
Following the Storytracks

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Sam Gill has been at the cutting edge of religious studies for decades, pushing the field to reimagine itself, its tools, and its subject on a regular basis. For example, attending to objects, voice, and movement—the materiality and poetics of living traditions—has been a hallmark of Gill’s work since the 1970s. He taught us about ‘lived religion’ before this analytical approach had a name. He got us out of our heads and taught us to dance and seek joy before it became accepted practice to acknowledge the bodies and emotions of our subjects or ourselves. He introduced us to cyber religion and the internet before many of us could operate a modem. In so many unconventional ways, Gill has offered a model for what an engaged scholar of religion might look like in the present. He has taken some of most productive aspects of Jonathan Z. Smith’s work, Gill’s massively influential and quirky mentor, and operationalized them with his trademark verve to generate a corpus that is playful, generative, and provocative.

As his former colleague and longtime conversation partner, I have learned a great deal from Gill. Recently, I have found his theorization of gesture salient for my own analyses of the stakes and ‘conditions of coherence’ in repatriation contexts. Thinking about the twinned force of bodies and objects upon one another helped me to see afresh how and why people would be drawn to handling their ancestors’ objects as extensions of themselves or, better, as an education about themselves. At an earlier stage in my career I leaned on Gill’s ‘storytracking’ methodology, which featured prominently in *Mother Earth* (1987) and in much of his Australia-based work (Gill 1998). During my dissertation research, as I slogged through the legal history of repatriation processes, I trained my ear to listen for telltale discursive signals along the way, cataloging micro-rhetorical shifts in order to tell a story of larger changes in collective language use and, ultimately, sensibilities about the dead. My poor man’s imitation of Gill’s model made this

labor payoff, attuning me to the cumulative effects of language play and work. In this context of appreciation I accepted the invitation to respond to Gill's essay.

When *Mother Earth: An American Story* came out in 1987, I was an undergraduate at the University of Colorado in the Department of Religious Studies, where I would eventually return as a faculty member and where Gill was for decades a major force. Regrettably, I did not take classes with Gill as a student, but I had a dawning awareness that he had written a book that was being taken very seriously by historians of religion and at the same time was provoking the ire of many scholars in Native American studies, especially within its small subfield in religious studies.¹ As a graduate student I followed the unfolding ruckus, especially as my own interests moved closer to Indigenous studies. My sense at the time, which I still stand by, is that Gill was frequently misread and misrepresented in the debates that ensued. His claims, as I understood them, were grounded in empirically demonstrable historical-textual evidence. Furthermore, his point, to my ears, was not to demean or de-credential anyone, *Mother Earth* included. His was a work of fine-grained detail that happened to have a punchline that was less than popular, especially among those who took him to task without first walking with him down the long path of his argument.

All of that said, then as now I would concede that Gill could have done more to anticipate possible negative reactions to his work. A bit more care in packaging his claims upfront and a less rigid tone in confronting challenges afterwards would have gone a long ways towards redirecting the reception history of this important book. Whatever the case, I was intrigued to learn that Gill had written a further essay on *Mother Earth* and assumed it was, at least in some measure, a repositioning of his prior responses to critics in view of new directions in Native American and Indigenous studies. Additionally, I assumed the essay indicated that Gill had turned up new evidence or examples by which to advance and refine his argument.

My assumptions were somewhat off the mark. The essay is less an elaboration of the arguments of the book than it is a restatement of them, which will be useful for those who have not given over the time for a careful reading of *Mother Earth*. It is also not as essay primarily focused on addressing criticisms of the book or its reception

1. For a recent revisitation of the *Mother Earth* dispute, with particular attention to its stakes for the academic study of religion in relationship to similar discipline-specific conflicts, see Laurie Patton's *Who Owns Religion: Scholars and Their Publics in the Late Twentieth Century* (2019).

history, though Gill nods to some elements of these stories. The essay is primarily a vehicle for Gill to introduce and test drive two analytical devices, 'meme' and 'conspiracy'. In order to launch his presentation of these frames, Gill first directs our attention to the *naming* of Mother Earth, productively demonstrating the usefulness of focusing on 'what' not 'who' is named. This move serves to lift up the discursive histories of Mother Earth and the processes and communities who have animated and been animated by it. Matters become less productive when Gill turns to meme and conspiracy.

Gill acknowledges that these terms are provocative, but he asks readers to follow along. I tried. Is he skilled at proposing new frames and then demonstrating the work they can do? Absolutely. As I suggested in my opening, Gill has refreshed the repertoire of religious studies terminology on multiple occasions, introducing us to 'mobius strip', 'proprioception', and 'prosthesis', and other out-of-the-box frames for teasing out and lifting up the telling nuances of religious life.² For this reason, I am sympathetic to Gill's quest for new conceptual frontiers. In the end, however, I think meme and conspiracy carry too much baggage in the contemporary moment when applied to concepts in any way associated with Indigenous people. The surface-level potential for misunderstanding and possible escalation of prior tensions around his work are simply too great to warrant adoption these frames in this context. As a heuristic for other areas of analysis, a gesture Gill suggests, they may well yield traction. Here the slope is too slippery.

Said directly, in a cost-benefit analysis, these categories are too risky if the goal is to open engagement with other people who have an interest and stake in the same subject area. I can imagine Gill responding that opening engagement is a secondary issue. The primary issue and commitment is to honest intellectual work, to seeing something from a different angle of vision, to redescribe and illuminate. But even here alternatives exist that potentially do the work Gill intends without setting up the prospect of a counterproductive backlash. In place of meme, what about 'trope' or, less elegantly, a spelled-out version of what Gill intends by meme without 'naming it'. The social media-inflected resonance of meme can't help but dominate in peoples' perceptions—snappy, caricatured, and packaged for short attention spans. This is hardly how Indigenous people wish to think of their cherished figures.

My reaction to 'conspiracy' is similar. In place of conspiracy, again, what about spelling out the idea without naming it in an inflammatory manner? I am persuaded that Gill's point about conspiracy is

2. A full list and links to Gill's publications can be found at <http://sam-gill.com/print-matter/>.

trenchant, at least with regard to the analytically dampening effects of deference and collective tacit agreements to buffer some things, ideas, and people from criticism. I am strongly of the opinion that religious studies came of age (to the degree it has) when a number of scholars in the field began to insist on probing analysis rather than engaging in mere deference parlayed as description. But conspiracy goes too far. It cannot but be misread by all but those most sympathetic to Gill.

Moving past Gill's frames, I will close with a few brief thoughts on the status of contemporary Indigenous movements and institutions. His analysis does not pay enough attention to recent developments in these contexts. His attention to Mother Earth is primarily in the realm of discourse and productively so. But he says little about the networks, movements, and institutions that materialize indigeneity today. To analyze 'what' Mother Earth is entails in some measure attending to where she is spoken. Whether in macro-global institutions such as the United Nations or in protest camps visited by Indigenous folks from numerous nations, indigeneity and its discourse is networked with strong and weak ties. It is a lived identity, complete with emergent forms of ritual life.

Simply put, Indigenous religious lives in the present have contours evincing social formations and discursive patterns that are not only reflections of disparate local groups grasping for common languages and actions by which to name and resist oppression. There is that. But this very aspirational feature of indigeneity has animated networks—cyber and embodied—and has resulted in materializations of 'Indigenous' in ways that deserve attention from scholars of religion. If Mother Earth is in some sense metonymic of the global Indigenous movement, then both need to be viewed as being something more than a name, meme, or conspiracy.

References

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