

Sam Gill and me: moving toward a proper study of religion

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As a non-indigenous scholar of indigenous religious traditions, my thoughts often drift to Sam Gill. I have long admired much of his work. But even as I write these words, I am well aware of their controversial nature. Then again, Gill is a controversial figure. While my admiration of Gill is not uncritical, I have often found that such words of praise are shared only rarely at conferences, usually over drinks, and even then, usually among other scholars in the field, who (like me) are white men who might nod their heads in agreement, but in hushed tones and with nervous glances over their shoulders. Rather than ‘standing on the shoulders of giants,’ I find myself anxiously looking over my shoulder when I utter an affirmation with Sam Gill’s name in the same sentence.

In the mid to late 1980s, at the height of his career as a scholar of Native American religious traditions, Gill had already served as a founding member of Arizona State University’s Religious Studies Department, focusing on Native American religious studies.¹ He then moved to the University of Colorado, where he maintained that focus.² But then something happened that abruptly shifted Gill’s focus and attention away from these beginnings into Australian Aboriginal cultures, theory, studies of dance, movement, the body, the senses, technology and futurist studies, and beyond (Gill 2020:6).³

One controversial aspect of Gill’s award-winning book is the claim that there is a ‘proper’ way to study religion. Doubtless, some audiences are put off by this notion, as well as the stern, even quaint, word choice implying that many here at the American Academy of Religion are doing something ‘naughty.’ Riffing on what Gill calls Smith’s ‘aesthetic of impossibles’ (Gill 2020:20) and Sullivan’s *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (2005), Gill’s

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The Proper Study of Religion could just as easily be titled *The Impossibility of Religious Studies*.

According to Gill, 'By this use of the word "proper" I mean a study of religion that is appropriate to and legal in a secular university' (2020:5). Crucially, such a field has never existed. More significantly, Gill warns, 'it is to be expected that some (all?) religious communities and adherents might consider this proper academic study threatening and perhaps wholly illegitimate' (2020:217). Then, in the attached footnote, Gill turns to his most controversial book, particularly in terms of its reception history, *Mother Earth: An American Story* (1987a), stating, 'a colleague ... told me that he preferred my Native American studies much more when it seemed I was focused on appreciating Native Americans and their religions, while he found my study of *Mother Earth* to be somehow opposed to them' (Gill 2020:217).⁴

Gill has also written about 'religioning' (at least implicitly, as far back as 1979; see also 1987b), which he has described as 'the ongoingness of religions' (2020:217), as well as 'in a different sense also the study of religion' (2020:217), in which scholars bring the category of religion to their objects of study, often unreflexively. I have grown increasingly interested in 'religionification' or 'religionization' (Taford 2016, 2017, 2019, 2020) as a distinct but related activity that Gill seems to have grasped, but which has gone largely unaddressed in much of his own scholarship (although certainly not in his alone). Following Willi Braun and Russell McCutcheon in *Reading J. Z. Smith* (2018), Gill paraphrases:

[W]hile much of Smith's contribution to the broad development of the field was to offer critique and an alternative to Eliade's 'academic theology' (as I call it), the current young generation of religion scholars have made a return to something more akin to Eliade. They [Braun and McCutcheon] write, 'The field has, for some, turned into one where we somehow already know that things just are religious' (ix). (Gill 2020:8)

A variety of other, interrelated, hereditary problems accompany religionification, including textualization as a gesturally naturalized mode of transduction. Amidst the implied necrophilia of our fellow academics who cry out 'the deader the better,' Gill challenges us: 'We tend to prefer *autopsy* to *kinesiology*; a proper study of religion probably needs to reverse this valuation' (2020:220). This is perhaps especially true for the academic study of indigenous religious traditions (Schermerhorn 2017, 2020). I myself have aspired to meet this challenge, but admittedly, I must report, with at best mixed results (Schermerhorn 2019, 2022; Weatherdon and Schermerhorn 2024).

One of the things I like so much about *The Proper Study of Religion*, like much of Gill's work, is that he is increasingly in tension with his previous, alternate, selves. Take, for example, this reflexive Gill:

[M]y study of Navajo prayer was based on my location and study of what I referred to as 'twenty thousand lines' of prayer 'texts,' not fully appreciating that, for a culture that historically does not write, the terms 'lines' and 'texts' made sense only as concocted and placed in the context of Western historical literate conventions. But my dissertation was approved and I went on with my career, if always feeling some dis-ease about this false equivalence. (Gill 2020:223)

Gill's 'Storytracking the academic study of religion' appears as the penultimate chapter in both *Storytracking* (1998) and *The Proper Study of Religion* (2020). Therein, readers encounter a brilliant comparison of both Eliade and Smith's intersecting storytracks, with a sophisticated analysis and critique of each. Gill's deconstruction of both Eliade and Smith is deadly. Gill concludes, 'as a result of academic studies, the real Arrernte are lost' (1998:210; 2020:188). Unfortunately, Gill falls prey to much of his own critique. He writes: 'Despite the fact that these scholars [Eliade and Smith] represent two of the most influential approaches to the academic study of religion, neither is primarily interested in any Arrernte reality.' And then, suddenly, but almost hidden in a footnote, Gill admits, that this has not been his primary interest, either (Gill 1998:257; 2020:188).

In addition to reading Arrernte texts (or textualizations) somewhat differently than he might have been taught to by either Eliade or Smith, Gill also finds himself productively in tension with Smith on the question of experience within the academic study of religion. Gill explains: 'Smith seems to take a very conservative position; academic experience largely comprises the movement-limited experiences related to reading. In this respect Smith follows the armchair work of Frazer; we might say that his early studies of Frazer gesturally naturalized his preferred mode of study, of experience.' (2020:120).

Yet, where Smith, like Frazer, seems to privilege the experience of reading texts above other modes of experience, Gill is drawn to experiences of dance, gesture, and movement. Take, for example, the Yaqui (Yoeme) deer dancers in Guadeloupe, who capture with the movement of their own bodies 'the quintessential self-movement and posture of deer' (Gill 2020:199). But even here, Gill prefers acts of moving over their reification, stating, 'Movement is the objectification of moving; the verb made noun, action made thing' (2020:201; 2022). 'Yet,' Gill cautions, 'we must ask, something so tenuous and nonsubstantial as process, transition, dynamics, energetics is surely either remarkably difficult to study, since we

need to grasp something as our subject, or it actually is impossible, mercurial, elusive ... we have no thing to study, no subject that will stay still long enough for us to attend to' (2020:202–3). As scholars, we have a variety of methodological options available to us, including observation over time, repetition as participants rather than as mere observers, recourse to photography and film, and even Labanotation. Still, the challenge remains, with perhaps none of these being especially well established methods in the academic study of religion (Schermerhorn 2022; Stepputat and Dietrich 2021).

Such challenges in the study of living movement should also advance the work of comparison. Following Smith, Gill urges that 'a proper academic study of religion cannot avoid comparison' (2020:213). Rephrased, absent comparison, I argue that the academic study of religion is impossible (Schermerhorn 2020). But Gill pushes the boundaries still further in stating that 'Comparison is inseparable from movement' (2020:215). It is counterproductive, then, that 'The gestural and postural skills that identify the academic enterprise tend to discourage moving' (2020:216). Gill adds: 'Our jobs are described as positions, lines, or chairs. Our work is to articulate a position or a stance or a point of view.' (2020:216). Not to mention that so much academic work is done while seated in a chair, at a desk, or standing at a lectern.

Perhaps an ingrained Protestant bias against 'dancing' manifests in its neglect within the field of religious studies. Gill laments:

And so it has been ignored, as has movement and things body-related, other than somewhat recently as niche studies. The comparative study of dancing in cultures across the globe has been left to anthropology, particularly to the small subfield dance anthropology. There has been nothing similar to dance anthropology in the study of religion. But then the study of ritual and even prayer has not been developed adequately either; this neglect seems astounding to me. (Gill 2020:111)

In my own work on movement, including dance as well as walking, there have been few examples to follow. Whether or not you think of Gill as a 'giant,' Gill helps us see farther. And with any luck, we might avoid the same pitfalls.

Response from Sam Gill: Seth Schermerhorn

I found humorous your comments on the controversy surrounding *Mother Earth*. In the early 2000s, Hugh Urban suggested I abandon Native American religion studies due to the reaction to the book. I really was unaware until I read your comments that I was something of a pariah in those days.

I've always worked mostly alone and in isolation, so happily I didn't experience this. You may be interested to know that the *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* is publishing a new article I wrote on *Mother Earth* – 'What is Mother Earth? A name, a meme, a conspiracy' (2024). It will include half a dozen responses, as well as my response to those responses.

I also got a kick out of your understanding of 'proper' as implicating an alternative of 'naughty'. Had I thought of that, I might have considered *A Naughty Study of Religion*. I had thought that 'proper' might suggest something like etiquette, as at a tea party, maybe something British. Smith did use the term, and that seemed sufficiently provocative to be worth the reactions such as yours.

I know you have written on 'movement' and appreciate your efforts and the difficulties you have encountered, namely, your 'mixed results.' Hopefully, the final chapter of *The Proper Study of Religion* will be helpful in suggesting how to have more interesting results, and how important it is to take self-moving radically. I notice that you (and I did as well in *Proper*) default to the noun 'movement,' implicating a change of place, rather than the verb 'moving,' which grapples with how we engage process and ongoingness, energetics and dynamics. I felt that much more was needed to develop these ideas, and that was the motivation for my book *On Moving* (2022). I think this shift could be powerful and transformative for religion studies.

It certainly is fair game to criticize me for not doing proper field work or language study in Central Australia. Would I have a several hundred-year lifetime, I might have considered it, as well as learning Navajo and living there for a few years, and Spanish and living in Cuba dancing salsa for a few years. Beyond these practical, and at my age depressing, realities, *Storytracking* (1998) was not about Aboriginal religions. It was about the academic studies of Indigenous Australian folks (or indeed any folks).

For those interested in self-moving, gesture, and identity, please read a couple of the chapters in *Creative Encounters, Appreciating Difference* (2018): 'Moving beyond place,' 'Not by any name' (this deals with the history of finding proper terms – Indian, Native American, Indigenous, etc.), 'They jump up of themselves' (a gesture-based study of Arrernte), and 'As prayer goes so goes religion' (a gesture-based study of Navajo prayer).

Notes

- 1 The same department would later grant me a PhD with the same specialization.
- 2 Years later, I earned my MA there.

- 3 For a concise review of the controversy that altered Gill's career, see Patton (2019:121–43).
- 4 Such a view coincides with a vision of religious studies that might better be termed 'religion appreciation,' in which 'a field of "religious studies" that is virtually unique, in others [sic] words a discipline consciously designed to shield its object of study against critical interrogation. (The closest analogues of which I can think are "art [also music] appreciation," topics that never achieved academic respectability or disciplinary status' (Lincoln 2012:134). This is the 'religious studies' that 'implicitly loves' religion and 'implicitly fears' the academy (Lincoln 2012:136).

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