acuity. Repetition is essential; repetition is nuanced and sophisticated.[173] What we typically do not understand is the magnitude of repetition necessary; indeed, it is often high, very high. Repetition is also linked with plasticity. We are constructed so that our experience clearly has an impact on our biology, yet fortunately, we are plastic/changeable usually only as the result of high repetition. Otherwise, incidental experiences might have too profound an effect on our skills and they wouldn't endure.[174] Gesture is movement that allows us to be at once prosthetic (tool, technique) and sensate feeling beings and, more importantly, to be both at once; the copresent implications of animate organism. Merleau-Ponty referred to this copresence also as "double sensation."[175]

Now many, if not all, animate organisms have this gesture/posture/prosthetic capability, yet surely it is distinctive of humans to have an awareness of ourselves *at once* as techniques, tools,

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[172] I much prefer to understand these as co-developing. I can't actually imagine that either could, in the long view of evolution, develop prior to and thus give causal rise to the other.

[173] The common description of higher education as "training" used to offend me somewhat. However, the more I appreciate the remarkable and essential importance of gesture, and that gesture is inseparable from skill acquisition and use, the more I am willing to embrace this old terminology. Indeed, I think there are many distinct advantages of understanding the training of religion scholars (or those of any discipline) on the medical school model where book learning is seen as essential and demanding, but that it is incomplete without laboratory and clinical experience (or the equivalent) carefully monitored by an experienced mentor.

[174] This is an overgeneralized statement; I'm well aware that the actual mechanics of plasticity are remarkably complex.

[175] Cited by Carrie Noland, *Agency & Embodiment*, 110.

prosthetics and also simply being (existing as) sensing feeling knowing organisms. There is no clear boundary between the two, between being and having awareness of being, although it is commonly assumed that such a strict boundary exists. There is no clear boundary among animate organisms (species) separating those who are aware from those who are not; yet, there is no arguable point at all that humans are remarkable because of the extent of our awareness and our gestural acumen to express and interrogate this distinction. Gesture is movement that is synesthetic in that it crosses among the senses and combines them. The movement of gesture creates knowledge, images, feelings that can be specific to any sensory channel or to cross among and combine them; however, gesture always connects with the world as world, not as streams of sensory isolated material bits that then need somehow to be combined.

Tools, prosthetics, are gesturally based, argues Leroi-Gourhan, and thus it is in the probing groping motions of the body that we not only construct the world about us but we also experience it, that is, sense and feel its reality. Musical instruments are prosthetics that extend—through the use of body motions in gestures we refer to as "playing"—ourselves into the world and we hear the world that we make; the making is comprised of the gestural patternings/skills of making the instrument, the skill in playing the instrument, and the resounding worlding of the music flowing into, manifesting in, the environment. We can also think of the actively driven use of our individual senses in the same terms as we think of palpation. For example, when we say "I looked carefully at that painting," are we not using our eyes in the same way that a physician uses her palpating fingers? When we say, "I listened intently to that music," are we not using our ears in the same way that a physician uses her palpating fingers? Are we not transforming our eyes and ears into tools, techniques, that actively prosthetically extend our senses into the world to explore and penetrate it, by means of gesture, for we move our eyes to see a painting and we turn our heads to listen intently to music? Yet, even when we concentrate on a single sense—looking or listening—we do not explore the world sense by sense and then add them together in some secondary constructive or synthesizing operation. We sense the world as the world as it is present to us, as we have access to it; not attributes separated by sensory channels. Perception is iconic in Peircian terms; whole and already together, for that is how we encounter the world as the world even as we are also constructing it, making it present, by perceiving it. Yet, we know that this ability to prostheticize our bodies, part by part, function by function, or in its entirety (think dancing), is always paired with the intimate proprioceptively trained feeling kind of knowing that is both recognition and evaluation. Indeed, I think a good case can be made for perception and knowing being as much recognition as discovery. Perception always engages the full experience of our perceiving lives compacted into what I term "experiential neuronal ensemblings" and these are always an aspect of every perceiving. These looping functions that feed forward and backward are complementary and essential to one another. We listen to music, as the skilled physician palpates a patient, recognizing so many things—rhythm, melody, color, our favorite artists, even the events and emotions associated with a particular song, and so on—which demands that we already know in some sense what we are hearing; recognition. But despite recognition and foreknowledge, it is also always experience and experience is always new in some respects, if only in its being present (or in its presence), in its potential for

novelty (nonlinearity); a comparative listening responding to the variations of what we hear with our expectations, our foreknowledge; evaluation.

A major contribution of Leroi-Gourhan was to recognize that as it developed in humans, gesture led to the distinction of humans in the capacity to develop external memory. First, it should be noted that language (speech first) is to be understood as a tool. Clearly to speak is a gestural extension of our bodies, in an act of agency and expression. Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler both extensively developed this idea based on Leroi-Gourhan.[176] A key notion however is simply that to use a tool to mark on a wall, a gesture distinctive to hominins, establishes an external counterpart to memory.[177] Amazing. Leroi-Gourhan found the existence of external memory distinctive of being human and as being essential to human development linked with the advancement of tools that are associated with external memory—pens, printing press, typewriter, audio-recorder, video-recorder, computer, 3-D printer. All these, Leroi-Gourhan holds, are based in gesture.

Returning to prayer, what now might be said? What does this discourse on self-movement, gesture, posture, prosthesis have to do with prayer? It is my hope that it provides a context for more fully comprehending repetitive formulaic speech acts that will provide an enriched way of approaching prayer as theory and practice; and religion as well. Let me start with the Navajo prayer acts I described at the outset. Navajo prayer is gesture in numerous respects. As the ritual act of prayer it involves not only well-known phrasing in the language of the prayer, the method of recitation also follows a prescribed style creating familiar sounds and sights. Singers (medicine persons) spend extensive periods of time in apprenticeship learning the huge body of improvisational skills—knowledge and gestural actions—that comprise the performances of healing rituals including the many complex prayer acts. A practicing singer constructs healing ceremonies both before and during its performance out of an amazingly rich body of components in order to treat specific individual and cultural needs. Extensive repetition and practice are essential to the acquisition of these skills. The act of prayer is set in a ritual context where there are numerous correspondences between the words spoken, the manner of recitation, the actions of the rites performed (sandpaintings, appearance of masked *diyin dine'e*, and dozens of other constituents), the physical environment (the hogan corresponds with the cosmic structure of Navajoland; it is microcosmic), the motivating circumstances (the specific causes, community and cosmic, indicated as cause for the illness being treated), the songs that are sung, and the broadly known stories summarized in the songs. The singer is not the only one for whom high repetition is essential. Every Navajo participates in ritual actions, frequent among them prayers that create the very skills that are essential to being a Navajo person. Navajo identity is acquired and transmitted through the high gestural postural

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[176] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998) and Bernard Stiegler, *Techniques and Time*, 3 vols. (Stanford University Press, 1998).

[177] I think it not accidental that prominent among the images of the most ancient art in France and now in Indonesia are imprints of the human hand with splayed fingers. Art is a quintessential act of prosthesis and to represent the hand with splayed fingers is doubly profound in presenting the human body part (the distinct fingers) that implicates prosthesis and the coincidence of the digital age with the rise of fingered *Homo sapiens*.

prosthetic repetition of distinctive phrases, sequences, orientations, sounds, correspondences of language to action that occur in prayers and also in song, rite, story, and landscape. Such acts are so commonplace as to feel natural to Navajo people.[178]

Navajo prayer as gestural act expresses, heals, teaches, and enculturates. In its references to life and relationship and Navajoland and cosmos, it creates by designating, ordering, and organizing. It also creates identity that is specifically Navajo by constituting techniques of body that mark Navajo identity. The repeated performance of these gestures/techniques amounts to an etching of this identity into human tissue, from synaptic criteria to the organization of muscle fibers.

The foundational principles (or structural characteristics) that underlie all of these specified gestural actions can be considered as posture—the vital position, physical and ideological, that is Navajo identity. These postural characteristics are what Maxine Sheets-Johnstone referred to as "corporeal concepts" and George Lakoff and Mark Johnson called "image schemas" and "basic level categories."[179] The performance of these gestures constructs the bodies at their cores, their posture, of those involved in the patterns identified as Navajo; that is, the repetitions etch these corporeal concepts into the very tissue of Navajo people. Prayers do far more than establish belief, they construct moving Navajo living bodies.

The prayer acts are prosthetic in that every aspect of these gestural acts reaches out beyond the physical bodies of the ritualists to connect with the immediate environment as well as in their broadest reach to the very acts of world creation and the fullest extent of Navajo imagination. In the farthest prosthetic reach these prayer acts invoke and engage—the "to" mentioned in the prayers—the *diyin dine'e*. This is the prosthetic distinction of prayer; it has the capacity to transcend the banal world to the farthest reaches of the imagination. The *diyin dine'e* reside as life-giving inner forms of the world, as beings on the "other side." These "to" figures named and invoked by being named in prayers are also made present through the gestural acts of sandpaintings and masked appearances. Prayers, in their utterance as well as in their structure, make present the radical other; make "possible" and accessible these "impossibles." These acts are distinctive of prayer (and as prayer so also religion) by their prosthetic power to invoke the copresence of the "here" of human existence and the "there" of the beings of the "other side," the *diyin dine'e*. Perhaps this power of prayer to cross among realities is why Navajos sometimes refer to prayer itself as person.[180] For the Navajo, the reach

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[178] In his "Techniques of Body," Mauss' observation that there are no "natural" techniques of body (gestures) is exceedingly important and necessary that we appreciate that we not consider some (usually our own) gestures as "natural" and others (not ours) as somehow concocted and of lesser value. Yet, clearly repetition of techniques of body create for those performing/practicing these gestures a feeling that they are "natural" in the sense of simply given, compatible with reality as given, not consciously constructed.

[179] Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, *Primacy of Movement,* 438-9 George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind* (University of Chicago Press, 1989) 282-3 and Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason* (University of Chicago Press, 1987), various.

[180] See Gill, "Prayer as Person"

is to the world of origination and to the space and condition of beauty from which Navajo life proceeds. The Navajo gestural/postural/prosthesis nexus invokes the copresence of the various distinctions/realms of reality; a copresence on which vitality depends. At the full reach of prayer, the mark distinguishing prayer, the prosthesis is the copresence of the impossible and the possible; the world of the radically other beyond the banal is copresent with the ordinary.[181]

What is essential to recognize in these Navajo healing rites including prayer—and I believe is also relevant to prayer (and religion) wherever it is found—is that in its prosthetic powers prayer achieves what should not be possible. The very distinction of the *diyin dine'e* is that they are other, apart, of the other side, of a different order of reality than humans, than ordinary reality. Navajos are not *diyin dine'e* and *diyin dine'e* are not human.[182] Yet the impossible is achieved in prayer and certainly other gestural acts. The *diyin dine'e* are here in the spoken word, in their sandpainted presentation, and as masked beings. Yet all of these acts construct a particular kind of presence or, better, copresence. In these gestural acts, there is a momentary copresence of the impossible and the possible. The inner forms, the beings of the other side, are here, yet they are also inner forms and beings of the other side. The interrogative powers of these prayer gestures show Navajos that health, life, and beauty in the ordinary world are twined (copresent) with the existence of and relation to these "others." In prayer acts Navajos experience the vitalizing effect of this copresence, that is, of the necessary distinction and discontinuity (impossibility) of the ordinary world and the world beyond (the other side) but also their essential twining. Prayer and ritual are tools (prostheses) that allow this experience of impossibles/possibles. Unity or reconciliation is not what is accomplished. Rather what is accomplished is a copresence, a structurality whose oscillatory effect is vitalizing.[183]

Navajo people, as well as many other Native Americans, often use the English word "harmony" to indicate something of central importance to their religious practice. Navajos have a more specific way of articulating results, effects, and that is *hozho* or beauty often depicted as a male-female pair of *diyin dine'e* named Long Life and Happiness (*sa'ah naaghaii bik'eh hozho*).[184] Many Navajo prayers conclude with the standard passage, "In beauty may I walk,"[185] often repeated four times. Importantly, beauty is understood in the context of self-moving,

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[181] It is notable that "masking" may also accomplish this prosthetic function gesturally. The masked *diyin dine'e* bring the "impossible" presence of these radical other beings into the realm of physical ritual reality where it is "possible" to physically interact with Navajo people.
[182] Risking slight overkill here I suggest that this condition is foundational to prayer wherever it is found. In Christianity, for example, the possible/impossible is even stronger; god is not human, yet god is man. There is a copresent implication at the core of Christology. If the first half of this statement of theological copresence did not pertain then there would be no prayer or the possibility of prayer.
[183] I am aware that this is not adequately argued here, but it can be and I do so in other writings.
[184] See Gill, *Sacred Words*, p. 54 for discussion of this term.
[185] See Gill, *Sacred Words*, p. 31 for discussion of the constituent associated with this distinctive phrase.

walking. This is consistent with the verbal character of Navajo language where everything is understood in terms of its movement, its action, its behavior. In Navajo language it is difficult to refer to a fixed non-moving object. Beauty then is self-movement, or I might suggest gesture characterized by certain conditions, techniques of body. Those conditions are for the Navajo the vitalizing relationship between opposing interacting pairs of all sorts, compounded at many levels: east/west, north/south, below the surface/on the surface, outer form/inner form, this human side/the other *diyin dine'e* side, male/female, Long Life/Happiness and so on often compounding by repeatedly pairing other pairings. Beauty is not stasis or unity or fixedness or stability or being centered or balanced; it is the resounding qualities, harmonic resonances of twinings; a twoness wherein each part demands the other both for its distinction as well as its realization, a oneness.

The Navajo sense of beauty is not so distant from Friedrich Schiller's understanding as developed in his *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795) as the rise of an interplay or play drive (*Speiltrieb*) when two opposing "drives," *Formtrieb* and *Sinnestrieb* for example, interact in concert.[186] Schiller identified this play with beauty; in play there is beauty. Indeed he wrote, "Man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and he is only fully a human being when he plays." In Navajo terms the importance of retaining the distinctions at play is ritually marked as well. At sunrise on the last morning of these multiple-day healing rites the one-sung-over is conducted out of the hogan some distance to the east to greet the rising sun. Here the final prayers of the ceremonial complex are prayed. They mark the return to the banal (non-ritual) world but also the copresence of the two—the ritual world and the world of daily Navajo life. This moment is the paragon of walking in beauty where there is felt connection between the world of order or beauty—posturally established in creation and re-established in prayer acts and other rites of healing—and the world of daily life invariably characterized by the nonlinearity of novelty; Navajos articulate novelty in terms of illness.[187]

Understood in terms of the gestural/postural/prosthesis nexus, Navajo religious life, including prayer, can be appreciated as the artful skilled performance of self-movement marked as distinctively Navajo. Health and life are constantly negotiated by these skilled actions in the perpetual presence of illness and death. That copresence established through the gestural skills of prayer acts, among other techniques of body, is the heart of Navajo vitality.

The repetition of Navajo prayers and the associated ritual acts of the healing rites is an essential aspect of the gestural postural character of these acts. Repeatedly experiencing these gestures all stamped firmly with those orientations and patterns of movement that extend from the most personal to the most cosmic is the cultural method of gaining and honing the gestural skill to be Navajo and to feel one's identity to be Navajo. Through the constant repetition of these gestural acts Navajos become shaped to reflect the distinctive values of their history, their tradition, and their culturally marked environment. Such repetition is fundamental both to

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[186] Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795).

[187] Navajos have other ways of indicating this relationship. Commonly they avoid closed circles in weaving patterns and basket designs and even in sandpaintings. This openness or gap is an explicit way of emphasizing the vitalizing effect of chiasm.

being enculturated as Navajo as well as having the distinctively Navajo skills to act with agency in the world and to respond to novelty.[188] Agency and identity are dependent on gestural acumen gained through repetition.

For Navajos as prayer goes so goes religion. Navajo prayer is a nested constituent of the larger performance and practice and experience of Navajo religion.[189] The repetitive and formulaic character of Navajo prayer is consistent with the balance of Navajo ritual and practice. For example, as a ritual speech act Navajo prayer participates in the formulaic gestural orientational sequence "feet legs body mind voice;" the voice reciting the prayers and singing the songs that are gestural/postural skilled acts of being Navajo. These speech acts engage the prosthetic actions of interrelating and entwining the individual and even the religious culture with the full history and physical environment that are distinctly Navajo. This Navajo gestural postural prosthesis nexus of prayer and religion, connecting through prayer with the impossibles does not accomplish some ending stability; they do not represent health. Rather what is accomplished is a vitalizing relationality that occurs with the presence effected through prayer and ritual acts of those whose presence among humans is impossible in the ontological sense that they are of the other side or they are inner forms or the *diyin dine'e*. The fishhook sought by Navajos in prayer is not full recovery from a specific illness. Indeed, Navajo healing ceremonies are performed both for those who are known to be terminally ill and incurable as well as those who have gained health (from the perspective of symptoms) through other means such as in western medical clinics. Rather it seems that Navajos seek life lived in the vitalizing ongoing relationship of the presence of what apart from the skillful practice of religion cannot be present; the copresence of the there and the here, the possible and the impossible, that is at the heart of self-movement, of walking in beauty.

I imagine the first prosthetic human act to be the pointing of a finger[190] stretched at arm's length. Gesturally this act directs the eye to the finger "there" but extends the eye to effect a connection of the pointing finger with some thing beyond the finger, to some thing "over there." The gesture of the pointing finger engages a transcending of the physical body while it creates a connection between the body and something other, a thing that is over there yet in perceiving it, in recognizing it, is also here. Thing there becomes distinguished and stands out in the environment in this prosthetic gesturing. Thing becomes identified with the pointing finger whose very gesture creates it in some sense. The interplay of this gestural prosthetics characterizes both the digital and the theological. The digital is the correspondence between the finger (digit) and the thing pointed out/created. The prosthetic correlation of finger with

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[188] A fascinating example of responding to novelty is found in how Navajo Enemyway was developed from its roots in the encounter of the dead enemies from warring tribes to a rite often performed for Navajo men who served in combat for the US military. But then, of course, constant change occurs with the performance of every religious act.

[189] The twining of various levels of ritual and cultural structuralities was the fundamental argument of my *Sacred Words*.

[190] A slight irony here in the context of the study of Navajos is that they never point with a finger, but rather with their lips, yet even this offers potential for understanding the distinctions of Navajos in terms of the gestural prosthesis nexus.

thing is the dawning of the digital age. The theological is the correspondence between the pointing finger and the fullest extent of the prosthetic imaginable, what Charles Sanders Peirce described in his "A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God."[191] It is not incidental that this essay is Peirce's finest discussion of play and his lifelong interest in hypothetic inference (abduction). Such pointing gives rise to the notion of transcendence both to "there" and upon a "half hour of idle musement" to "There." Of course, these ideas are my own fanciful exercise in attempting to describe a generic gestural postural prosthesis nexus that might apply to the distinctions of religion and prayer, academically constructed through fits and halts.

Here are finally, to me, the most important issues in the discussion of prayer as a comparative religious form of action. The formulaic and repetitive character of prayer must be understood as the acquisition of the skill, not unlike that involved with playing music or sport. Formula and repetition must be valued positively as contribution to the accumulation of experience that builds acumen, agency, identity, and beauty. In this respect, gestural acts are inseparable from posture/position. These gestural acts of prayer have a prosthetic function. It is to transcend the performer of the act, as does any speech act. It has the agentive power to create relationship and, in turn, identity. The prosthetic distinction of prayer is its "reach;" it dares unapologetically to invoke (make present) by naming that/those whose nature is the impossible—the unknowable, the unfathomable, that which has no name, that which is its own self, that which is beyond, that which is identified with origin or unity or totality, those of the other side or the inner form, those of a mythic era or a storied place. Prayer affects the copresence of the possible and impossible, not for reconciliation or resolution, but for the vitalizing movement, a sounding and resounding, that such a copresence engenders. And finally, as Marcel Mauss showed, all such gestural/postural/prosthetic actions are distinctly shaped by culture, history, and psychology. He showed that there is no perfect or natural gesture; gesture can exist only as a bearer of the distinctive markers (posture/position) of culture, history, and experience. Prayer is always bodied. Prayer as a comparative religious category is, I suggest, distinctive in terms of at least these criteria. Yet as prayer is distinctive to specific cultural and historical settings, then the narrower postural distinctions of specific prayer traditions correlate with the specific religions in which they occur.

There is a double sense in which we might hold that as prayer goes so goes religion. One is in the broad theoretical sense of academic comparative studies; as we come to develop our theoretical understanding of prayer in this gestural/postural/ prosthesis nexus, we cannot help but also enrich our understanding and appreciation of religion. The other sense is in terms of the narrower study of a particular religion or religious community or religious person; as we use this account of prayer to help us articulate what distinguishes culturally and historically specific prayer acts and practices, we cannot help but also improve our understanding of what specifically distinguishes this particular religion or religious tradition or religious practice.

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[191] *Hibbert's Journal* (1908). Interestingly, since I've previously referred to Schiller with regard to play, as a youth Peirce intensely studied Schiller's Letters.

V: Play

In the modern academic study of religion there is no scholar who has done more than Jonathan Smith to demonstrate the generative power of differences. Smith's many discussions of comparison and theory of myth and ritual time and again examine the dynamics of difference and incongruity. In this article "No Place to Stand" *I consider how Smith's religion studies, dating from his early study of Frazer's* The Golden Bough*, exemplify how the study of religion might be positively understood in terms of play; his study of myth and his study of Frazer offer, I believe, the strongest examples.*[192]

Play involves holding together, without resolution, opposing positions giving rise to the oscillatory interplay that generates creativity and beauty. Allowing the play to go on without interruption, without the urge to give it halt, is difficult for readers of Smith, but also for Smith himself. Smith's readers have commonly taken from him the opposing maps of religion—locative and utopian—as ways of categorizing religion without even acknowledging his third unnamed map (or, as I prefer, mapping strategy) which is akin to play. I locate religion wholly in this third play strategy and recommend the same for the academic study of religion. Smith himself betrays occasional moments of nostalgia for "stance" and "place," movement-stopping strategies, and ultimately concludes that scholars must take a stance to avoid inaction altogether. Throughout this book I have attempted to show that we are constituted in the oscillatory spaces of synapse and groping and copresence; that such structuralities, rather than being some odd construct of the scholar, are constitutive of our animate being. As self-moving organisms the implication is that copresence, metastability, nonlinearity are not only increasingly recognized philosophically as fundamental, but that they are constitutive of us in the deepest neurobiological sense.

What I want to accomplish by including this article is to show that Smith's study of religion has established a lineage spanning several decades that acknowledges the generative power of play (in my terms, also self-movement) to enhance the academic study of religion. By placing Smith's work in the context of the philosophy and biology of movement, especially living movement, I want to illuminate the importance of his work, but more so I want to show the potential of his core insights.

Smith has been persistently concerned with "place" and in this article I show that we can appreciate that he has given "the play to place." Yet giving the play to place is to introduce the fundamental importance of movement. Taking the primacy of self-movement radically is the fundamental challenge. To do so leads, I believe, to the replacement of concerns of place with those of the dynamics of movement, coordination dynamics, metastability and nonlinearity. Movement (especially as process), I argue, is the future of the study of religion and the academy. As the implications of movement are incorporated in the study of religion, the mentalist tendencies that characterize much of Smith's work—the emphasis on text and thought and meaning—are balanced by greater attention to sensory-rich experience; the focus

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[192] See also my article "Play." In *Critical Guide to the Study of Religion*, edited by Russell T. McCutcheon and Willi Braun. London: Cassell, 2000, pp. 451-462.

on the discovery of meaning (halts) as fundamental to both religion and the study of religion must shift to concerns regarding coherence in the midst of ongoing moving dynamic processes.

"Go Up Into the Gaps" shows that play occurs in the gap that at once holds things together and keeps them apart; that it is in the gaps that play occurs. I explore Friedrich Schiller's 1793 comments on play to give historical depth to these ideas and for cultural examples I look to the Zuni, Hopi, and Yaqui in the American Southwest.

13: No Place to Stand: Jonathan Z. Smith as *homo ludens,* the Academic Study of Religion *sub specie ludi*[193]

> "Give me a place to stand on and I will move the world."
> Archimedes

Raising questions, demolishing unquestioned categories and patterns, insisting that discerning difference is fundamental to comparison—these are the trademarks of Jonathan Z. Smith's scholarship. His perspective and the accompanying academic operations foster studies that produce theory in religion, theory that I will argue might well be understood in terms of play.[194]

Juxtaposition is Smith's initiating operation. He sets two or more "things" side by side—texts, interpretations, quotations and their sources, ideas, and approaches. Juxtaposition is more than placing two things in adjacent spaces. Juxtaposition is a placement that implies

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[193] Originally published as "No Place to Stand: Jonathan Z. Smith as *homo ludens*, the Academic Study of Religion *sub specie ludi*" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 66/2(1998): 59-88

[194] Quite obviously from the title, my concern is with play and how it characterizes not only Smith's work but also with how the academic study of religion would benefit significantly by adopting a play theory of religion. This focus immediately raises the difficult question of what I understand as play. My readers will demand definition of me at the outset. I am convinced that our attempts to define such words as religion and play have gone so terribly sour because we have approached them from the assumptions of classical category theory. George Lakoff discusses the limitations of the classical theory and offers a prototype theory as a more useful alternative. Though it would take much more space than a note or even an artide to deal with a definition of play, I must here say at least that for historical and cultural reasons we tend to see what we understand as the distinctive actions of children as one of our principal prototypes for play. Thus, the playground and children running seemingly randomly about the space provide one prototype from which *we* develop the idea that play is like a back and forth movement without apparent intent or final goal. Games provide another prototype. The play of a game is that action and interaction that result from holding together two opposing forces. When one conquers or dominates in a way the other cannot possibly overcome, there is no longer play. From this prototype we associate play with all sorts of dialogical structures, offering for example an alternative to hierarchical dualities such as right and wrong and good and evil. While this essay is not specifically on defining play, I will point out as Igo along some of the elements of play, their operative prototypes, and their academic heritages. lt will be a nontechnical discussion of play that must await another work for a more satisfying and complete consideration.

relationship. Juxtaposition is the necessary precondition to comparison. It demands comparison. An effective juxtaposition engages a tension among the items juxtaposed, a tension that raises questions not easily answered. In an engaging juxtaposition there is movement back and forth among the elements. An interplay.

In comparison the acceptance of *difference* is the grounds of its being interesting, creative, and important. Difference drives the interplay. Smith conceives this difference most commonly in such terms as incongruity, lack of fit, and incredulity. He frequently invokes Paul Ricoeur's axiom "incongruity gives rise to thought," or as he has stated more formally: there is through comparison "a methodical manipulation of that difference to achieve some stated cognitive end" (1987:14).

Juxtaposition frames the comparative enterprise. Difference fuels comparison. To initiate and maintain the playful process is as important as forcing it to precipitate some unwarranted conclusion. The thoughtful process generates theory and insight.

Smith does not limit this dynamic process to the technical academic methods of a student of religion and culture. He recognizes that they are present as well in the structures of religious experience. His analyses tend to move easily between the study of some aspect of a specific religious tradition and the study of religion itself and, even more broadly, the whole educational process.

Smith also shifts back and forth between the study of religion and academic self-criticism. But the method is constant: juxtaposition (comparison), difference (incongruity or incredulity), thought (reflection).[195] Numerous pairs are played against each other: 1) the entities juxtaposed for comparison, 2) the deconstructive and reconstructive phases (that is, difference and thought or incongruity and reflection), 3) the study of religious phenomena and the self-conscious analysis of academic method, and 4) the subject and the object of the enterprise. Smith's approach depends in the most basic way upon juxtaposition, upon the holding together of two things that cannot easily subsume one another. He does not seek some final resolution but rather an occasional clarification, even the revelation of more interesting juxtapositions.[196]

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[195] I always have the desire to add to Smith's focus on thought by including action. Action, doing something external, would include writing and discourse in the field of scholarship and a whole range of human action in the religious field. I will note later, however, Smith's work is self-consciously focused upon text and scholarship where, likely, it has seemed to him thought is an adequate descriptor.

[196] It seems rather clear that the prototype of play that is most operative here is that of play in game. Similar views of play date as early as Friedrich Schiller in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* in which he posited a series of paired drives—such as the formal and sensuous drives—which, when engaged with one another gave rise to a third drive, the *Speiltrieb.* Charles Sanders Peirce, who attributes his understanding of play to Schiller's influence (see Hardwick: 64), sees play as "musement," and I believe that for him play was nearly synonymous with the inferential method he called "abduction." I wonder if the whole tertiary structure of his philosophy does not reflect this perspective on play.

Religion and the Study of Religion

Smith's approach to religion can be considered *sub specie ludi.* Play is an important element running through Jonathan Smith's study of religion; key both to appreciating and critically evaluating his work. Furthermore, understanding Smith's notion of play has implications for other recitings of religion, notably Milan Kundera's as I will show.

Religion, as Smith understands it, is a mode of human creativity.

> What we study when we study religion is one mode of constructing worlds of meaning, worlds within which men find themselves and in which they choose to dwell. What we study is the passion and drama of man discovering the truth of what it is to be human. History is the framework within whose perimeter those human expressions, activities and intentionalities that we call "religious" occur. Religion is the quest, within the bounds of the human, historical condition, for the power to manipulate and negotiate one's "situation" so as to have "space" in which to meaningfully dwell. It is the power to relate one's domain to the plurality of environmental and social spheres in such a way as to guarantee the conviction that one's existence "matters". Religion is a distinctive mode of human creativity, a creativity which both discovers limits and creates limits for humane existence. What we study when we study religion is the variety of attempts to map, construct and inhabit such positions of power through the use of myths, rituals, and experiences of transformation. (1978c: 290-291)[197]

And, according to Smith,

> Man . . . has had only the last few centuries in which to imagine religion. It is this act of second order, reflective imagination which must be the central preoccupation of any student of religion. That is to say, while there is a staggering amount of data, of phenomena, of human experiences and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or another, by one criterion or another, as religious—*there is no data for religion.* Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy. For this reason, the student of religion . . . must be relentlessly self-conscious. Indeed, this self-consciousness constitutes his primary expertise, his foremost object of study.

> For the self-conscious student of religion, no datum possesses intrinsic interest. It is of value only insofar as it can serve as exempli gratia of some fundamental issue in the imagination of religion. (1982b:xi)

With respect to religion Smith shows us that the playful character of being human is exemplified as an oscillation[198] among an array of active and passive, willful and receptive attributes: activities and intentionalities, invention and participation, creation and discovery,

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[197] The paper was delivered as a lecture in May 1974.

[198] Oscillation is common to the view of play that develops on the prototype of the actions distinctive of children. This view of play is used by Hans-Georg Gadamer (91-119) in his consideration of the ontology of art.

quest and location, manipulate and negotiate, construct and map, analysis and reflective imagination. The activities, expressions, and intentionalities that are considered to be religious take such forms as myths, rituals, and experiences of transformation. These actions are not distinguished by any unique religiousness, they are open to analysis as religious in terms of their characterization of worlds, situations, spaces, domains, spheres, powers, and positions. The study of religion parallels its practice and experience. As religion is an "attempt to map, construct and inhabit . . . positions of power," the study of religion is an attempt to map those data that are chosen to exemplify religion. Whereas religion maps, constructs, and inhabits "through the use of myths, rituals and experiences of transformation," the study of religion maps through the "imaginative acts of comparison and generalization." Myths, rituals, and experiences of transformation are structurally parallel to academic theories and methods. It is not the religiousness of the data that directs the study of religion, it is the imaginative and self-conscious selection of theory.[199]

Throughout his work, Smith's concern, given his view of religion, is where the academic stands in her or his endeavor. Hence, it is no surprise that the issue of "place" is a persistent topic.

Place

Smith's critical examination of Mircea Eliade's most basic and universal pattern and symbolism—the "center"—began as early as 1971 in a lecture entitled "The Wobbling Pivot" in which he suggested that Eliade overemphasized the center to the exclusion of other place categories.[200] He presented a series of queries and applications intended to complement and extend Eliade's conception. Smith attributes to Eliade a generative theory of religion: "The question of the character of the place on which one stands is *the* fundamental question as Eliade has taught us" (1978f: 103). Perhaps Smith learned this from Eliade, but his various analyses of Eliade's studies of religion show that, for Eliade, it was a question not so much posed as it was a question to which he provided what he and many others have considered the definitive answer.[201]

A statement made by Claude Levi-Strauss is likely the more important and persistent inspiration for the formation and development of Smith's concerns with the interconnection of "place" and

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[199] Perhaps I should not over-complicate the presentation at this point, but I must at least note that taking Smith's priorities seriously means that these parallels between religion and the study of religion are also the product of a self-conscious selection of theory. It is not that religion has some inherent nature or essence, it is that religion takes on this profile according to the way Smith chooses to construct the data he considers relevant to his theory of religion.
[200] Smith regularly uses Eliade as the foil against which to articulate his understanding of religion and the academic study of religion. I find that the juxtaposition and comparison of the two figures and their works are an effective way to consider critically two major positions within the academic study of religion. I have comparatively examined both their views of place (in press; and 1998, chap.7).
[201] As I will repeatedly point out, the essentialist aspect of Eliade's work greatly limits his playfulness.

the analysis of religious experience.[202] As early as 1968 in a lecture entitled "Birth Upside Down or Right Side Up?" and as recently as the preface to *To Take Place,* and several times in between, Smith quotes the following passage from Levi-Strauss's *The Savage Mind:* "A native thinker makes the penetrating comment that 'All sacred things must have their place.' It could even be said that being in their place is what makes them sacred for if they were taken out of their place, even in thought, the entire order of the universe would be destroyed. Sacred objects therefore contribute to the maintenance of order in the universe by occupying the places allocated to them. Examined superficially and from the outside, the refinements of ritual can appear pointless. They are explicable by a concern for what one might call 'micro adjustment'—the concern to assign every single creature, object or feature to a place within a class" (10).[203]

There is for Smith a high potential for insight when students of religion attend to categories of place. The designation of meaning, sometimes referred to as "sacrality," is related to place. The language of symbol and social structure expresses an individual's or a culture's vision of its place. Place is articulated in the act of creating and discovering worlds of meaning (see 1978b: 141, 145). Whereas Mircea Eliade equates the "sacred" with the place category of the center, Smith enriches and even confounds this simple identity. Whereas Levi-Strauss equates the "sacred" with "being in place," this is but the beginning for Smith.

Smith articulates a notion of place in the terms of two categories he labels "locative" and "utopian." A *locative* vision of the world emphasizes place (1978f: l01). A *utopian* vision of the world emphasizes the value of being in no place (l978f: l01).

> Those myths and rituals which belong to a locative map of the cosmos labor to overcome all incongruity by assuming the interconnectedness of all things, the adequacy of symbolization . . . and the power and possibility of repetition. They allow for moments of ritualized disjunction, but these are part of a highly structured scenario (initiation, New Year) in which the disjunctive (identified with the liminal or chaotic) will be overcome through recreation. (1978c: 308-309)

> A utopian map of the cosmos is developed which perceives terror and confinement in interconnection, correspondence and repetition. The moments of disjunction become coextensive with finite existence and the world is perceived to be chaotic, reversed, liminal. Rather than celebration, affirmation and repetition, man turns in rebellion and flight to a new world and a new mode of creation. (1978c: 309)

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[202] Smith also frequently cites the statement attributed to Archimedes that serves *as* epigram for this article and occasionally a statement by Mary Douglas; "Holiness is exemplified by correctness. Holiness requires that individuals shall conform to the class to which they belong. And holiness requires that different classes of things shall not be confused" (53).

[203] Smith usually accompanies this passage with a footnote in which he juxtaposes to Levi-Strauss's statement the text from the Pawnee Hako as recorded by Alice Fletcher on which Levi-Strauss based his statement. Juxtaposition, comparison, difference, thought lead Smith to conclude that "It is not, in this account, being-in-their-place which *confers* sacrality as Levi-Strauss suggests" (1978: l37 n.26).

Although Smith emphasizes that taken together these maps present the basic dichotomy among religions (and he exemplifies them with specific religious traditions), one cannot simply classify religions in terms of these maps. The locative map has been by far the more familiar. But, as Smith notes, this reflects the way in which the study of religion has been approached.[204]

The locative map is necessarily a centered map. It depends upon some order or set of organizing principles, that is, some center whether or not it is spatially marked. Eliade proclaimed an identity between the "sacred" and this locative, centered, map of the world. He contrasted all other maps as "profane" or non-religious. In '"The Wobbling Pivot" Smith suggests that the elements of chaos, which Eliade identified as profane, can be more effectively comprehended in the context of a religious worldview. Chaos, Smith says, "is a sacred power; but it is frequently perceived as being sacred 'in the wrong way"'(l978f: n97). He cites the myth of the charioteer in Plato's Phaedrus (253-254) to illustrate his argument: "If one had only the white horse of decorum, temperance, and restraint, he would never reach heaven and the gods. If one had only the lawless black horse, he would rape the gods when he appeared before them. Without the black horse there would be neither motion nor life; without the white horse there would be no limits" (1978f: 97).

Smith holds that there is an interdependence between the locative center-oriented map and the utopian chaos-generating map. He links the sacred and the chaotic (rather than the profane), and thus shows that there is a religiousness to being out of place as well as to being in place. Still, partly because the locative map has been so successfully and extensively documented by students of religion, but also because of the nature of maps, the utopian map tends to be seen as at most a subtle development upon, enrichment of, the old model; that is, a momentary phase in the reformulation of new locative orders. In "The Influence of Symbols on Social Change" Smith shows that social change is often motivated when a culture experiences chaos. He follows Suzanne Langer's view that man "can adapt himself somehow to anything his imagination can cope with; but he cannot deal with Chaos" (1978b). And this seems especially true for students of religion.

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[204] "Students of religion have been most successful in describing and interpreting this locative, imperial map of the world—especially within archaic, urban cultures. . . . Yet, the very success of these topographies should be a signal for caution. For they are largely based on documents from urban, agricultural, hierarchical cultures. The most persuasive witnesses to a locative, imperial worldview are the production of well-organized, self-conscious scribal elites who had a deep vested interest in restricting mobility and valuing place. The texts are, by and large, the production of temples and royal courts and provide their reason d'etre—the temple, upon which the priest's and scribe's income rested, as 'Center' and microcosm; the requirements of exact repetition in ritual and the concomitant notion of ritual as a reenactment of divine activities, both of which are dependent upon written texts which only the elite could read; and propaganda for their chief patron, the king, as guardian of cosmic and social order. In most cases one cannot escape the suspicion that, in the locative map of the world, we are encountering a self-serving ideology which ought not to be generalized into the universal pattern of religions experience and expression" (l978c: 293).

The utopian map cannot stand as a structural equivalent and parallel to the locative map; it can scarcely be conceived at all except in terms of the rejection of or rebellion against a locative map. Although Smith cites examples of the utopian map, it does not seem that he is actually interested in establishing it as a separate map. Rather, it seems he wants to show how these two maps are interdependent, how they stand together in complex relationships that are fundamental to religion.

Incongruity, issues of fit, constitute another relational factor that Smith develops. In his "Map Is Not Territory" incongruity is focal. In the penultimate paragraph of this essay Smith summarizes his concern with incongruity in what he describes as a third map of the world. "The dimension of incongruity which I have been describing in this paper, appears to belong to yet another map of the cosmos. These traditions are more closely akin to the joke in that they neither deny nor flee from disjunction, but allow the incongruous elements to stand. They suggest that symbolism, truth, ritual, repetition, transcendence are all incapable of overcoming disjunction. They seek, rather, to play between the incongruities and to provide an occasion for thought" (1978c: 309). According to Smith none of the three maps can "be identified with any particular cultures at any particular time. They remain coeval possibilities which may be appropriated whenever and wherever they correspond to man's experience of the world" (1978c: 309). This view follows upon Smith's earlier observation in "The Influence of Symbols on Social Change": "Each society has moments of ritualized disjunction, moments of 'decent into chaos' of ritual reversal, of liminality, of collective anomie. But these are part of a highly structured scenario in which these moments will be overcome through the creation of a new world, the raising of an individual to a new status, or the strengthening of community" (1978b: l45).

Smith's concern is more with fit than with pattern, and this constitutes his more fundamental revision. Smith views humans as both creators and discoverers of their place in the world (with the corresponding notion that their view of their world can be articulated in terms of place). This means that human religious and social actions are generated by and given meaning in the terms of fit, the relationship between map and territory.

Smith's discussion, developed in the terms of three maps, would be clearer (at least to me) if understood as attitudes toward maps or mapping strategies. Religions take shape in the process of juxtaposing experience with structuring maps. What Smith describes as a locative map is an attitude that seeks congruence of map (worldview) and territory (experience). It stretches the map to encompass all aspects of the territory, even apparent disjunctions like initiation and the New Year. The locative attitude would seek an expansion of the map to approach the scale of one to one. The motivation is to find the meaning of experience in the corresponding perfect and complete fit of the map. In contrast, what Smith describes as a utopian map is an anti-map attitude. The utopian attitude finds maps artificial, constraining, threatening. The utopian motivation is to shrink the scale and inclusiveness of maps, to diminish their influence, to find meaning in experience itself rather than any map correspondences.

These two attitudes toward maps are mirror images. Neither is achievable in its pure form except in the most special and momentary of circumstances. When a map achieves full scale it is experienced either as suffocating or as indistinguishable from the territory it charts. When all

designations and categorizations of place are eliminated in the utopian moment of "being in no place," there can be no vision of the world at all. The utopian, like the locative, attitude is a process forever seeking fulfillment and a process always defined in terms of a rejected map (Smith uses the terms "rebellion" and "flight" and the examples "gnostic revaluation" and "yogic reversal").

In this place-founded imagination of religion, map, whatever its kind, is indispensable. What Smith shows is that there is a range of attitudes about the relationship between map and territory spanning a domain defined by ideals at the opposing extremes which he terms "locative" and "utopian." Smith's insight has been to shift the study of religion from a classification of map types, of the identification of religion with one map coordinate, to an examination of the dynamics of the relationships between maps (worldviews) and territories (human experiences). It is to see that religiousness occurs in the play between map and territory, worldview and experience. Juxtaposition, comparison, difference, thought.

The third, yet unnamed, map that Smith describes is not so much a third ideal, though technically Smith presents it as such, as it is a necessary product of Smith's analytical scheme. This position, as Smith envisions this religious map, allows "that symbolism, myth, ritual, repetition, transcendence are all incapable of overcoming disjunction." However, following my argument, in the face of the impossible (or at best rare and momentary) achievement of either the locative or utopian ideals, the only positive alternative is to "allow the incongruous elements to stand." Here the incongruity is not only that between map and territory but between either ideal goal and its respective accomplishment.

One may choose to limit religion to those rare moments of achieving the locative or utopian goals (as in happily accepted complete dogmatism or rarefied mystical moments) and to the more or less tragic strivings toward these ideals. This has been a common choice of students of religion and it remains a popular notion. Smith shows students of religion the double-face, the holding together of tragedy and comedy. Without rejecting a basically tragic view, one may complement it with a comic and playful view allowing religion the mode of experience "to play between the incongruities and to provide an occasion for thought." Rather than some third unnamed seemingly exceptional subdivision, all religion occurs as the inevitable play between map and territory. It is the play of fit. To return to Smith's analogy of the charioteer, all cultures must drive chariots reined at once to the desire to have a place for everything with everything in its place and the desire to be free of all constraints, or, put negatively, reined to the boredom with and oppression of a static and dogmatic order as well as to the terror and anxiety of chaos.

Smith's accomplishment here may be described as enriching the categories and characterizations of place that distinguish religion. Because he presents his discussion of place in terms of different kinds of maps, I fear many may limit his accomplishment to this. His more important accomplishment is in giving the play to place,[205] that is, in showing us that religions

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[205] While I argue that Smith presents a play approach to religion, and his language often suggests he is doing so self-consciously, I think the play elements might have been richer and clearer had the level of self-consciousness been higher. For example, by shifting Smith's presentation made in the nominal terms of maps to the verbal terms of mapping strategies, the

may be engagingly understood by considering the way they think about and act toward the relationship between maps (worldviews) and territories (experience). And extending that, Smith shows us that religion arises in and exists because of the play of difference.

As with religions, so with the study of religion.[206] As religions create and discover meaning in the struggle of juxtaposing given categories with experience, so also do students of religion, but the latter are largely engaged in mapping territories comprised of religious mappings. This helps us begin to comprehend—I'll return to it later—the provocative title and conclusion to Smith's "Map Is Not Territory.'' "We [academics] need to reflect on and play with the necessary incongruity of our maps before we set out on a voyage of discovery to chart the worlds of other men. For the dictum of Alfred Korzybski is inescapable: 'Map is not territory'—but maps are all we possess" (309).[207] Smith illuminates the correlation—a locative style correlation—between academic method and the resulting understanding of religion. In his shift from a method of correlating academic maps to religious territories to include religious strategies and attitudes toward mapping, he demands a major reconsideration of such basic religious forms as myth and ritual.

Myth

As a category, myth has confused and often confounded the study of religion in that it has been used to denigrate as well as elevate. It refers variously, even unpredictably, to that which is false, that which is held to be true yet lacking evidence or proof, that which is truth unquestioned, that which is the ground for truth yet is itself not subject to such concerns. Whatever the evaluation, myth is generally recognized as narrative, as story, though for most students of religion it is written text rather than story told or performed. Smith's view of place provides a context and background for his insightful studies of such classic myths as Hainuwele (Wemale of West Ceram), Io (Maori of New Zealand), and Enuma elish (Babylon). How one views myth is to Smith "the most interesting dilemma of choice confronting the student of religion." The choice is between seeing myth as an exotic or an ordinary category of human experience (see 1982b:xii). Smith chooses the latter. "In short, I hold that there is no privilege to myth or other religious materials. They must be understood primarily as texts in context, specific acts of communication between specified individuals, at specific points in time and space, about specifiable subjects. . . . This implies, as well, that there is no privilege to the so-called exotic. For there is no primordium—it is all history. There is no 'other,'- it is all 'what we see in Europe every day'" (1982b: xiii).

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dynamic relationship between opposing drives as described by Friedrich Schiller might illuminate the dynamics of the relationship. Schiller argued that play arises in "a reciprocal action between the two drives, reciprocal action of such a kind that the activity of the one both gives rise to, and sets limits to, the activity of the other, and in which each in itself achieves its highest manifestation precisely by reason of the other being active" (XIV.1).

[206] It is the other way round actually, since religion is the creation of the study of religion.

[207] Much more need to be said about this passage. Whereas Smith sees religion as occurring in the negotiative processes of maps (traditions) and territories (human experience), here he seems to be saying that the academic study of religion has no access to religious territories. I will return to this riddle.

Smith borrows Kenneth Burke's definition of the proverb, applying it to myth: myth is a "strategy for dealing with a situation" (I982b: xiii and 1978c: 299). In every one of Smith's studies of myth he places a story in its historical and cultural context and asks how it constitutes a "strategy for dealing with the situation" faced by the culture. Smith rejects a long tradition of scholarship which has upheld "a distinction between the primal moment of myth and its secondary application, between its original expression and its 'semantically depleted' explanation." He holds "that there is no pristine myth; there is only application. Myth is . . . a self-conscious category mistake. That is to say, the incongruity of myth is not an error, it is the very source of its power" (1978c: 299 and l978a: 205-206).

Myth then is one form of religious mapping. Myth is a story concocted and told to deal with a situation at hand. It bears the tradition, but not so much a record of pristine truth or otherness revealed as the embodiment of a practical strategy for dealing with a situation. The myth of Hainuwele, for example, is, in Smith's analysis, a strategy the Ceramese used in the early twentieth century to deal with "the cargo situation," that is, the discrepancy between European and Ceramese worlds (1982c). It is in this regard like the Akitu festival (the Babylonian New Year) of many centuries earlier which Smith shows is a ritual for the rectification of a foreign king originating in the period of Assyrian domination of Babylonia. In a careful and detailed study of a myth recorded in 1907 from the Maori of New Zealand, Smith shows that the myth must be understood in relationship to millenarian movements, widespread at the time. The story reflects and works with the complex, volatile, and transformational religious history of the time (1982c).

In "Good News Is No News," myth is an important analytical category in Smith's examination of the relationship between Greco-Roman aretalogies, "collections of model hagiographies and paradoxographies widespread in the period of Late Antiquity;'' and Christian gospels. Smith bases his comparative study of these literatures on the recognition that both are dealing with situations at hand, that their power rests in the acknowledgement of discrepancy. Thus, both may be seen in the terms of myth. In the conclusion of this study Smith brings clarity to his view of the nature of myth.

> There is delight and there is play in both the "fit" and the incongruity of the "fit," between an element in the myth and this or that segment of the world that one has encountered. Myth, properly understood, must take into account the complex processes of application and inapplicability, of congruity and incongruity. Myth shares with other genres such as the joke, the riddle and the "gospel" a perception of a possible relation between two different "things" and it delights in the play in-between.

> We have need of a rhetoric of incongruity which would explore the range from joke to paradox, from riddle-contest to myth and the modes of transcendence, freedom and play each employs. (197Sa: 206)

Myth is a bringing together of elements from religious tradition and elements of specific historical cultural situations.[208] Myth holds these together, permitting a movement back and

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[208] Smith's understanding of the interrelationship between tradition and application is similar in some respects to Mikhail Bakhtin's understanding of discourse in the novel. "The way in which

forth between them, examining and delighting in how they fit, or fail to fit, together. Myth is a form demanding juxtaposition, comparison, difference, thought. It may precipitate solution, but its power is in its play.[209] In "Map Is Not Territory" Smith provides a rich statement of his theory of myth *sub specie ludi.* "There is something funny, there is something crazy about myth for it shares with the comic and the insane the quality of obsessiveness. Nothing, in principle, is allowed to elude its grasp. The myth, like the diviner's [referring to African divination] objects, is a code capable, in theory, of universal application. But this obsessiveness, this claim to universality is relativized by the situation. There is delight and there is play in both the fit and the incongruity of the fit between an element in the myth and this or that segment of the world or of experience which is encountered. It is this oscillation between 'fit' and 'no fit' which gives rise to thought. Myth shares with other forms of human speech such as the joke or riddle, a perception of a possible relationship between different 'things'. It delights, it gains its power, knowledge and value from the play between" (300).

Smith's understandings of place and of myth—as well as his understanding of the academic methods of the study of religion—are species of play. Both place and myth, in Smith's view, demand a juxtaposition, which engages comparison (the task of fit, of mapping), precipitating differences and the delight as well as the frustration in the awareness of difference.[210]

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the word conceptualizes its object is a complex act—all objects, open to dispute and overlain as they are with qualifications, are from one side highlighted while from the other side dimmed by heteroglot social opinion, by an alien word about them. And into this complex play of light and shadow the word enters—it becomes saturated with this play, and must determine within it the boundaries of its own semantic and stylistic contours. The way in which the word conceives its object is complicated by a dialogic interaction within the object between various aspects of its socio-verbal intelligibility. And an artistic representation, an 'image' of the object, may be penetrated by this dialogic play of verbal intentions that meet and are interwoven in it; such an image need not stifle these forces, but on the contrary may activate and organize them. If we imagine the *intention* of such a word, that is, its *directionality toward the object*, in the form of a ray of light, then the living and unrepeatable play of colors and light on the facets of the image that it constructs can be explained as the spectral dispersion of the ray-word, not within the object itself . . . , but rather as its spectral dispersion of an atmosphere filled with the alien words, value judgments and accents through which the ray passes on its way toward the object; the social atmosphere of the word, the atmosphere that surrounds the object, makes the facets of the image sparkle (277). Notably, the play metaphor of light on the water is, I believe, based on the prototype of play being the activity distinctive to children*.

[209] As Smith says, "The power of myth depends upon the play between the applicability and inapplicability of a given element in the myth to a given experiential situation. That some rituals rely for their power upon a confrontation between expectation and reality and use of perception of that discrepancy is an occasion for thought" (1978c: 308)

[210] Again, it is important to note that Smith's understanding of myth is a product of his self-conscious choices of theory. It is not a claim about some essence or nature of myth. Also it is important to note that Smith's view of myth would, I think, be broadly and soundly rejected by most religious adherents. Myth, as religion, is of the scholar's making.

Ritual

Ritual, which Smith understands to be one of the basic forms of religious action, is a major concern throughout his writings. He helps orient us to the complexities of the study of ritual by placing it, along with myth, in the context of our intellectual history. While myth was conceived as a study of belief, for the study of ritual "there is no question of beliefs, no problem of the endless subtlety of words, but rather, nonsense. Ritual lacking speech, resisted decipherment. The 'other,' with respect to ritual, remained sheerly 'other'—there could be no penetration behind the masks, no getting beneath the gestures. The study of ritual was born as an exercise in the 'hermeneutics of suspicion,' an explanatory endeavor designed to explain away" (1987: 102-103).

Whereas exegesis has been the mode considered proper to the study of myth, description has been the mode deemed proper for the study of ritual. Simply put, students of religion have not really known what to do with ritual other than to describe it. When pushed, we have tended to advance some notion that serves to explain it away. Smith tackles a major problem in his efforts to shape ritual theory. His theory of ritual is *sub specie ludi,* as evidenced even in the playfulness of the title of a 1974 lecture on bear hunting rituals, "The Bare Facts of Ritual." But it is not simply a direct translation of his view of myth. The lecture deserves careful consideration.

Smith describes hunt ritual as having several phases. The first part is the preparation for the hunt, rites performed to insure its success, including such rites as divination, mimetic dances prefiguring the hunt, and invocations of the master of animals or guardian spirits of the hunters. Commonly a ceremonial or ritual hunt language is used. The second phase is composed of rites associated with leaving the camp. Smith describes a complex of roles and relationships that mediate the hunter and the game animals in the hunting grounds.[211]

The third ritual phase is "the kill" governed by complex rules of etiquette including such things as the attitude and directional orientation of the animal as it is killed, the physical relationship between hunter and animal, the acceptable weapons, the bloodiness of the wound, the prohibited and acceptable locations of the wound on the animal's body, and what must be spoken to the animal before it is killed. Smith holds that in this phase the controlling idea is that "the animal is not killed by the hunter's initiative, rather the animal freely offers itself to the hunter's weapon" (1982a: 59).

The fourth and concluding phase of the hunt is the return to camp, which includes the etiquette of treating the corpse of the animal (often adorned or clothed); the butchering, distribution, and eating of the meat; the care and disposition of the bones; and the purification of the hunters. The emphasis here, as Smith sees it, is upon the reintegration of the hunters and the

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[211] "The forest serves as a host to the hunter, who must comport himself as a proper guest. The hunter is a host inviting the animal to feast on the gift of its own meat. The animal is host to the hunters as they feed on its flesh. The animal is a gift of the 'Master of Animals,' as well as being a visitor from the spirit world. The animal gives itself to the hunter. The hunter, by killing the animal, enables it to return to its 'Supernatural Owner' and to its home, from which it has come to earth as a visitor" (l982a: 59).

game into the domestic world and the return of the soul of the animal to its home that it might regenerate flesh for another hunt.

In his characteristic fashion Smith approaches the analysis of the hunt with "some blunt questions" that arise from the obvious, yet routinely ignored, incredulity of the prescribed method of kill. He asks the simple and rather obvious question: "Can we believe that a group which depends on hunting for its food would kill an animal only if it is in a certain posture?" Pointing out that "if we accept all that we have been told on good authority, we will have accepted a 'cuckoo-land' where our ordinary, commonplace, common sense understandings of reality no longer apply. We will have declared the hunter or the 'primitive' to be some other sort of mind, some other sort of human being, with the necessary consequence that their interpretation becomes impossible. We will have aligned religion with some cultural 'death wish,' for surely no society that hunted in the manner described would long survive. And we will be required, if society is held to have any sanity at all, to explain it away'' (1982a: 61).[212]

Smith's consideration of hunt ritual, foundational to the presentation of his general ritual theory, begins with the contention that the killing of hunted animals as prescribed and enacted in hunting ritual is not and cannot be a description of the actual killing of animals. He provides ethnographic evidence. He also describes ceremonial killings in bear festivals practiced by some circumpolar peoples. For example, a bear cub may be captured and treated as a guest while it is being raised to adulthood. Under the control of a ritual environment the captive bear is killed precisely in the prescribed manner. Against these queries and observations Smith forges his ritual theory. "There appears to be a gap, an incongruity between the hunters' ideological statements of how they ought to hunt and their actual behavior while hunting. For me, it is far more important and interesting that they say this is the way they hunt than that they actually do so. For now one is obligated to find out how they resolve this discrepancy rather than to repeat, uncritically, what one has read. It is here, as they face the gap, that any society's genius and creativity, as well as its ordinary and understandable humanity, is to be located. It is its skill at rationalization, accommodation, and adjustment" (1982a: 62). This is the familiar gap[213] in

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[212] Though I agree with Smith's point here, I would anticipate that many would feel that, far from being "primitive," hunting peoples are in fact superior to technologically modern hunters; that their spiritual relationship with the animals, permitting them even to speak with them, enables them to hunt precisely in the terms of the prescribed hunting etiquette. In this view, which remains primitivist with different valences, all the values are reversed. It is not the hunters who have a death wish but rather those who have severed their spiritual relationships with the animals and with nature. What is most basic here is to comprehend that this view is the flip side of the "cuckoo-land" view and ultimately amounts to explaining away the hunt ritual.

[213] Developing on Gregory Bateson's important discussion of play, Don Handelman provides an insightful discussion of the play function of the gap in terms of being in the boundary. The boundary between not-play and play is constituted through the self-referential paradox that depends on qualities of processuality. "Every passage to play through a paradoxical boundary imputes processuality to the medium of play" (1992: 1).

which play occurs. In ritual that which is and that which ought to be are held together. Juxtaposition. In this gap a culture plays out its most creative actions, its rituals.

Attributing much weight to the occasional ceremonial killings, though not practiced by all hunting cultures, Smith argues that these rituals enact the "perfect hunt," the way a hunt "ought" to be conducted. It is through their rites, Smith proposes, that hunters fill the gap of incongruity. The actual hunt is imperfect, while the description of the ritual hunt and/or the ceremonial killing are perfect. The hunter, having participated in the ceremonial kill, carries the knowledge of how a hunt "ought" to be performed in his mind as he conducts the imperfect actual killing of animals. From this Smith draws the conclusion that the ritual hunt closes the gap of incongruity. "The hunter does not hunt as he says he hunts; he does not think about his hunting as he says he thinks. But, unless we are to suppose that, as a 'primitive,' he is incapable of thought, we must presume that he is aware of this discrepancy; that he works with it, that he has some means of overcoming this contradiction between word and deed. This work, I believe, is one of the major functions of ritual" (1982a: 63).[214]

Smith understands ritual as a controlled environment that resolves the incongruities commonly experienced in the course of life. It differs from myth which itself creates and plays among incongruities. Ritual resolves the incongruities that are a given aspect of life, whereas myth engages a thought-provoking process, a mode of constructing meaning. Smith holds that *"ritual represents the creation of a controlled environment* where the variables (i.e., the accidents) of ordinary life may be displaced *precisely* because they are felt to be so overwhelmingly present and powerful. *Ritual is a means of performing the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are in such a way that this ritualized perfection is recollected in the ordinary, uncontrolled, course of things.* Ritual relies for its power on the fact that it is concerned with quite ordinary activities, that what it describes and displays is, in principle, possible for every occurrence of these acts. But it relies, as well, for its power on the perceived fact that, in actuality; such possibilities cannot be realized" (1982a: 63, Smith's emphasis).[215]

In Smith's understanding ritual is distinguished from non-ritual in several respects. Ritual is perfect, non-ritual is imperfect; ritual is special, non-ritual is ordinary and everyday; ritual is controlled, non-ritual is uncontrolled. Ritual is how things ought to be, non-ritual is how things are.

While incongruity, gaps, and play are essential to Smith's views of both myth and ritual, their respective roles appear to be quite distinct. Smith sees both myth and ritual as serving practical purposes, as existing only in application, only in their performance, only in meeting the need of a concrete historical cultural situation. Myth offers a second perspective on an existential situation provoking thought and action in response to the incongruity it presents when the two

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[214] Notable here is Smith's giving rare attention to actual subjects rather than texts reporting the subjects. It is interesting that the actual behavior of real hunters (not hunters in texts) is an inference of the application of Smith's theory.

[215] The impossibility of achieving perfection "in actuality is precisely why ritual must be understood as a genre of play.

are juxtaposed. Because of the character of myth, the gap cannot be overcome, thus energizing the play of thought regarding fit and non-fit, a play that gives rise to meaning.

Ritual, on the other hand, is motivated by incongruities in the course of life that can never be overcome. Ritual provides the controlled environment in which perfection and order can be experienced, if but momentarily. In Smith's view, it appears that ritual tends to serve primarily a locative strategy and depends upon the establishment of the ideas, the perfect, the "ought," that is determined somehow outside of and prior to ritual, one might suppose in the play of myth.

In *To Take Place* Smith maintains the notion, worked out in "Bare Facts," that "ritual represents the creation of a controlled environment where the variables (the accidents) of ordinary life may be displaced precisely because they are felt to be so overwhelmingly present and powerful. Ritual is a means of performing the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are" (109). But here, despite a leaning toward the locative, he holds a more obviously playful understanding. "Ritual thus provides an occasion for reflection on and rationalization of the fact that what ought to have been done was not, what ought to have taken place did not . . . . Ritual gains force where incongruency is perceived and thought about" (109-110). This is even clearer in his comments on a description of Indic sacrificial ritual. "Ritual is a relationship of differences between 'nows'—the now of everyday life and the now of ritual place; the simultaneity, but not the coexistence, of 'here' and 'there.'. . .The absolute discrepancy invites thought, but cannot be thought away. One is invited to think of the potentialities of the one 'now' in terms of the other; but the one cannot become the other. Ritual précises ambiguities; it neither overcomes nor relaxes them" (110).[216]

Homo ludens: Smith as Play

In the collection of Smith's essays entitled *Map Is Not Territory,* Smith concludes many of the essays with an "Afterword" in which he describes his thinking and reading on the topic since its earlier publication. Smith concludes the afterword to his essay on James George Frazer, entitled "When the Bough Breaks," with the following curious sentence: "Frazer, for me, becomes the more interesting and valuable precisely because he deliberately fails" (239).

In the article Smith appears to demolish both Frazer and his famous work *The Golden Bough.* In reading Smith's article one is dazzled by his virtuosity, tenacity, incisiveness, courage, and boldness; one is embarrassed for Frazer, for a whole tradition of scholarship, and for one's own meager efforts too easily identifiable with the sins of the great Frazer. But then, almost too late, Smith zings us with this declaration, a conundrum really, that he actually finds Frazer interesting and valuable, and, all the more shocking, he attributes the measure of his interest to Frazer's deliberate failure. It is a common technique in Smith's writing to draw his readers, willing or not, kicking and screaming (either with pleasure or pain) into the play of incongruity.

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[216] This understanding of ritual is developed by Catherine Bell. Bell uses the term *ritualization* to emphasize that ritual is a way of acting, a "cultural strategy of differentiation linked to particular social effects and rooted in a distinctive interplay of a socialized body and the environment it structures" (8).

His study of Frazer and *The Golden Bough* provides some keys to our fuller understanding of this playful dimension of Smith's contribution to the academic study of religion.

"When the Bough Breaks" is published in Smith's 1978 collection *Map Is Not Territory,* having first been published in 1972 in the journal *History of Religions.* Though Smith does not acknowledge it, the article relies heavily on Part I of his 1969 Yale University doctoral dissertation entitled *The Glory, Jest and Riddle: James George Frazer and* The Golden Bough. The title to Part I is *"Homo ludens:* Frazer as Play." In an arresting display of analysis and scholarship Smith carefully examines Frazer's massive work. He finds that no question, no thesis, directs the work. Hence, there can be no answers, no conclusions, not really even any clear direction within the whole rambling thing. By the hundreds Smith juxtaposes Frazer's sources with his extractions from them, showing that Frazer misquotes, misclassifies, and misinterprets the bulk of the materials he presents as documented facts. Upon Smith's examination of Frazer's presentation of the Scandinavian myth of Balder in light of its sources, he concludes: "I can think of no other passage of less than one hundred words in the work of any other scholar which contains a comparable number of errors of fact and interpretation" (237).[217]

Is not Frazer's work simply bad scholarship? Why should a bad scholar be considered a player? Why does Smith declare this to be of interest and value? Smith never discusses what he understands by the term play, and there may be good reason for that.[218] It is also not clear whether Smith intends his connection of Frazer with play to be entirely complementary, as the following passage shows:

> The book which set out to explain the priesthood at Nemi has failed to accomplish this end. The work which is entitled *The Golden Bough* has, in fact, nothing to do with the golden bough. This is more serious than the simple criticism that *The Golden Bough is* a "misnomer." It calls into question the whole purpose and intent of the vast work. . . . Frazer has produced, in *The Golden Bough,* a bad joke, and, poor comic that he was, he gave away the punch line in the first page of the Preface to *Balder the Beautiful:*
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> > . . . . Though I am now less than ever disposed to lay weight on the analogy between the Italian priest and the Norse god, I have allowed it to stand because it furnishes me with a pretext for discussing not only the general question of the eternal soul in popular superstition, but also the fire-festivals of Europe . . . Thus Balder the Beautiful in my hands is little more than a stalking-horse to carry two heavy pack-loads of facts. . . . He, too, for all the quaint garb he wears, is merely

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[217] He later would find Eliade's treatment of the Arrernte example "Numbakulla and the Sacred Pole" at least comparably in error (see 1987: 1-23).

[218] Notably, Jacques Derrida frequently used the term "play" with little definition or distinction. Indeed it seems that while Derrida deconstructs every other term, play is the one left to stand without this attention. This is perhaps because it is self-deconstructing as in "to risk meaning nothing is to start to play" (1985: 69) or because there must finally be some place on which to stand, even momentarily; to deconstruct and play is in itself shifty enough to semi-ground a stance. See Derrida 1970 for his discussion of play.

> a puppet, and it is time to unmask him before laying him up in the box. *(Golden Bough,* Vol. X, pp. v-vi)

Smith follows this passage by quoting the conclusion Frazer wrote to the same introduction:

> I am hopeful that I may not now be taking a final leave of my indulgent readers, but that . . . they will bear with me yet a while if I should attempt to entertain them with fresh subjects of laughter and tears drawn from the comedy and tragedy of man's endless quest after happiness and truth. *(Golden Bough,* Vol. X, p. xii). (1969: 109-110)

Smith concludes, "The Bough is broken and all that it cradled has fallen. It has been broken not only by subsequent scholars, but also by the deliberate action of its author" (1978e: 239),

We may feel that Smith has played a bad (or, perhaps more accurately, a "cruel") joke upon his readers, but he is no bad comic. Not only does he not give away the punch line, he persists in complicating the play, in raising the stakes. For example, in the "Afterword" to his 1978 essay Smith shows more clearly Frazer's joke: "Frazer, in his researches, encountered the Savage which put the axe to his Victorian confidence in Progress and, in his studies of dying gods and kings, was brought up short before the absurdity of death. The history of mankind became, for him, the attempt to transcend that which cannot be transcended—namely death, 'no figurative or allegorical death, no poetical embroidery thrown over the skeleton, but the real death, the naked skeleton' *(Golden Bough,* Vol. VII, p. vi). And, in the face of this 'real death' one can only act absurdly, or, to put it another way, all action is a joke" (239).

These remarks are made as an allusion to and brief summary of an article Smith had conceived as a companion piece to "When the Bough Breaks." From his summary it appears likely the piece would have been drawn from Part II of his *The Glory, Jest and Riddle,* especially the concluding section "The Royal Play" of Chapter Five "The Pattern of Divine Kingship." Here Smith writes:

> As one steps hack and attempts to survey the vast panorama of Frazer's *The Golden Bough,* one is struck by the fact that Frazer has combined these two attitudes [comic and tragic]. He has chosen as his subject matter the daring, tragic attempt by man to overcome death by slaying it and has chosen as his manner of approach, his style, a comic playful stance. Unless the two are indissolubly held together (by author and reader alike), unless the seriousness of each is equally perceived, there is a danger of reducing Frazer (or of Frazer reducing himself) to the maudlin and over-dramatic on the one hand, to being frivolous on the other.

> What Frazer has sensed in *The Golden Bough* is what later philosophers have termed the absurdity of the human condition. . . . Striving to conquer death by means of death, man asserts the reality of death, its omni-presence and omnipotence, all the more strongly. It is tragic, it is comic, it is absurd. (376)

> Frazer, as the chronicler of "these efforts, vain and pitiful, yet pathetic" *(Golden Baugh,* vol. IX, p. 241), adopts the necessary double-face. (378)

I want to consider these quotations and Smith's work in light of his remarks in perhaps his best-known essay "Map Is Not Territory." One of Smith's favorite and most stimulating tasks is to

show the absurdity of the places on which scholars stand to profess their knowledge. In contrast to Archimedes' dictum "Give me a place to stand on and I will move the world,"[219] Smith has the audacity to hold that "The historian has no such possibility. There are no places on which he might stand apart from the messiness of the given world. There is, for him, no real beginning, but only the plunge which he takes at some arbitrary point to avoid the unhappy alternatives of infinite regress or silence. His standpoint is not discovered, rather it is fabricated with no claim beyond that of sheer survival. The historian's point of view cannot sustain clear vision."

"The historian's task is to complicate not to clarify. He strives to celebrate the diversity of manners, the variety of species, the opacity of things" (1978c: 289-90).

Then Smith concludes "Map Is Not Territory" with another apparent riddle developed on the map-territory metaphor. "We [academics] need to reflect on and play with the necessary incongruity of our maps before we set out on a voyage of discovery to chart the worlds of other men. For the dictum of Alfred Korzybski is inescapable: 'Map is not territory'—but maps are all we possess" (309). This statement is richly complex, highly playful, and demands careful consideration in light of the history of Smith's work. I will examine these remarks briefly before returning to his study of Frazer.

Smith's standard method of source criticism would seem to belie his statement that map is not territory and that we have only maps. Smith clearly holds the cited sources as territory at least in the sense of having priority or primacy over the presentations made of them. But what I think he means when he says that maps are all we have is that he understands the academic study of religion to be confined to the analysis of texts. He recognizes that the most primary sources are still texts that purport to map some text-independent reality or territory. Smith confines his work to texts, to maps. This is consistent with the range of Smith's source criticism. He compares Frazer's presentation to the sources he cites, but he does not attempt to compare those primary textual sources with any text-independent human reality. It appears that Smith sees this "reflecting on and playing with the necessary incongruity of our own maps" as preliminary or preparatory to charting "the worlds of other men," but he does not, or at least rarely does he, go on to do so, and it would appear either he is not interested or feels it premature.

Thus, in this widely cited and highly important statement it appears Smith both embraces and denies the map-territory distinction. He confines academic work to the comparative study of maps without regard to territories, all the while admitting that such territories at least exist. It is that we do not *have* these territories; we cannot have other than textual records of them. This confinement of the academic study of religion to text is particularly interesting since Smith's understanding of religion is elaborated through his carefully self-conscious development of theories of place, myth, and ritual that emphasize mapping, application, human experience, history, and society. With regard to the impact and effect on the world beyond texts, Smith writes that "it is both wonderful and unaccountable, perhaps even comic

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[219] As quoted in 1978b: 129. The quotation also appears in 1978c: 289.

or crazy, that sometimes our playful imagination, our arguments about and mental construals of the world, turn out to have real consequences" (1978d: 18).

There is a major advantage in Smith's restricting the work of scholars to texts. It enables a comparative task that leads to a measure of objective accomplishment, that is, conclusiveness. In the frame of comparing map with map, text with text, while excluding consideration of the map- and text-independent realities, the results are conclusive and seemingly inarguable. In this relative domain Smith can be certain of the territory. Interestingly, in contrast to his own dictum, he has a very firm place on which to stand.[220] So, for example, in his study of Frazer's presentation of the Balder myth Smith's comparison supports the frank and unqualified conclusion that Frazer's presentation is loaded with "errors of fact and interpretation." This stance is taken in many of Smith's studies. He reveals the incongruities through comparison. And in these comparative operations Smith is unhesitating and forthright in declaring presentation of fact and interpretation as either accurate or in error.

But why does Smith go to such lengths to compare presentations with source texts? The case of Frazer is especially revealing. Smith reports that Frazer's earliest critics recognized his failure and that Frazer himself acknowledged his failure as deliberate.[221] So what could possibly motivate Smith's exhaustive comparative analysis? That is, if it is a foregone conclusion that Frazer at least acknowledged his failure, it would not seem worth the enormous effort of Smith's analysis simply to verify Frazer's statement. Thus, it would seem that Smith was principally interested in *how* Frazer failed. This, indeed, is what his analysis shows, that is, that Frazer is *homo ludens.* According to Smith, Frazer knowingly and deliberately construed his sources to deal with issues other than those he stated as his purpose. He was perpetrating a joke and therein, in Smith's view, lies the glory of the work. Smith praises Frazer finally for his approach and style which Smith identifies as "a comic playful stance."[222]

In this study I believe that Smith forges his understanding of the role of the religion scholar. Though Smith is able to cite Frazer (in the preface to the tenth volume![223]) to show that his intention was other than what he had stated, it is actually Smith's study that reveals the humor of Frazer's work and illuminates the distinctiveness of its character as a riddle and joke. Smith does not do this by an interpretation of Frazer's work alone but only through the exhaustive, tedious, but ultimately exciting examination of how Frazer creatively used his sources. This revelation, or I would suggest construction, is apparently worth the extent of Smith's effort, and

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[220] And it is not an arbitrary choice.

[221] Smith depends here solely, it seems, on the prefatory statements to Volume X which, as he notes, were omitted by Frazer from the abridged edition, thus "countless readers who have read the work in this edition have not been 'in on the joke'" (1978e: 23a n. 96). This is yet too liberal, because few readers—one can scarcely imagine any other than Smith—have understood *The Golden Bough* in light of the selected prefatory comments to the tenth volume.

[222] Recalling Smith's studies of Eliade, we might suppose that Eliade's failure was less interesting to Smith because he did not find Eliade to he a player.

[223] I seriously doubt that any reader of *The Golden Bough* would find these brief statements as central to framing an interpretation of the whole enormous work. Thus, I am far less convinced than Smith that Frazer's failure was a persistent self-conscious motivation.

we must attempt to understand why. I do not believe that Frazer's work can he interesting on the terms Smith states apart from Smith's study of it. Whereas Smith calls Frazer a poor comic, having produced a bad joke, apart from Smith's analysis I don't think any reader would find Frazer a comic at all. We would no more see the bad joke than we would recognize the many errors in his presentation of Balder.

Smith is perpetrating a joke himself. He, much more than Frazer, is the player, the trickster. As Frazer did with Balder, Smith does with Frazer, but much more ingeniously and self-consciously. He reworks his source maps in order to deal with issues other than those explicitly stated. Religion, for Smith, is the invention of scholars, a product of scholarly maps and mappings. While the maps appear to be about "the worlds of other men;" the joke is that they are only about the worlds of the scholars who must "reflect and play on" them to work out their own issues. It is, as shown above, surprising to Smith when our work actually has any effect on the real world of men. Smith, like Frazer, is interested in the priesthood of Nemi or the Scandinavian myth of Balder (indeed, he is interested in Frazer and his work) primarily because these subjects provide the symbols by which academic maps are drawn. They were both interested only in the texts, the maps, that are articulated in the terms "of other men." Smith is showing that this territorial analogy reveals what distinguishes the academic enterprise. Religion, as a modern western academic invention, is comprised of only what we write about it.

Through the detailed objective comparison of map (e.g., Frazer's *Golden Bough* or Eliade's report on the Arrernte) with territory (the ethnographic and literary sources) Smith is able to demonstrate that scholars do not simply objectively present their subjects; indeed, they often do not even present a legitimate face of their subjects. What they do is to recreate their subjects in terms that meet their own needs, both personal and academic. Smith shows that Frazer actually recreates Balder for his own purposes, the attempt to transcend death, and that the loads of facts Balder, as stalking horse, is made to carry are concocted by none other than Frazer himself.

Shockingly, Smith shows that what we have thought to be the territory of religion—the substance and subjects of the works of scholars like Frazer and Eliade who seem to inundate us with factual information about scholarly-independent realities—is actually comprised of projections of scholarly maps. The joke, it would seem, is that there are no territories, or that real territories are inaccessible to the scholar. The joke is that for the study of religion there is no territory, only maps made to resemble it. Recognizing the joke illuminates Smith's view of the map-territory distinction as the metaphor by which to distinguish scholarship. In Jean Baudrillard's terms, what scholars have presented us has been a "precession of simulacra" rather than reality (l ff.). And this work is what as scholars, we are in the business to do. It would seem clarifying to me now to rephrase Korzybski's statement as "Map is *now* territory," which renders the rest, that is any play between map and territory, completely absurd. Smith's conclusions are the same as Frazer's, the holding at once of the comic and tragic views, the double-face.

I believe that Smith is fully aware of this absurdity and that his work finally does not embrace playing this absurdity endlessly as in a sandbox. Our only choice, as he puts it, is "the plunge" that avoids "the unhappy alternatives of infinite regress or silence." It is, as Smith states a

standpoint "fabricated with no claim beyond that of sheer survival." This is the full force of play in Smith's approach—the choosing, the assumption of a standpoint, however temporary, and while fully acknowledging its absurdity.

To take a stance, in this complex multi-cultural world, without recognizing its absurdity is either religious, narrow-minded, or naive. To refuse to take any stance at all is either to indulge infinite regress, a favorite of many post-modernists, or silence. The alternative, which is at least more interesting, is the perspective of play: seriously taking a stance while acknowledging its absurdity. Scholarship, as Frazer found, is like life in that it must go on despite its absurdity.

Religion sub specie ludi

So what might a study of religion look like if conducted *sub specie ludi?* Let me conclude by attempting to summarize, extend, and develop some of the ideas suggested by Smith.

The heritage of the academic study of religion, what Milan Kundera has called "the deep well of the past," is the western intellectual development of recent centuries. It is distinguished by literacy, by second-order criticism, by the growing awareness of cultural and religious multiplicity, and by the consequent increasing problematization of the foundations of western perspectives. This questioning is due either to the rigorous analysis of these foundations or to the growing awareness that the western claim to truth and finality is but one among manifold such claims among peoples around the world.[224] Religion, as a generic category, is inseparable from the western effort to learn how to live morally and meaningfully as modern citizens of a complex world.

Play, as demonstrated to us by Smith as a double-face, is holding at once comic and tragic perspectives, the oscillatory and iterative negotiation of fit, the acknowledgment that we must stand somewhere despite knowing that there is ultimately no justifiable place on which to stand to comprehend the world. To embrace this absurdity is particularly suited, one might even say singularly so, as the attitude for the modern academic study of religion. It is the perspective from which we can simultaneously embrace two or more opposing positions without declaring ourselves mad. Indeed, through descriptors such as joke, humor, laughter, and play we can see the analogy between what we do as serious academics and what children, athletes, chess competitors, and novelists do with equal seriousness.

Smith suggests we take an attitude toward what we do that corresponds with the attitude expressed by other players when they say, "it is just a game" or "it is only play." To say "this is religion" is parallel to the statement "this is play" as Gregory Bateson has discussed it. He expands the statement as "these actions in which we now engage do not denote what those actions *for which they stand* would denote" (180). Invoking Korzybski's map-territory relation, Bateson gets right to the point: "the fact that a message, of whatever kind, does not consist of those objects which it denotes ('The word "cat" cannot scratch us'). Rather, language bears to the object which it denotes a relationship comparable to that which a map bears to a territory. Denotative communication as it occurs at the human level is only possible *after* the evolution of

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[224]Awareness of others and reflections on the implications of multiplicity were enabled, if not directly caused, by the media expansion of print. This is particularly important now as we are at the moment beginning to imagine the effects of expansion into hypertextual media

a complex set of metalinguistic (but not verbalized) rules which govern how words and sentences shall be related to objects and events" (180, Bateson's emphasis).

Religion (generic) I argue is the construction of a metalanguage that makes possible some general comprehension and discourse about what is religious. The academic study of religion, like the signs that communicate the message "this is play," is on the order of metacommunication.

Humor as presented by Milan Kundera in his *Testaments Betrayed* is parallel to play. Kundera believes that humor characterizes the distinctive perspective of the novel. Humor is "not laughter, not mockery, not satire, but a particular species of the comic which renders ambiguous everything it touches" (5-6). And humor is that "intoxicating relativity of human things; the strange pleasure that comes of the certainty that there is no certainty" (32-33). Humor, as Kundera understands it, characterizes the novel as *"a realm where moral judgment is suspended.* Suspending moral judgment is not the immorality of the novel; it is its *morality"* (7, Kundera's emphasis). A novel is characterized by humor, implemented by the suspension of moral judgment, and Kundera criticizes recent works presented as novels that he believes are intent upon making such judgments.

Kundera's explanation of his position is important for the insights I want to draw from it. "Western society habitually presents itself as the society of the rights of man; but before a man could have rights, he had to constitute himself as an individual, to consider himself such and to be considered such; that could not happen without the long experience of the European arts and particularly of the art of the novel, which teaches the reader to be curious about others and to try to comprehend truths that differ from his own" (8). "The novel is a method of inquiry and presentation that is particularly suited to the modern world, a complex world of diverse peoples. Kundera sharply contrasts the perspective of the novel with a religious perspective. The novel in its embracing of humor requires an exploration of myths and sacred texts that renders them profane, that is, it removes the sacred from the temple, "Insofar as laughter invisibly pervades the air of the novel, profanation by novel is the worst there is. For religion and humor are incompatible" (9).[225]

This discussion of humor is instructive for how students of religion (generic) should research and write. It is only by profanation, by taking the sacred out of the temple, that students of

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[225] This statement, of course, issues from a particular understanding of religion, one with which I here agree. I am well aware that the very character of this kind of statement invites the ire of many readers. The response is likely to attempt immediately to find an exception (either rendering humor differently than does Kundera or positing some tradition, like Zen, as incorporating this ambiguity), thinking this adequate to dismiss the statement. Most definitions of religion are tacitly based on the paradigm of Christianity (perhaps chain link extended to monotheism). Let that be my paradigm here, because l want to refer to religion as it is self-consciously understood by adherents of many specific traditions. For example, belief in god, belief that scripture is revelation, belief in the infallibility of the pope, any of which may be qualified by academic theologies, cannot be dismissed as representing those masses who profess to be Christian.

religion may even begin to grasp religion. Given that our subjects are culturally and historically specific religions, our only attitude can be that of play or humor as Kundera presents it.

Thus, the academic student of religion is like the novelist in some respects. It is her or his job to create the world of religion, knowing full well that all that exists of religion (the generic) is what students of religion write of it. In this respect we are storytellers, concocting tales of "other men." These fictive narratives give us the terms, categories, perspectives, and methods with which to comprehend the complexities of the choices we have. Without honoring the impossibility of truth and ultimate reality in the modern complexly plural world, truth and reality have no meaning at all. Without upholding differences as unresolvable, which from the perspective of most of our subjects would threaten the core of their existence, differences are either denied or disguised or glibly digested into cheap and empty universals.

Upon accepting the mantle of storytelling, we lay aside the role of discovering truth, of reporting objective reality. In doing so we must experience the freedom and responsibility of the storyteller to make her or his stories, and the telling of them, as engaging and as profound as possible[226] so as, in Kundera's terms, to incite the reader of our work "to be curious about others and to try to comprehend truths that differ from his own."

But we are not like the novelist in at least one important respect. The subjects of our stories are real people. We cannot go about our task assuming that what we do does not affect the real worlds of actual people that give inspiration to our fictions. Thus, for me, the fullest range of play, the greatest absurdity is that, because our knowledge is always in some respects a product of our theories, we can never objectively know those whom we choose as our subjects, but we are nonetheless always in interaction with them, as partners in a dance. Our particular kinds of stories cannot exist without our real subjects. Whereas the novel is distinguished by its being totally hyperreal,[227] the humor extends much more deeply for students of religion. Novels deal with truth and reality, not as the distinction of their content but as they interrelate with the real lives of their authors and readers, that is, in their being written and read. While students of religion must acknowledge that our writings are fictive, in that they are the products of our theoretical perspectives, we must constrain these fictions by the real and independent presence of "the worlds of other men." *Sub specie ludi,* the study of religion resolves, by embracing it, the paradox that our subject reality is and must be independent of us while our attempts to understand it, in some measure, make our subject dependent upon us.

Our academic play, like any, is bound by the rules that distinguish the activity. Our subjects may support many profiles and show many faces through the acts of our interpretations—they are puppets of our choices of theory. Still, underlying our understanding of what is academic is the philosophical assumption that our subjects exist independent of what we write of them. Thus, academic writing is distinguished from the novel by our acknowledgment that we cannot say

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[226] I am increasingly convinced that the standards and conventions of academic writing and speaking greatly inhibit the creative potential of our work. We must take advantage of much more expansive and creative modes of research and presentation as offered, for example, by the Internet. We must explore media more compatible with play and humor.

[227] Though, of course, there are mixed genres such as historical novel.

simply anything we want about our subjects. As academics, we are bound by the rules of our play to have our stories constrained by our real subjects.

What we write then is hyperreal, but it must also be real. It is hyperreal in that it is distinguished, on the one hand, by imaginative academics creating stories, arguing hypotheses, and concocting theories. All these are fictions to be judged only in terms of the history of similar writings. Yet, on the other hand, writings of the academic study of religion must also be demonstrably grounded in the author-independent reality of the subject. Smith shows us the methods by which we can evaluate the legitimacy of academic work, but, because he appears to limit his concern largely to the world of texts, I do not think he goes far enough to assure that scholarship is held to be responsible to the actual subject.[228] Without this grounding—albeit a fictive grounding since it is ultimately impossible and, thus, the necessity for a play perspective—what we do is finally not academic at all.

The "no place" on which we may stand is the fictive narrative, the narrative comprised of such terms as myth, ritual, place, mapping, comparison, criticism, and text, none of which exist, at least in the generic sense, in the worlds of our subjects. This "no place" is the "fabrication with no claim beyond that of sheer survival" where we may stand to attempt to comprehend the most confounding and urgent issues that distinguish the world in which we live.

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[228] This limitation, I think, tends to relieve us of the responsibility to be constrained by our subject I believe there *is* a huge difference between creatively interpreting one's subject and an illegitimate construal. We must promote the former and discourage the latter.

14: Go Up Into the Gaps: Play of Native American Religions[229]

It was a dark and misty winter afternoon. As I crested the hill east of Zuni the familiar sights of Corn Mountain to the south and Zuni village nestled in the valley below greeted me. I thought of Frank Hamilton Cushing's description of Zuni as it first appeared to him in 1879:

> Below and beyond me was suddenly revealed a great red and yellow sandplain. … To the left, a mile or two away, crowning numberless red foot-hills, rose a huge rock-mountain, a thousand feet high and at least two miles in length along its flat top, which showed, even in the distance, fanciful chiselings by wind, sand, and weather. . . .

> Out from the middle of the rock-wall . . . flowed a little rivulet. Emerging from a succession of low mounds beneath me, it wound, like a long whip-lash or the track of an earth-worm, westward through the middle of the sandy plain and out almost to the horizon, where . . . it was lost in the southern shadows of a terraced hill.

> Down behind this hill the sun was sinking, transforming it into a jagged pyramid of silhouette, crowned with a brilliant halo, whence a seeming midnight aurora burst forth through broken clouds, bordering each misty blue island with crimson and gold, then blazing upward in widening lines of light, as if to repeat in the high heavens its earthly splendor.

> A banner of smoke, as though fed from a thousand crater-fires, balanced over this seeming volcano, floating off, in many a circle and surge, on the evening breeze. But I did not realize that this hill, so strange and picturesque, was a city of the habitations of men, until I saw, on the topmost terrace, little specks of black and red moving about against the sky. It seemed still a little island of mesas, one upon the other, smaller and smaller, reared from a sea of sand, in mock rivalry of the surrounding grander mesas of Nature's rearing.[230]

It is now more than a century later and everything appears the same. Perhaps, I thought, this scene is little different from that seen by Fray Marcos de Niza in May of 1539 when he made the first European contact with native peoples in what we now know as North America. Zuni is on an ancient road traveled by many. Coming here is like traveling back nearly half a millennium. Zuni is fitting to be preserved as did Aldous Huxley in *A Brave New World*. I began to look forward to seeing religious events out of the past.

But wait! I was brought out of this foolish romantic reverie by a traffic jam. Sitting in my car. Waiting. I felt irritated. I was eager to get to the village. What might I be missing? It would be my first time to experience Shalako. I had read so much about Shalako, a grand ceremonial affair, one of Zuni's most important, occurring early each December. What could be holding up traffic in so remote and ancient a place? Seeing the flashing lights of a police car I concluded it must be an accident. Surely traffic would soon move along. The police car moved very slowly

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[229] Originally published in *Dancing Culture Religion* (2012), pp. ??

[230] Frank Hamilton Cushing, "My Adventures in Zuni" *Century Illustrated Magazine* 25(1882). Reprinted in Jesse Green, ed. *Zuni: Selected Writings of Frank Hamilton Cushing* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska press, 1979), 47-8.

parallel to the line of traffic. Why so slow? As it approached me I could finally see. The police car was escorting a small troupe of Zuni figures along the highway. At the head of the group was a Shalako, a twelve-foot tall feather-topped, bird-headed, beautifully costumed figure. Slowly the procession passed and I was able to move along, park, get a quick bowl of chili, and prepare myself for a magical night at Zuni. Well a little has changed since Cushing's day.

Some years before, I sat atop a pueblo in the Hopi village of Hotteville. The occasion was Niman, the home dance. This stately early August event marks the closing of the kachina season that begins in December. Kachinas, messenger spirits, appear as masked dancers for the last time before returning to their homes in the San Francisco Peaks some ninety miles to the west, easily seen on this brilliant hot day. The sounds—clack, jingle, clack, jingle—announced their arrival. As they entered the village plaza I recognized them as my favorite, Angak'china, the long hair kachina. To me, their beauty is somehow in their simplicity. Oh they are elaborate enough with feathers and jewelry, kilts and sashes. But their faces are simple, a small turquois rectangle with simple markings for mouth and eyes, set against long hair flowing from the crown of the head nearly to the waist in front and back. They brought gifts of food. They brought dolls for the children. Their dancing brought life and happiness to everyone. I could feel their power then. As I remember them I feel that power now.

Then there was the time, I've forgotten the year, I visited the Franciscan Fathers at St. Michael's near Window Rock on the Navajo Reservation. I enjoyed the hospitality of the Fathers, though awestruck by the sheer fact that I was walking the same grounds, sleeping under the same roof, where Father Berard Haile had lived so many years of his life. He was a sensitive and insightful friend to Navajos, a devoted inquirer about their religion, though he never participated in nor even directly observed their rituals. The second or third day I was there, after an appropriate time for us all to get acquainted, I was asked if I wanted to see the Navajo ritual art collection. It was not a public display. I felt honored. Once in the little room burgeoning with shelves, cabinets, and drawers I was enthralled by the marvelous things about me. We talked easily of these things. I was invited to look at a set of Navajo *ye'ii* masks kept in a drawer. As the drawer glided open, suddenly it came to me. I knew these masks. They had been given as a set to Father Berard by the family of a deceased singer, or medicine man, who feared, because of their power, to keep them. Father Berard had studied and photographed these very masks in the preparation of his book *Head and Face Masks of the Navajo* (1947). I gazed on the familiar empty buckskin bag-shaped masks. Compared with masks made by most other Native Americans these seem so crude. They are not beautiful, yet they are haunting. I don't know whether it was because I know how powerful Navajos consider these masks or that Father Berard had been involved with them, but I couldn't bring myself to touch them, or even to look long upon them. These same strangely ambivalent feelings returned when, some years later, I was shown two Navajo masks by an art dealer in Chicago.

Masks worn, masks danced, are captivating. They take hold of us. They mesmerize. Their power is both that of beauty and that of darkness. We are attracted, fascinated by masking, yet somehow they also frighten. What is this power? How might we appreciate it even if we know we'll never be able to understand it? These examples of masks used in ritual dancing by Native American cultures are three among hundreds. As introduced in my consideration of Javanese masked dancing (*wayang topeng*) there is a homology and compatibility between the masking

structurality that interconnects masker and mask and the dancing structurality that interconnects dancer and dance. It is not surprising that masking and dancing are conjoined in self-othering cultural and religious activities. The perspective drawn on to help illuminate Javanese masking and dancing was Merleau-Ponty's flesh ontology. Here I will approach these Native American maskings and dancings from the perspective of play.

If anything distinguishes a mask as an object it is that it is a rigid sculpted face. This characteristic holds for these Native American masks as well. It is like a face in form only; it has facial features but no facial sensuality. Notably most masks are self-consciously false; that is, mask makers appear to take every opportunity make a mask so it will never be mistaken for a living face. Masking is not disguise.

But a mask without a masker, the one who bears the mask, is inanimate, a piece of sculpture, an unused prop. Such objects are often used as wall decorations. Masking, as a ritual and cultural activity, is always the conjunction of the two, the mask and the masker. At the basic definitional level the concept mask requires the conjunction of these two elements. Even the English word mask holds this structurality. The word mask may be a verb meaning "to mask," yet it may also be a noun referring to a physical object. There is a double nature necessary to the very idea mask. It is not a doubling that is eventually resolved, but is ever at play.

This simple observation of the double nature of masking, that is an interplay of masker and mask, suggests the immediate relevance of play as I have presented and discussed it. I will pursue the conjunction of playing to masking. A mask as an object, rigid and fixed, and artificial in form is often used to present the eternal and universal idea of a given figure, the figure the mask presents. Apart from the masked presentation this figure has no physical, no sensuous nature, but remains pure form, idea, concept, or virtual. Hence the masking presents rather than represents. The masker, apart from a mask, is a living breathing sentient being. As a human being, he or she, in Schiller's terms, most fully realizes him or herself in the interplay of sensuous and formal impulses. Yet, as masker, the formal drive of the masker is made subsidiary to the sensuous self, since in donning a mask one gives up the form that identifies the human individual. The formal character of the masker becomes coincident with the being presented as the mask, that is, the masker is othered. Masking heightens some aspects of human sensuality. Behind the mask a human masker is, in one sense, reduced in the direction of his pure sensuality. The physical mask at once limits and controls the sensual perceptual faculties that distinguish the nature of the masker as a human being. The masker's vision is impaired, as are his or her senses of hearing and touch, as are his or her abilities to communicate through speech and facial expression. But as the masker's sensual faculties are altered he or she provides a sensuality, a living existence, to an otherwise lifeless form, the mask. This sensual element tempers the pure formality and changlessness apparent in the mask by bringing it into concrete actions, movement that is identified with the mask entity, in a specific time and place. Both mask and masker must exist. Each exerts influence on the other. Masking brings self-moving, sentient, sensual, and physical existence to the pure form of deity, spirit, or concept while at the same time stripping the human masker of his or her own formal self only to engage him or her with another form.

The interconnection of masker and mask and the actions of masking constitute a field of play. The gap between the entity presented through masking and the human being underlying the presentation is a field of play; a space in which the figure presented comes into physical being; a field in which humans come to know through experience, from the inside out (proprioception and touch), the spirits and deities on whom their lives and world depend. In this play between the two, something emerges, comes to life, that is much greater than either one separately or even by the simple addition of the two. In the oscillatory movement of play, that is masking, the virtual is animated and manifested.

Schiller wrote that play is a reciprocal action between two drives (the sensual and formal, in this case), reciprocal action of such a kind that the one both gives rise to, and sets limits to, the activity of the other, and in which each in itself achieves its highest manifestation precisely by reason of the other being active. If a spirit, a deity, a mythic figure is formalized in a mask, the represented entity becomes manifest, comes to life, through the interplay with the sentient human masker. While one may contemplate and study the forms of the spirits, gods, and mythic figures, in the activity of masking a human being actually manifests these figures, stands inside of them, giving them sensual existence. The masker fills up and comes to know the form represented by the mask, a feeling experiential kind of knowing.

Masking is a remarkable example of what Schiller recognized as play. He called it "living form," a term that would serve well as a synonym for the *energia/ergon*, as Gadamer put it, of masking. And to continue to follow Schiller, it is "living form" that is Beauty. It is the moving in concert of the sensual and formal drives that gives rise to the play drive and hence to beauty. This vital conjunction is also necessary in masking. If the masker does not know the figure whose face he or she is bearing; if the masker refuses to yield his or her personal identity to play the mask (though this is unbelievably difficult to do); the masking is likely to appear false, awkward, anomalous—the sensual aspect of the masking prevails over the formal. If the mask as a form, as an ideal, so overwhelms the masker as to render him or her lifeless, unable to move or act, stricken under the weight of the idea that must be made manifest, the masking fails; it is but a tableau. Here the formal aspect of the masking prevails over the sensual. It is only in the oscillation, the vitalizing reciprocal self-moving engagement of the mask and masker, the formal and the sensuous, that masking achieves "living form," that masking becomes beautiful, manifests beauty.

Entrainment is perhaps another way to describe this working together that yields living form, a way of understanding what Schiller meant by "in concert." When two people walk together, they almost immediately begin to match strides. When a number of people are hammering together, they will fall into a hammered rhythm,[231] This is entrainment and it occurs with masking as well. Once in costume, masked, and in the masking events, the masker's movements, gestures, and postures entrain with the character of the masked entity, as it is understood by the whole masking community. When entrainment occurs in masking, the entity

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[231] I experienced this entrainment personally when I visited a black smithy in Bamako Mali.

presented by the masking comes to life and the maskers achieve experiential knowledge of this entity. This is "living form;" this is beauty.

Around the world cultural and ritual practices commonly conjoin masking with dancing. This should be no surprise because both masking and dancing exist as structuralities characterizeable as playing and self-othering. For both there are the two that are also always one. For both there is a gap, a distance that is filled, but never crossed by living movement. This distance is virtual in dancing where the dancer and dance are one body; the distance is a slight opening, like synapse, in masking where mask and masker, like puppet and shadow, are physically separate yet inseparable. The entrainment of mask/masker is most readily enacted in dancing where the playing self-othering multiplies and compounds.

With this exciting way of understanding masking and masked dancing I want to return to Zuni at the time of Shalako. Late that December afternoon crowds gathered along the Zuni River at a place where a tiny bridge had been constructed of mud and stone. In time a procession of masked figures, called the Council of the Gods, crossed the bridge and entered the village. Leading the group was a young figure carrying a fire brand, Shulaawisi, the fire god. His mask and body were painted black with blotches of light-colored dots all over. Next came Sayatasha and Hututu, the Rain Gods of the North and South. Two yucca-carrying whippers, Salimopiya, came last. The group proceeded to six locations in Zuni Village where holes had been dug, representing the six directions. At each hole the group deposited prayer plumes and sprinkled corn meal. These rites blessed the village, bringing it into correspondence with the order of the whole world in accordance with myth and history. The procession ended at one of the Shalako houses prepared for this event. Here Sayatasha faced Hututu and called "Hu-u-u." Hututu responded "Hu-tu-tu, Hu-tu-tu." Then the group entered the house.

Later that evening I stood for hours in cold ankle-deep mud outside this house enthralled by what I was seeing and hearing. Inside this Shalako house was a long rectangular room. On one end were an altar and a place designated for singers and drummers. Many Zuni people had gathered in the large open portion of the room sitting on chairs and benches. A dance corridor remained open along one long interior side of the room. It was along this dance corridor sitting on benches that the Council of the Gods took its position.

With their masks propped atop their now strangely human heads, members of the Council began to chant in unison. This rhythmic flow of speech continued hour after hour throughout the evening. Not only was this most wonderful, but amazingly the Council shared the house with a pair of Shalako dancers who were performing their own, yet different, chant; two groups, occupying the same space, chanting different words, hour upon hour. The overlapping sounds, in a language I did not understand, were enchanting. I could not seem to stop watching and listening.

Near midnight, the chanting complete, all took a break from the ritual intensity to eat and to rest. Finally the dancing began featuring the wonderful swooping dances of the Shalako. The Koyemshi, a troupe of mud-head clowns, performed their buffoonery in another house a short walk away.

The complexity of Shalako is daunting and so much is transparent to this single all night performance. Shalako is actually a many day performance culminating nearly a year of extensive preparation. The members of the Council of the Gods spend much of their time for a year enacting the responsibilities of their offices. Shalako requires the building, or at least the refurbishing, of six to eight dwellings in which to house the event. And Shalako is but one of many Zuni masking rituals performed throughout the year.

Confining our attention to but one figure, Sayatasha, we may begin to appreciate more deeply the play of masking. Around the time of the winter solstice, shortly after Shalako is performed, the members of the Council of the Gods who will serve the following year are chosen. After these men are chosen they make offerings to the ancestors at the river, a first performance of the ritual acts they will conduct daily until they perform Shalako almost a year later. Every night they meet to discuss aspects of Shalako and late at night they learn the prayers they will recite during Shalako. Every morning they arise before dawn and prepare to offer prayer meal to the rising sun. Each month at the time of the full moon they offer prayersticks to shrines and at the new moon they travel many miles to plant prayersticks at springs in the mountains south of Zuni.

The Zuni man who will portray Sayatasha, the leader of the Council, is called by the title Sayatasha Mosona and in all that he does during this year he must act in an exemplary manner. He must work hard physically, socially, mentally, and religiously. He is responsible for the Zuni religious calendar, reckoned primarily by the position of the moon. Sayatasha Mosona must notify all parties at the appropriate time to prepare for ceremonial occasions. This man must even walk like Sayatasha, a gait that is ponderous, with exaggerated strides. Sayatasha walks slowly poising each foot in the air momentarily before bringing it heavily to the ground. Like the Rain Priest he will portray, this Zuni man is sought out for counsel and pointed to as an exemplar of Zuni life ways. Sayatasha Mosana is building through extensive repetition deliberate movements constituting the gestures and postures distinctive to Sayatasha. In this long process he is becoming Sayatasha in his bodily tissues.

The Sayatasha mask and costume are elaborate. To examine the appearance of Sayatasha demonstrates the many attributes of Zuni culture and religion that are brought into play in his masking. Sayatasha is both Rain Priest of the North and Bow Priest. He is the Chief of the Kachina Village which lays beneath a lake two days walk to the west of Zuni, the home of Kachinas and the home of the dead. This remarkable figure, who appears but one time each year at Zuni on this Shalako night, is thus associated with both agriculture and hunting, with both life and death, with both the human Zuni world and the world of kachinas and the dead. The mask and costume reflect the conjunction and interplay of these associations.

The mask is bell jar shaped. Atop the head are downy feathers, blue jay feathers, and feathers of summer birds all fastened to a prayerstick attached to the head, a designation of a Rain Priest. Sayatasha means "Long Horn," a name he is sometimes called when Zunis use English. This designation refers to his distinguishing feature of a single long horn extending outward from the right side of his head. This horn is for long life. A large flat "ear" extends outward from the head on the left. The right eye is a short slit, short according to Zuni reckoning for witches that their lives be short; the left eye corresponds with a long line that extends outward into the

"ear," long so that the lives of good people will be long. Black goat hair hangs from the horn and over the forehead. A white cotton thread hangs down behind. The elk skin collar is stuffed with wool.

Sayatasha wears a white cotton shirt cut full over which he wears an embroidered white blanket fastened on the right side. He wears a white cotton dance kilt with a blue band, an embroidered sash, a red women's belt, fringed white buckskin leggings, and blue dance moccasins. The cotton dance kilt and shirt and the dance moccasins are those of a Rain Priest and are associated with bringing rain. He carries a fawn-skin quiver over his right shoulder. He wears many necklaces and bracelets. In his right hand he carries a deer scapulae rattle and in his left a bow and arrow and many prayersticks. The quiver, bow and arrows, prayersticks, and rattle identify Sayatasha as a hunter and warrior.

Though this is but a superficial consideration of a single figure in the complex Shalako rituals placed loosely in his cultural and religious contexts, it is clear that Sayatasha is not merely a man wearing a mask and costume. Sayatasha as a Zuni kachina engages a vast field of play that is the vitality of Zuni culture and history. A particular Zuni man has practiced and played almost constantly for a year to present Sayatasha in living movement and form. This field of play is activated and realized in the concentrated form of Sayatasha through the masking. It is the contrasting and even contradictory aspects which, when brought together in this masking, initiate a play that has the potential to produce a living form, to be experienced as beauty.

Sayatasha is at once Sayatasha and Sayatasha Mosona: spirit and human, eternal and mortal, form and sense, of the domain of the dead and of the living. Sayatasha is at once Rain Priest and Bow Priest; at once hunter and warrior; bringer of rain and long life, controller of weather, while at the same time killer of witches, protector, deer hunter, and killer of enemies.

Indwelling Sayatasha's form is for a Zuni man an entry into Zuni philosophy and belief, but it is also to bear the responsibility and to be the vehicle for transforming these formal aspects of Zuni religious life into the experience and history of the Zuni people. Masking Sayatasha is, through play, to bring into concert many pairs of mutually exclusive attributes that constitute Zuni reality. The play does not resolve these attributes into unity; the play demonstrates that Zuni religious culture is given vitality in the interaction among these forever opposing and contrasting values and attributes.

Other Native American masking examples will be useful to expand and enrich the nexus of dancing and masking, but first I want to comment on how I see this notion of play as characterizing much of Native American religious experience. To focus on the play of Native American religious action is to articulate the dynamics of what Jonathan Z. Smith meant when he said, "it is precisely the juxtaposition, the incongruity between the expectation and the actuality that serves as a vehicle for religious experience." [232] When we think of religions, especially Native American religions, we tend to think of principles like balance, harmony, centeredness, piety, respect for the earth, kinship with the animals and plants. What we often fail to realize is that a religion characterized in this way would scarcely be either alive or real.

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[232] Jonathan Z. Smith, "Map is Not Territory," in *Map is Not Territory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

Holding this romantic image, we fail to see is that religion generally, and most certainly Native American religions, is a process of manipulation and negotiation and application. It is a process of playing in which the many formal dimensions of tradition are strapped on like masks and made to dance and have presence in an ever changing and always demanding world. It is interplay in this gap that gives life to any religious tradition and it is the extraordinary playfulness of Native American religions that distinguishes them among religions.

For a number of years I lived in Tempe, Arizona, just three miles from the Yaqui village, Guadalupe. Every year during the season of Lent I would drop by Guadalupe now and then to observe the various events of their Easter celebration. The Yaqui people lived for centuries in Sonora Mexico before many were forcibly displaced. Some established communities in Arizona. Their history is remarkable. Yaquis effectively maintained separation from the Spanish for nearly a century after the first contact in 1533. After shunning Spanish influence for nearly a century, suddenly, it would seem, early in the 17th century they requested missionaries be sent to them. The Jesuits arrived in 1617 and in two years the Yaquis had undergone remarkable transformation in their cultural and religious lives. They became Christian at that time, but in their own way. For one hundred fifty years they allowed missionaries to live among them, but finally in 1767 they found Mexican pressure so great that they expelled the missionaries. More than a century followed during which the Yaquis enjoyed an autonomous existence. However, though they fought gallantly, in 1887 they were overcome by Mexican troops and dispersed far and wide.

In time, having formed communities near Tucson and Phoenix, some of the Yaquis began to revive their cultural and religious practices, especially thse associated with Yaqui Easter. The whole season of Lent is filled with ritual and ceremony centered on the small Yaqui church in Guadalupe, standing in the shadow of the larger Catholic mission church just to the north of it. I will not describe the complex of events enacted throughout the whole Easter season, only those of the climactic day, Easter Saturday.

During Easter week the attention of Guadalupe is focused on the Yaqui church and the plaza which extends to the east in front of it. Many of the events—the processions around the way of the cross, the capture and crucifixion of Christ, the control of the church by the evil Chapayekas—are somber and heavy in tone. Yet adjoining the plaza in the area in front of the Catholic mission church, a carnival with rides and booths seems to foreshadow and presage the coming victory over evil and its celebration in fiesta.

Easter Saturday is the dramatic climax of this old struggle between good and evil. Early Saturday morning the fearful Chapayekas who have captured and crucified Christ and taken over the church, leave this domain and in procession escort an effigy of their leader, Judas, into the plaza and affix it to a large cross. They retire to the fringes of the village. Throughout the morning people from the community gather. Many Yaquis approach the anti-Christ to affix a token of penance to him, usually a scarf.

Pascola dancers, with their small masks on the sides or backs of their heads, mingle among the crowds with coffee cans receiving donations as a man, speaking alternately in Yaqui, Spanish, and English, informs the visitors about what is happening and repeatedly asks for donations. Vendors sell food and drinks. There is an air of expectation. Late in the morning the Maestro, or

leader of the Yaqui church, along with a small group of worshippers carrying a cross appear in the plaza and begin a worship service read from a Yaqui book of worship. The group proceeds slowly in the direction of the church. Once they reach the church they enter followed by many women and children. A curtain is drawn across the door.

At the east end of the plaza appear black garbed Pilates, representing soldiers. In two lines, one formed on each side of the plaza, they march slowly forward to a drum beat with an occasional eerie flute melody. The Chapayekas follow, prancing and playing, firing toy cap guns and clacking their wooden daggers on their wooden swords. They often stop to wiggle their hips to awaken their belts of horn rattles. The long bands of cocoon rattles wrapped about their ankles emphasize in sound their every step.

The masks of the Chapayekas are wild and colorful. Many look something like cow heads, but others clearly represent stereotypic images particularly of ethnic groups: a yellow-faced Chinaman with pigtail; a red-faced, big-nosed, cigar store Indian with long braided black hair. European Americans are not always absent from masked representation. At the end of the Nixon era one Chapayeka was an unquestionable representation of Richard Nixon. Chapayekas are a strange mixture of fearfulness and humor.

This huge procession of perhaps a hundred men marches forward into the plaza. Then retreat. Again and again. On each advance they move closer to the church. Finally, at mid plaza, the lines stop moving. They wait in silent readiness. Suddenly the church bell begins rapidly tolling. Simultaneously the lines of Pilates and Chapayekas rush noisily toward the church. As they approach the church the curtain covering the door flies open and the Pascolas along with many women and children rush out filling the area immediately in front of the church. They are armed with hands full of flower petals and green leaves. As the evil ones approach they are pelted with flowers and leaves, the transformed blood of Christ. Repelled, the Chapayekas return to their positions mid plaza and reassemble for another attack.

As the women and children return to the church, some of the Chapayekas, those newest to this role, fall to the ground in the area around Judas. They crawl forward. There, met by their family sponsors, they remove their masks under the protection of a blanket or an overcoat. They leave their masks and their daggers and swords at the foot of the Judas effigy. With unmasked heads covered, the sponsors rush these maskers at a full run to the church where they are rededicated to Christ. Other sponsors approach the remaining Chapayekas who remove some aspects of their costumes--rattles, blankets, sandals, an apparent sign of their loss of power.

Quiet returns. Once again the bell rings. The second attack is launched. Again the women and children are successful with their flowers in repelling the onslaught. Other Chapayekas give up their masks. Those remaining remove even more of their costumes.

One final attack is carried out. On its failure even the last of the Chapayekas remove their masks and are rushed to the church.

The huge straw-stuffed Judas figure is now surrounded by Chapayeka masks. The swords and daggers are all propped in a line around this figure. As the last of the head-covered figures reaches the church, the Judas effigy surrounded by the masks and boxes of debris generated by all these events is set afire. It is quickly an inferno.

Simultaneously, a troupe of Matachini Dancers enters the plaza and begins to dance and the Pascolas joined by a Deer Dancer appear with their musicians immediately in front of the church. It is fiesta time.

There is really so much to be considered in terms of the play of the Yaqui masking on this occasion. There is the play of the past and the present. The ancient Pascola masks representing animals appear in the same event as the Chapayeka representations of contemporary stereotypes. The Yaquis seem masterful at playing the past and the present in the same plaza as a way of vitalizing a hopeful future. Other Yaqui masking features are of special interest to me. The men who mask the Chapayekas comprehend the power of the mask. It is a power that threatens to overwhelm the masker with the character and attributes that the mask presents. In recognition of this power and as protection against it, the masker wears a rosary about his neck. All the time that the mask is on his head, he places the cross of the rosary in his mouth. Constantly he must pray or say the name "Jesus." This is his protection. It is also essential to the *energia* of the masking, the interplay of the masker and mask, the back and forth between all of the opposing valences represented. There is always a fearful or negative element of playing and self-othering. This fear or risk is the qualitative opening manifesting as living movement. Derrida wrote that "to risk meaning nothing is to start to play." The Yaqui masker, by carrying a rosary cross in his mouth, is demonstrating a determination to maintain that masking is and must be maintained as a double identity. Indeed those who portray Chapayekas often talk of the difficulty, but necessity, of having to act in ways that oppose their personal behavior. This reminds me of the same concern expressed by trance dancers in Bali. The masker is not the entity presented by the mask, yet clearly the masker is that entity for the Chapayeka cannot exist without the masker. And the masker experiences being a Chapayeka in his masking activities. The mask form is understood as a powerful presence, especially when enlivened through masking and worn by a human masker. This conjunction of form (the presentation of evil) and sense (the religious Yaqui) must remain at play. Each one both limits and makes possible the existence of the other.

Another very moving aspect of this event is when the Chapayeka maskers remove their masks and are rushed with their heads covered to the church. It is as though the masker, once free of the Chapayeka mask, the form assumed for the masking event, is pure sense, that is, formless, a moment of mere sensation. Certainly with head covered he is faceless, he has no identity. He must be rushed to the church, the opposite pole from the Judas effigy and the Chapayeka mask that has been his form, to acquire another form, this one in the church in the image of Christ and the good.

Finally, in its annual enactment of the Easter pageantry, the Yaqui demonstrate the importance of the play between good and evil. Every Easter, good is victorious. That much is certain. But what makes this victory powerful correlates directly with the eternal presence of evil. If the evil is not powerfully present, how can the victory of good have meaning? And, of course, the struggle continues year after year in the play of masking.

There is one final example of masking that will further illustrate how Native Americans commonly see the double nature of masking, the double nature that I am articulating in terms of play. In northern Arizona Hopi children are carefully protected against seeing the masked

kachinas, spirit messengers, without their masks as they are guarded against seeing masks not in use. They understand the kachinas to be exactly what they appear to be, spirit beings who come to Hopi bringing rain, food, and life. At the age of eight to ten, children are initiated into the Kachina Cult and thereupon formally begin their active religious lives.

The climactic event of this initiation rite is when the children are invited into a kiva, or ceremonial chamber, to witness a dance they have never before been permitted to see. The kachinas enter the kiva climbing down a ladder extending into the kiva from a rooftop hatchway. As the kachinas appear they come without masks. The children suddenly recognize their male relatives and neighbors. Many experience this event as a horrible disenchantment. They feel the adults have lied to them and they wonder whether they will ever be able to trust them again. In a short time, of course, all of these children are involved in the practice of Hopi religion. The boys will soon begin to be maskers themselves.

What is remarkable from the perspective I am developing is that this disenchantment is structurally parallel to a demonstration that the mask and masker must always be understood as a field of interacting play. It is difficult to imagine how the distinction between masker and masked identity could be more dramatically established than in this initiation event. Where from the children's perspective there was wholeness and unity of these entities in their midst, initiation divides them, breaking them in two, divided by a space, a gap that seems unbridgeable. All the more remarkable is that by conjoining this revelation with the commencement of the formal religious life, it must be concluded that the Hopi recognize the religious importance of the play between mask and masker, that in this gap is the play that provides energy to ongoing cultural and religious life. Though the children feel the possibility of truth has been lost for them; they will soon experience that it is in this field of play, in the gap between mask and masker, that the vital character of Hopi religious life is experienced. They will come to know the power of this play in their experience of masking the kachinas.[233]

We are accustomed to various metaphors to describe the character of Native American religions; many are romantic projections. Harmony, as it occurs in music, may be a better metaphor than balance, though both are so often used. Musical harmony requires the interplay of wave patterns that modify one another to produce a whole array of overtones. Harmony occurs through the interplay of separate yet interacting vibrations, not through their resolution into a single tone. Sound is always in process, always passing away as it is coming into being, always creatively interacting with other sounds. Sound is oscillation, movement. Sound is impossible to freeze or to stop without losing it all together. Various notes when played together, interact, create harmonics, produce living form, or beauty as Schiller put it, but only because there are gaps, differences, between the tones that interact. It is in these gaps that not

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[233] Sam Gill, "Disenchantment." *Parabola* I:3 (1976): 6-13. Reprinted in *I Became Part of It: Sacred Dimensions in Native American Life*. Edited by D. M. Dooling and Paul Jordan-Smith. (New York: Parabola Books, 1989), 106 -119 and Sam Gill, "Hopi Kachina Cult Initiation: The Shocking Beginning to the Hopi's Religious Life," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* XLV 2, Supplement (June 1977), A: 447-464.

only Native American religions, but all religions, exist. Only here in these gaps is there the potential for play, for movement, for vitality.

Indeed, gap is a provocative metaphor that invokes the dynamics and vitality of Native American religions. So where, beside maskings and dancings, are these gaps to be found? Mythology and ritual, by their natures, create gaps. They are distinguished by their being at once apart from what seems necessary to life and the basis for all of reality, essential to a meaningful life. Many view mythology and ritual as guidebooks, charters, or paradigms for proper living. In this limiting view the religious objective would be to diminish the gap between life and these religious forms. Any disparity between the two is somehow a human failing. Such views remove the play, stop the movement, end the dancing. It is much more fruitful to see mythology and ritual as, even by their natures, gap creators. To understand that the very character that distinguishes myth and ritual is to acknowledge that they open gaps between them and life as lived in which the cultural tradition is played out. The gap created between the mythic and the quotidian worlds, between ritual and non-ritual life, affords human beings the opening in which they must play out their destinies. To close the gap, to live in myth, to make every act a ritual act, is tantamount to destroying human life altogether, certainly it would be the end of religion.

While I believe that to view religion from the perspective of play I have here developed may serve to illuminate the religious vitality of all human beings, there are many signs that Native Americans have very playful religions. Dancing is a near synonymy with religion for Native Americans. Among the religions of the world, few have so elaborate or extensive a use of masking. Native Americans incorporate, in some of their most important religious ceremonials, the performances of clowns. The story traditions about fools and tricksters are widely understood as essential to the proper development of life. The ritual arts are rarely confused with the fine arts, though in form they may be indistinguishable.

The religious value of ritual art forms is assured in widespread practices of destroying ritual art in its use or after it has served its purpose. Navajos never keep sandpaintings nor even allow them to be photographed. Pueblos whitewash and repaint kiva walls, so richly decorated every season with murals. Yaquis burn the Chapayeka masks. Ritual masks are carefully stored by the Pueblos and in some cultures, the Seneca for example, masks are fed and considered to be alive. Pipes are disassembled and kept in bundles. Of course, many Native American cultures have developed craft arts that parallel these ritual arts, but most make very clear distinctions between objects made for sale as crafts and authentic ritual art forms. Such acts assure that form does not appear alone, but that it is always conjoined with the sensuous. It is in the interplay that these objects are religiously powerful, that they become truly beautiful.

Native American religions are distinguished in a playful celebration of the gaps, whose spirit and vitality is nicely caught in a provocative passage written by Annie Dillard:

> Ezekiel excoriates false prophets as those who have "not gone up into the gaps." The gaps are the thing. The gaps are the spirit's one home, the altitudes and latitudes so dazzlingly spare and clean that the spirit can discover itself for the first time like a once-blind man unbound. The gaps are the clefts in the rock where you cower to see the back parts of God; they are the fissures between mountains and cells the wind lances

through, the icy narrowing fiords splitting the cliffs of mystery. Go up into the gaps. If you can find them; they shift and vanish too. Stalk the gaps. Squeak into a gap in the soil, turn, and unlock--more than a maple--a universe. This is how you spend this afternoon, and tomorrow morning, and tomorrow afternoon. Spend the afternoon. You can't take it with you.

VI: Creative Encounters

15: Creative Encounters

Years ago I was asked to write an intellectual autobiographical essay as a chapter in a book of such stories by religion scholars. I was delighted by the invitation and promptly wrote of my Kansas farm roots, my business career, my surprise acceptance to the University of Chicago Divinity School, my love of bicycling and hiking, my passion of dancing hip hop and various dancy forms of gym work outs, my travels and my relationships and how all these activities shaped and reflected my "intellectual" interests including what I read, thought, wrote, and taught. I loved doing this essay and found the process surprisingly revealing; I've used the technique with students who have always loved digging through their lives to find the roots of their own interests and passions. I submitted that essay and after quite a long while I got a polite rejection note from the editor expressing his appreciation for my submission while conveying that his committee had actually thought I was a more senior scholar. I felt slightly naïve, but not offended. I got it, intellectual is not supposed to have any relationship to body, to the personal, to the subjective, beyond the default use of eyes and fingers.

Now I recognize perhaps a bit more lucidly that, without fully realizing or articulating it, my work has always been driven by my fascination that who we are (our personal, family, cultural, racial, ethnic, age identities) and what we do (the passions, but also the routine patternings of bodied activities that are key to living the distinctive factors that constitute our identities) are entwined at the level of biology with what we think and believe (even how we recognize things as reasonable and factual). Most academic humanities and social scientific studies acknowledge this connection by default in the conventions by which we identify our subjects; that is in the names we use to say what we study. We study Africans or Fourteenth Century Muslims or women or bharta natyam (a classical dance of South India) or troubled youth or Martin Luther. The implication is that the identity of a group of people is somehow relevant, in a primary sense, to our interest in them and to our understanding and appreciation of what distinguishes them among others. It seems that the constant negotiation of labels, as I wrote about above, is inseparable from our advancement and refinement of our studies of our subject. The labeling of our subject establishes perimeters for our studies; but it also tacitly embraces the assumption that the bodied factors that identify them are fundamentally relevant. While these labels most commonly indicate some physical or bodied identity factors—age, ethnicity, place in history, race, country—the studies proceed on the assumption that identity can be adequately accounted for in relatively abstract conceptual terms that foreground *meaning*. We presume that our subjects can be fairly seamlessly transduced from the domain of action, bodies, movings to that of the language articulation of ideas and concepts. Such is not the case.

In teaching courses on dancing and religion for many years I made extensive use of videos to present the many dances that we studied. I also took students to studio once a week where they learned dances from people of the cultures whose dances we were studying. I came to realize that I was treating both the filming and the studio dancings as more or less transparent windows into the realities of the subjects we were studying. Yet, while far better than print, no film and certainly not 90 minutes of learning a bit of movement in a large Western dance studio

offers unfiltered access to the subject. I have been deeply interested in understanding the complex and interesting factors in these kinds of transductions. I subsequently taught courses on dancing and film including film theory (interesting in that film theory is often based on the proposition, obviously in contention, that what the lens sees is objectively real and true) and the philosophy and biology of perceiving and knowing. By studying classic dance films like Carlos Saura's flamenco ballets, one can see how the filmmaker elects to present a dance or dance tradition in a creative encounter with the dance as a cultural tradition (as vast and varied and nebulous as it always is) that does far more than simply and objectively present it. Saura is particularly interesting in that he often used filmic devices of presentation that at once persuade and dissuade the viewer that what is "seen" is "the real thing." He forces his audience to be constantly aware that they are both seeing a made-up film, a work of art, and that they are also seeing the subject unmediated. In the case of dancing, but certainly also religioning, until quite recently we did not even have video encounters. Until recently it was simply impossible to have any semblance of direct experience with the countless dances performed around the world. Until recently our access to the religioning occurring all over the world and throughout time has been restricted largely to the window provided by sacred and ethnographic (including traveler's descriptions and other incidental documents) writings. Still we often consider these texts as transparent windows; ignoring that they are all products of creative encounters.

The rise of the digital information age began, at least in my reckoning, when the first humans used their distinctively hominin digits, comprising the hand, to hold a charred stick or piece of ochre to make marks on a cave wall (to be be slightly cartoonish). As André Leroi-Gourhan helped us see, this act effects a turning of oneself inside out; it externalizes memory and knowledge; it makes endure across time the experience of the now. Today it seems that everything can be transduced into Bit Reality; the technology/interface by which any and every thing may be represented and normalized as bit-based information. Whereas the bulk of our academic attention has been on the analysis of information, I have been persistently drawn to how patterned bodied behavior has a certain primacy (as evidenced by my writings on gesture above). I've come to see biology as more fundamental than electronics, with process and media more fundamental (and interesting) than product. As Walter Ong and Marshall McLuhan and J. L. Austin showed us, the physical skilled acts of marking on a wall—indeed, our whole repertoire of skilled makings (from printing press to iPhones)—have a more fundamental connection with our identity factors and with our sense of values than do the "informational" component, the content of what is marked on these surfaces. Most people can discourse deeply and precisely about technique, yet we are either uncomprehending or we utter obvious superficialities when asked to tell the meaning and value of the technique.[234] We are quick to

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[234] Ballet, or dance generally, is an appropriate example. The details of dance technique are remarkably refined and there is almost always an extensive vocabulary used to teach and correct technique. Yet, when asked, so what does this particular dance mean? we can perhaps mutter something like "oh, it's about a girl and a guy; you know, relationship issues." Merce Cunningham did everything he possibly could to confound the question of what does a dance mean using techniques of randomness that often made his audience leave before the end of

ask the question, "why?" but not so adept at answering it. Yet, our own (indicating academic, western literate-emphasizing, folks) gestural formation makes it nearly impossible to acknowledge value without feeling the need to employ the skill of transducing action into articulate reasoned statements of belief and meaning. My interest is not to reject information, concept, content or translation, interpretation, analysis so much as it is to see that these academic (and perhaps Western) techniques are also inseparable from living gestural postural, thus bodied, practices and the accumulative effect of naturalizing almost anything. And, notably, if we are asked, "Why do you do these things (seeking meaning)?," we probably look at our interlocutor with incredulity; isn't it obvious?

Years ago, I wrote a piece that was titled "Embodied Theology."[235] I now rarely use the term "embody" because, as noted by Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, I think it implies that we exist apart from body, which I don't believe, and that we somehow come to exist "in" body. I argued that the gestural skills that are used without question and practiced with little awareness are fundamentally constitutive of reality. Such simple and uncontested practices related to education are a simple and obvious case in point. Prior to school age and now commonly extending into the early years of formal education, the principal method of teaching/learning is play. In this period—widely acknowledged as, in so many respects, the most formative period in the entire life cycle (it is called *primary* education)—physical activity, moving about, physically interacting, playing, acting (playing like), and specific skill development are prominent. Children at this stage are excited and thrilled to be learning and gaining new skills, to be discovering and making themselves and their world through moving encounters; all methods are actively bodied. Serious formal education might be marked as beginning with a shift in this bodied pattern and skill-forming behavior as captured in the teacher mantra "Sit down, keep your hands to yourself, be quiet, pay attention." These instructions too are bodied, skill forming, and behavior and gestural patterning that shape identity and also reality. Yet, they are distinguished, especially from what had gone before, as movement-discouraging. Educational furniture, architecture, and technology support these exacting movement-discouraging bodily patternings. Movement, beyond hands and eyes, is allowed only during recess or in after school activities. Perhaps music and art are more commonly allowed than is dancing in school curricula because they can be done while honoring the importance of the movement-discouraging body basis of prevailing pedagogy. Play becomes work, extended to home work, and eagerness to learn is often replaced by boredom and required discipline. The repetition of play—swinging, spinning, hearing and telling a story over and over, the physical pleasure of randomness and surprise, acting in the present without expectation of outcome, the unbridled use of imagination—that physically shapes the body as a gesturing skilled actor of identity, often becomes, as education advances, the repetition of redundancy and disconnect. Attitudes

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the performance. William Faulkner did something of the same when asked what was *The Sound and the Fury* about, he responded by saying, "Oh, I just had this image of a little girl climbing a tree. She had dirty drawers."

[235] "Embodied Theology." In *Shifting Paradigms: Theology, Religious Studies, and the University*, edited by Delwin Brown and Linell Cady. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002, pp. 81 – 92.

toward repetition change dramatically. In play—art, dance, music, sport—repetition is honored and enjoyed throughout life as building and maintaining skill, as key to fundamental technique, as essential so that one becomes creative and innovative. In movement-discouraging pedagogy, repetition is often experienced as boring, dull, sleep-inducing, droning. Notably, both domains/approaches to education are creating gestural patterns that, upon lengthy repetition or practice, become naturalized, thus the basis for identifying the real and unquestioned. A correlation I suggested in "Embodied Theology" is that, despite the overwhelming concern with body in the originating events of Christology (virgin birth, Christ as fully human, crucifixion, and bodily resurrection, and the cannibalistic implications of the Eucharist), Christian theology and history have strongly aligned with suspicions of being bodied and with gestural/postural patterns that are movement and body discouraging. Given the rise of modern education out of a history of the church and in strongly Christian cultures, the preference for a movement-discouraging pedagogy correlates generally with Christian values.

The result of one of my early mid-life crises, brought on by overwork, financial stress, and a failing marriage, led me to a life-changing discovery. For a couple decades or so I had been a typical academic spending most of my time sitting—reading and writing, occasionally talking. Add to that a couple more decades as a serious student; even more bodily regimented to chairs with the bulk of my movement limited to hands and eyes (students sit in class, teachers stand and walk about). In responding to my life crisis, on a lark (love the avian implications of this word) I took an adult beginning jazz dance class. The discovery was an awakening to the sheer physicality of my existence; glory be, I was body. I experienced the simple act of walking as something of a miracle; the interconnections of nerves and muscles, the design of skeleton, in the remarkable coordination that is smooth movement; and at that time I'd never even heard of proprioceptors. My body, so long dormant, was horribly out of shape so I soon joined a gym where I did aerobic movement workouts. Rather quickly my active movement life became much more important than my movement-discouraging life; the effect was a quickening, somehow experienced as both mother and fetus. I also experienced the pain, slightly pleasant, of awakening long dormant muscles. This discovery of myself as body led to shifting my studies to dancing and all sorts of culturally identifiable movement. I realized that my studies of cultures that did not have writing had already directed my attention to ritual and dancing and masking. The discovery eventually led to my founding and operating of a dance and music studio and to sponsoring cultural exchange visas for twenty-some artists from Africa, Indonesia, and Latin America. I danced and played music with these amazing people. It led me to travel to countries on several continents to observe and learn dances. It eventually led to me to performing, teaching, and choreographing dancing. During this long gestation period I wrote extensively, yet had little interest in academic publishing. Yet, very slowly I began to develop ideas about dancing as a distinctive marker of being human, as well as offering remarkable insights into the study of culture and religion. I began to understand the importance of dancing as a category for the comparative study of cultures. It led beyond dancing more broadly to biological and philosophical studies of movement, and to gesture and posture. It is in these studies that I've become increasingly clear about how to articulate what, it seems, I've always known. With the help of Maxine Sheets-Johnstone and others, I grasped that movement has primacy. We are born moving and we do not learn to move; although of course, in a sense, our

entire lives unfold in the constant exploration and practice of patterned movement through which we create and discover ourselves and the world that is other. I came to appreciate that we (academics or those whose identities are based on received western world sense) tend to focus more on movement as thing (a trajectory on a grid, or an objectified event) rather than on the actual moving itself (the "in process" moving). I came to appreciate that concepts arise from human bodied moving; all concepts are corporeal or based on corporeal concepts. Especially those most fundamental relationship concepts—inside/outside, in front/behind, above/below, self/other—are wholly based in being moving human bodies. Such fundamental concepts are at the core of what we accept as reason and logic. I came to see, especially with the help of Renaud Barbaras, that perception is inseparable from movement; as is also knowing. What we perceive as true and real is based in our gesturing/posturing bodies.

What I can now say is that these thirty years of movement-encouraging bodied activities and experiences totally changed, reconstructed, who I am, what I know, how I know; and I mean this in a literal biological (neurological and skeletal-muscular) sense as well as the more common sense of the array of concepts I hold.

Recently, I engaged in a process spanning several years of revising a book manuscript over and over again in the attempt to find a way for it to be acceptable to a university press. The book proposed in intellectual terms that religion is thoroughly bodied. The ultimate rejection seems to have been based on a reviewer's stark statement, passed on to me as evidence, that "religion is an abstract concept and has nothing to do with body." Descartes' ghosts still haunt. How to be an academic as well as a mover/dancer? How to be a mover/dancer as well as a student of religion and culture? How to offer the insights of my experience moving and dancing to the comparative study of cultures and religions?

Being fundamentally interested in comparison, I realize that there is more than one motivation to compare. One may either attempt to diminish perceived differences as being apparent, not real. This strategy is based on revealing some underlying commonality that, because of its universality, is real. The principal risk of this strategy is that the difference that distinguishes the subject is often victim to the typically tacit assumptions of what constitutes the real that are brought to the comparison. Another strategy to comparison treasures the differences as the fundamental condition for creative encounter, yet there remains the necessity for some, perhaps subtler, commonality that comparison be even possible. As Jonathan Smith showed us comparison involves the oscillating encounter of select aspects of two things with one another with respect to some common third thing that sets the parameters of what aspects are compared. I'm not so sure we have been adequately successful in imagining and using, or even being aware of, these third things. I have focused on dancing and moving as third things, and by extension gesture and posture. My efforts have been to develop a strategy that appreciates differences and my approach to third things has increasingly moved towards biology (not some biological reductionism, but rather an exploration and appreciation of the remarkable capacities that distinguish human beings as vastly complex animate organisms). I have also found important confluences between biologically based studies and some branches of philosophy (Michel Serres is exemplary).

Faced with a world of almost incomprehensible diversity, the rise of modern anthropology sought to document differences in ethnography as it also sought to construct theory to bring some sort of order and relatedness within the diversity. The principle born in the name anthropology—Greek *anthrōpos* is human being—reveals its most fundamental assumption. The question on which the "study of" proceeds is "what distinguishes or is the nature of being human?" While there is perhaps a presumption that we already know what distinguishes being human, the "study of" then attempts to construct principles of organization and behavior that make comprehensible vast differences. Anthropology proceeds as a strategy of finding coherence in an environment that presents itself as threateningly incoherent. The academic study of religion generally lagged anthropology by a few decades, yet it has necessarily faced the same concerns.

Across all these decades, difference and the issues of appreciating difference have been my constant companions. While I think that I tend not to tolerate very well those around me that seem to have different values, I love and find highly stimulating those others whose lifeways, arts, gestures, patternings of moving are different from my own. These felt values reflect the course of the shifting experiences of my life. I don't well tolerate or appreciate academic, intellectual, and political differences; those based on the communication that seemingly should be based on fact, evidence, reason, objectivity. I tend to experience these differences as personally threatening and uncomfortable; I find myself often feeling that such differences are incomprehensible. They motivate creative encounters, yet a rather painful experience of creativity. Yet, I'm fully aware that others feel the same way about me in terms of our differences. I suspect that this, the energetics of creative encounter, is widely experienced.

In contrast, nearly every encounter I have had with dancers and those practicing other forms of movement are eager to show and share and invite me to participate; and to sometimes find a great deal of light humor in my dancing attempts. I spent time dancing with a group of young people in Mali. I did my best and loved it. We danced barefoot in a dirt school yard among stones and broken bottles. I was stunned when older women would approach me, get on their knees, and put their hands around my calves. I didn't know how to respond and asked, "What's going on?" I was told that this was a way of acknowledging me. That no one could understand why I was trying to dance like a young person, but since I was a foreigner they could appreciate me; appreciate me because of my differences!

We live in a world in which conversation about all critical concerns employs a vocabulary with extensive use of terms such as fact, alternative fact, fake news or fake facts, lies, and fantasy. It seems the dilemma is that the value of these terms lies in clearly distinguishing one from another. Lie and truth are mutually exclusive, as are fact and fantasy. Yet there seems to be no broadly agreed-upon authority to make these distinctions. We live in a world where fact is often understood as what anyone proclaims as fact (to them), where my truths are what you call lies and vice versa, and both are allowed to carry on.[236] The frustration in the Trump era is palpable to nearly everyone in the world. So many today are asking, "How did we get here?" and "When is this situation going to end?" Disparately we ask, "How is it going to end?" There is

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[236] See for example Andersen's book *Fantasyland:*

everywhere uttered with regard to so much the statement "We've never seen anything like this before!"

Yet, a good many of the examples I've recounted in this book have documented this same situation (though far less blatant, dramatic, and emotional) as practiced by reasoned and respected scholars and authoritative actors; they were not crackpot conspiracy theorists or fringe wingnuts. It is clear in all the examples I have presented that examine creative encounters that I have not wanted to simply dismiss the work of the "fact concocting" academics as bad scholarship. I have wanted to see their work as product of the gesturally naturalized practices of academia. I have also been acutely aware that my often highly detailed comparisons are based on the premise that there are facts. The term fact implies the indisputable as established by verification. We cannot consider something factish or to have factiness,[237] yet both terms seem more accurate descriptors. Clearly, I cannot embrace a totally objectivist, universalist, understanding of fact; that would either obfuscate verification or assert that verification is universally accepted. Long ago, I proposed that facts (as well as truth and even reason, also reality) operate within frameworks that are assumed. In the broadest terms, any verification requires unquestioned assumptions, commonly reason and observation and conventions of language and culture. Unquestioned assumptions might be the laws of physics or the solidness of matter or the grammatical rules of a given language or the linearity of time. As assumptions, these givens on which facts are verified are not themselves subject to question. I have sometimes defined "myth" as the story on which truth and reality are based. Myth is typically a story of origination, of first actions, of given order. Myths bear the authority of gods. For much of history, myth has functioned as the unquestioned basis for truth and reality even more so than have reason and the laws of physic; indeed, through at least the time of Copernicus science proceeded on revealing the scientific principles that would reflect God's perfection. Even at present, large portions of the population readily cite "belief in God" and "creationism," thus religious mythology, as foundational, as the basis for the verification of fact. Some facts then are based on assumptions so broadly held that we might assume that they stand as facts universal, or Facts. Yet, other facts function as facts only within a local system that operates with assumptions that other local systems do not recognize or share.

My suggestion is that the appreciation of difference requires knowing and often revealing the "stories," the narratives recounting the extended repetitive gestural/postural practices that have become naturalized; that is, that have made what are recognized as facts in the world seem "just so."

Recently I had a chat with a recently retired colleague. I asked him, "So what made you decide to retire?" His response was, "I just got so tired of having to know everything all the time." I was a little surprised. My teaching approach has been based on the exploration with students of what I don't know and understand, yet I remember years ago when student asked questions beyond my knowledge I often felt obliged to give answers, and to present them as fact even though I full well knew I couldn't verify them. We do this all the time in conversation. The "creative" part of encounters is often the statement of "opinion" (something that pops out

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[237] Inspired by Stephen Colbert's use of the term "truthiness" on his old show "The Colbert Report."

because we feel it to be so) that we then attempt, through discussion, to support and verify with the invention of factish things. In science, this is called hypothetic inference; hypothesis is not the end of the creative encounter, but a stage that engages further encounter often in search of supporting facts, and also the processes of verifying that what is proclaimed to be fact is indeed verifiable, scientifically, as we say. C. S. Peirce understood this process in the three terms "abduction" or hypothetic inference, followed by the more quotidian methods we label "induction" and "deduction." He recognized that only abduction amounted to actual advancement of knowledge even though it is on the order of a guess. Notably, abduction can mean "away from the center" suggesting that the rise of a new hypothesis can only arise when the world (or some part of it) is seen as off kilter, un-centered, short on fact, incredulous, different. I suggest that the world outside the lab (and often inside it from my experience) is not populated with objective facts that can actually be universally verified. Some facts are so banal that we can communicate and live in the world, but those for which it actually makes a large difference in the world, it is much more complex; indeed, factiness is a common parameter of creative encounters, "You say 'lie,' I say 'alternative fact.'"

Yet, more importantly I have come to see that it is the "ishiness" of facts and reason and truth and reality that are at the core of what makes being human so damned fascinating. Despite my frequent irritation at those I think "wouldn't know a fact if it bit them" and "whose reasoning must have been offered by a slug," I'm a huge fan of nonlinearity (that many things cannot be fully predicted or explained simply because of the randomness and complexity of hugely complex creative encounters) and metastability (that remarkable human capacity to thrive on recognizing that things can be both and at once, true and not true, real and apparent, fact and fiction, is and is not).

When emphasis is placed on embracing and treasuring nonlinearity and metastability and the dependence of truth and fact and reality on local assumptions, often rarely recognized because they seem so obviously real (just so), then I have to explore the processes and forces involved in creating these local systems within which facts and reason prevail and seem obvious. At present I think this exploration is the most fascinating and important task of not only academics, but of all people, because at the heart of this endeavor is the ideal that we absolutely must go beyond tolerating or understanding or explaining (away) difference to gain a deep appreciation of differences, to honor and treasure differences as vitalizing. What could be more important in the world today?

While likely there are many ways of seeking the appreciation of differences, I have found to be fundamental the biological and philosophical basis of human movement, as I have attempted to introduce above, as it can be investigated in detail in the terms of gesture and posture. Important to this approach for me is my belief that local conditions in which facts may be recognized as the obvious are shaped by long term highly repetitive practices that over time come to naturalize concepts and relationships and values to the extent that what is experienced as fact and real and truth require no verification. The verification is based in feelings of coherence. Rather than statements of reason or justification or explanation or meaning, we tend to experience something as fact because it is just so to us. Outside this local context, or inside it for those who are self-reflective, we can observe and document and tell the

stories of the practices over time in which what is recognized as fact or truth or real can be appreciated as seeming just so.

Fiction is a genre that takes as its responsibility the telling of concocted stories (lies) that engage readers in such a way that they comprehend, largely by our empathy with them, how others might act (truths). Fiction does not dictate what is fact and reality; rather fiction raises the questions that are most fundamental, "Who am I?" "What is the truth?" "What is real?" Fiction, at least the best of fiction, offers no pat answers to these questions. Rather it offers the experience to the reader that creates an appreciation for the complexity and profundity of these questions. The very engagement of these questions is vitalizing. The degree to which the presentation of confoundment and complexity captures the seeming impossibility of resolution is what tends to correlate with the importance and durability of a work of fiction.

Academic studies should strive for the same style (morality) of approach. It should not be our job to give the meaning that our subjects somehow cannot articulate. It should not be our job to so thoroughly describe and explain our subjects that we may proclaim "they are known." Rather through a rigorous comparative enterprise we must strive to appreciate differences in creative encounters. We must strive to tell the stories brought by the various parties to these encounters that we might appreciate how each came to know as "just so" various facts, varying realites. We must strive to see difference as vitalizing and remarkable and the basis for creativity and innovation. We must attempt to present our studies in such a way that our accomplishment is measured in the degree to which they enhance the capacity of our readers and students to see encounters as arenas of creativity and to appreciate the differences, whether they produce art of war. Academic studies should engage subjects to inspire the play of difference and complexity, not to eliminate it by offering explanation, for such explanation halts the inquiry and destroys the vitality of the subject.

I proceeded on the study of the Australian creative encounter on the belief that I can demonstrate in a factually based way that Eliade put together (concocted) his "Numbakulla" story by selections of words and phrases from accounts that were much longer and that he drew on disparate (in time and space) sources that only he saw as connected. I have print evidence of Eliade and also his cited sources; the conventions assumed have to do with text comparison only at the level of correlation with the cited source. Yet, I do not feel it possible to identify and isolate "primary sources" (facts) about Arrernte culture in the late nineteenth century. I went to Australia. I stood on the same ground where Spencer and Gillen stood a century before. The place is real; my feelings of connection with the place are real. This experience of being in the place has something akin to what Walter Benjamin called "aura" when referring to being in the presence of "originality." This feeling of aura influences my interest and passion and my sense of what "actually happened," in ways I cannot begin to articulate; yet, I'm not sure they have anything to do with the actual Arrernte or even with Spencer and Gillen. My experience was so strong that I am sure it has led me to recognize "facts" that I attempt to verify where others would not be convinced, and the thing is I don't much care; isn't the level of my convictions and my not caring that others do not agree at the core of most creative encounters (yet academics are trained not to admit this)? My interest has been in examining the minute detail using methods of comparison to tease out the story of the creative encounter. Yet, this too is but my own creative encounter with whatever I engage as of

interest, what I feel about it all. There is no question that I was driven to do the work I did; there remains the question, why? I can't answer that beyond saying, "I just had to, that's why."

When I teach "about" the dancings of others, or I even teach the dances themselves of others, to my students I am mindful that there are rolling chains of transductions between what I'm presenting and anything I can call objective or factual about the subjects. Each marks a creative encounter that transduces. My teaching is based on extensive reading and perhaps some attempts at dancing. I attempt to be aware of the writers and the perspective of the writers, yet, as demonstrated in the example of spending years trying to trace Eliade's simple "Numbakulla" example back to its "factual real" source (an effort that ultimately failed), I can't do that for everything I read. So much is taken on faith and on a shared academic ethic that we don't make stuff up, that we tell it like it is (if only we could). As lofty and essential as is this ethic, it is naïve, and frankly impossible. Even without the wanton concoction of evidence, the academic process is fundamentally a creative encounter (or a cascade of many of them). We willingly participate in a conspiracy of silence in which we agree to never say that we know our interests and values shape our outcomes every bit as much as anything we might identify as fact. It seems we need alternatively to flaunt our passioned engagement, yet with responsibility to the conventions that gesturally form us.

Students of the humanities are used to the label "soft" and its implications that we basically just make things up or can advance opinion with "soft" (meaning little or inconclusive) evidence. We are diminished in our authority in contrast with the sciences that are labeled "hard" because they deal with facts and numbers and information. Yet, Thomas Kuhn and Michael Polanyi have put the lie to that hardness and objectivity. As I have noted, laboratories are places where the real conditions, inseparable from randomness and accident, are eliminated by controlled environment. I was a physics minor as an undergraduate. I took many a lab course. Yet I found myself almost always feeling the urge to "fudge" the results of my experiments; they never came out quite like the formulas indicated they should; reality intruded. I remember one of my physics teachers, Professor Brazeil, who paused during one of his lectures and said, "you know I'm always amazed that any of you would actually believe any of this." Then science is also based on calculations often requiring the use of irrational numbers such as Pi and the square root of two. It is impossible to calculate the exact length of the hypotenuse of a triangle with a unit of one on each side. These kinds of "facts" in science are the facts of inexactness. This "irrationality" is perhaps why Kepler preferred geometry to mathematics and built his cosmology and his theory of harmony on shapes rather than numbers. The history of science is a history of creative encounters that create facts and reality. The history of modern physics can be described as proceeding from the creative encounter of Newtonian physics and quantum mechanics. And we might suggest science is creative in its own aesthetics of impossibles, such as the theory of quantum entanglement or the understanding of light as both wave and particle or string theory or the big bang or that there are 2 trillion galaxies in the universe.

Modernity and especially what we understand as post-modernity have given rise increasingly to the understanding that there is no such thing as a real center, that is a permanent non-relative absolute. At best, we have "broken center" (Nathan Scott based on Yeats "things fall apart, the center cannot hold" 1919), "abduction" (Peirce), "wobbling pivot" (Jonathan Smith),

hyperreality and simulacra (Jean Baudrillard), and that center cannot be thought of as a being presence (Jacque Derrida). Another way to understand this nominally post-modern view is that creative encounters most always have differences in power and authority, but never does one party to the encounter have the corner on (claim to absolute determination of) reality, facts, truth; these fundamentals are what are negotiated and contended in the encounter. The rigid clinging to facts and reason and reality might be understood as a nostalgia for a time now past or it might be a humorless religious perspective that fails to appreciate the vitality of the aesthetic of impossibles or it might be a shallow or limited view of science. Such an objectivist perspective depends on reason, reality, truth, facts as somehow "given" in the world, as if from a higher power, or as "designed" into the nature of existence to be discovered and articulated by humans. What I'm suggesting here is that religions in their artful use of an aesthetic of impossibles, science in its incorporation of nonlinearity and metastability and irrationality and relativity, philosophy in recognizing that centers have no being presence … all of these attest to the remarkable capacity distinctive of human beings to not only recognize two opposing things as also inseparable and as necessarily copresent with one another, they also constantly depend on this very capability for human moving, perceiving, knowing, creativity, and vitality. This structurality is fundamental to the appreciation of difference in creative encounters.

Sam Gill – Curriculum Vitae

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