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The Transgressions of Gishwhes

By Alena Karkanias

Written for Jonathan Stockdale's class

Imagining Religion, fall 2015

Michael Taussig's theory of transgression understands there to be a fundamental delineation between that which is classified as profane, and that which is classified as sacred. The first domain is that of the ordinary, the day-to-day, and regular, while the latter is that of the extraordinary, the respected, and otherwise profound. Taussig stresses the importance of the act of moving between these domains, putting forth the position that it is this action that brings the boundary between them into being and is the event that facilitates the most significant experience of the sacred. This paper examines the international scavenger hunt known as "Gishwhes," using these terms to understand the appeal of the individual acts that constitute the event, and the enduring impact of the Hunt on those involved with it. This paper also looks at the implications of applying a theory developed for application to religious phenomena to a secular event. I put forth the conclusion that such an application is beneficial for throwing into sharp relief the ways in which scholarship around the concept of the sacred can be made more diverse, how religious studies can be made more complex, how secular phenomena can be considered with equal weight as religious experiences, and how doing so benefits a larger field of study regarding profound human experiences.

GISHWHES

G.I.S.H.W.H.E.S (pronounced "gish-wez,"), the Greatest International Scavenger Hunt the World Has Ever Seen, was officially started by actor and philanthropist Misha Collins in 2011. The prior year, Collins had reached out to fans through twitter to help his

TV show, *Supernatural*, win a People's Choice Award. In thanks for their support, Collins requested self-addressed envelopes from fans in order to send them puzzle-pieces with scavenger hunt prompts on the back. Surprised and gratified when people actually completed and shared these items, which included such tasks as getting a photograph of "firemen wearing nothing but kale," through social media, Collins officially established the Hunt as an annual event the following year.¹ In 2011, Gishwhes won a Guinness World Record for the world's largest scavenger hunt with approximately 6,000 people participating worldwide; the Hunt has continued to grow in size, breaking the record a second time in 2012 with over 14,500 participants.² Over the years, Gishwhes has also won Records for "Most People Dressed as French Maids,"³ and "Most Pledges to a Charitable Campaign."⁴

Gishwhes is the single largest contributor to Random Acts, the non-profit charity organization Collins co-founded in 2009, as participants' \$19 registration fee goes directly to the charity.⁵ After registration opens around March, participants are self-organized or placed by the Gishwhes organizers into international teams of 15 by the middle of July before the Hunt begins the first week of August. On the morning of the first day, a list of 150+ items (2015's list contained over 200) is released, and teams have

¹ Laura Prudom, "Supernatural Season 9: Misha Collins Talks Castiel's Human Side, Sex Scenes, Random Acts and GISHWHES," *Huffington Post*, last modified July 26, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/07/26/supernatural-season-9-misha-collins_n_3656950.html

² World Records

³ Collins, Misha, *GISHWHES 2015 | Greatest International Scavenger Hunt the World Has Ever Seen*, Video, June 30, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Am5WFvNcIo>, 1:59

⁴ Prudom

⁵ Megan Daley, "Supernatural Star Misha Collins is Setting up for this year's GISHWHES Competition," *Entertainment Weekly*, last modified July 18, 2015, <http://www.ew.com/article/2015/07/18/supernatural-misha-collins-gishwhes>

seven days to complete, photograph or film, and submit their items for points. A few items are often amended during the course of the week, and more are often added as well.

Bonus points are awarded for submissions that go above and beyond expectations. Past items have included the following:⁶

IMAGE: You, dressed as The Flash in the LHC (Large Hadron Collider) tunnel. If this is too difficult, you will get full credit for dressing as The Flash in any actual, operational particle accelerator. 216 points.

IMAGE: An angel made of feminine hygiene products. 31 points.

VIDEO or IMAGE: Roller-blade through a museum – Steve Martin style – but wearing a sock monkey hat. 61 points.

VIDEO: Throw someone a surprise party with friends they haven't seen in more than 10 years. Film the first moment of their surprise re-encounter. 72 points.

IMAGE: Get an online or offline CPR certification. Submit an image of you holding up your Certificate. Bonus points if you do it with a friend. 80 points.

VIDEO: Let's hear "Carry on My Wayward Son" on a giant pipe organ (antique preferred) in a cathedral or church, played by someone wearing a sock monkey hat. 41 points.

IMAGE: Schools, hospitals, and prisons are notoriously dismal places that are in desperate need of art to brighten them up. Get permission from one of these places to create a giant Gishwhes-themed (mascots, items from the past, kindness, etc.) wall mural. 83 points.

IMAGE: You've just received an invitation to the annual Color Me Pretty Construction Paper Gala. Design and wear an elegant gown consisting of only construction paper. You must be posed with an antique or hotrod car/motorcycle (that will take you to the Gala, of course) or in front of the Gala itself which takes place in the most stunning public building of your city. 41 points.

VIDEO: Host the world's largest hopscotch game in velour track suits at one of the following locations: Santa Monica Promenade in California, Brighton Pier in Brighton, Piazza Del Popola in Rome, Stanley Park in Vancouver, Sydney Opera House in Sydney, Jardin du Luxembourg in Paris, Parque do Ibirapuera in Sao Paulo, Jardim Botânico in Parana, or Hamburger Dom fair in Hamburg. 63 points.

IMAGE: Refugees from Syria and other countries are making dangerous journeys across the Mediterranean and seeking asylum in Italy, Greece, and other EU countries. Bring clothes and supplies for survivors to local immigration headquarters. 53 points.

VIDEO: Space exploration has a history of music; from the early days of human space flight to our most recent rovers on Mars and missions to Pluto, flight controllers play a wake-up song to signify the start of the day. If you had to write a space theme, what would it be? Parody or

⁶ See end of paper for some photo and video examples

original music allowed. Bonus points if you record the song. Super bonus points if you make a music video. 62 points.

The List prompts participants to enact public performance art, create costumes and creative works out of unconventional materials, and engage with their friends, families, and strangers in ways they otherwise might not. Over the years, an increasing number of tasks have included philanthropic, charitable, or “kindness” aspects, as Collins hopes people will see that doing “charitable things can be really fun and exhilarating, [instead of] onerous.”⁷ These diverse tasks are united by the philosophy underpinning the whole competition, which organizers say is “designed to disrupt the monotony of everyday life and inspire people to connect with one another.”⁸ They add that participating in Gishwhes has taught them that they “can choose freedom. We can carve out our own path. An entirely different version of reality is open to us if we make ourselves available to it.”

Many participants found themselves questioning their own definitions of normalcy and appropriateness during the week, and reveled in the multiple experiences facilitated by the Hunt that helped them realize where they had been guided by normalcy in the past. They now had a choice not to act that way, and to collect rewards for acting against convention. Participant Genna H. said that “Gishwhes dragged me out of my comfort zone and then gently held my hand as I realized that kindness and the need to

⁷ Steve Helling, “Behind the Scenes of *Supernatural* Star Misha Collins’ Amazing Scavenger Hunt GISHWHES,” *People*, last modified August 25, 2015, <http://www.people.com/article/misha-collins-gishwhes-savenger-hunt-2015>

⁸ Graham Slaughter, “The Kooky World of GISHWHES, the Epic Online Scavenger Hunt,” *CTV News*, last modified August 6, 2015 <http://www.ctvnews.ca/lifestyle/the-kooky-world-of-gishwhes-the-epic-online-savenger-hunt-1.2503462>

help others can be found in anyone – especially strangers!”⁹. Tammy M. added that “Gishwhes provided a release from everyday responsibilities for a week of fun, creativity, absurdity, family memories, and awesome acts of kindness – loved every minute of it!”¹⁰ Collins articulated his beliefs regarding this philosophy that pervades Gishwhes in his introduction to the 2014 Coffee Table Book, a compilation of many of that year’s submissions:

“Speaking of ‘weird,’ one of my mottos [...] is ‘death to normalcy!’ [...] ‘Normalcy’ can be a prison. Every moment presents us with choice, but normalcy blinds us to that choice. We wake up and choose to wear our clothes right-side-out, we choose to wear shoes, to eat eggs for breakfast, to ignore the homeless man on the way to the bus and to not look other passengers in the eye on the bus... But what if we didn’t? [...] Well-practiced Gishers live this way for the week of the Hunt, but wouldn’t it be lovely if we could extend this irreverence into our real lives?

Being ‘normal,’ behaving ‘normally,’ lets us fit in. It lets us feel like we belong. But what is this shit-show we’re trying so hard to fit in to? Is this really a world we want to be a normal part of? I, for one, think our current situation has a lot of room for improvement. And I think one really good way to instigate change is to notice when we are being guided by normalcy and to try something different. Even if we don’t choose to dress in drag every day or sing on the bus every day, just knowing that we could helps us. It reminds us that we can change, that the world around us can be reimaged, and that there is infinite possibility in every moment, even as we commute to work” (2014, 1).

Another participant, Kelly S., succinctly summed up the way her own mindset changed during and because of Gishwhes: “First day of Gishwhes – ‘This is impossible!’ Last day of Gishwhes – ‘Anything is possible!’ Every. Single. Year. Best week ever.”¹¹ Her experience reflects Collins’ beliefs, as well as the hopes of another organizer, Jean Louis, who says the following:

“Gishwhes has a ripple effect that – I choose to believe – can eventually change you (and maybe even, collectively, the world) in a subtle or even monumental way. I’m not expecting this “game” to shift you into being more artistic, courageous, or kinder (though it might!), but I am convinced that it will – even if only on a subliminal level

⁹ Misha Collins, *2015 Coffee Table Book: Dinomite and the Amazing Annihilators of the Mundane!* Pterodactyl Flight Path Books, Washington DC: 2015, 121

¹⁰ Ibid 101

¹¹ Ibid 71

– shift you into seeing the world a bit differently. And sometimes a new perspective is all we need to, one day, when we’re least expecting it, embrace and shamelessly shine our freakish individuality and unlimited kindness,” (Collins 2014, 231).

Transgression

Taussig claims that “transgression is a key component of religion,” understanding this action to be one wherein the boundary between the profane and the sacred is crossed.¹² Taussig presses that the thing of importance is the effect of the movement between the sacred and the profane in the act of transgressing, complicating individuals’ relationship and this movement by asserting that the barrier between them “connects” as much as it “dislocat[es].”¹³ He posits that the “barrier crossed by transgression does not so much exist on its own as erupt into being on account of its being transgressed,” and asserts that “it is in the charged space thus opened by transgression that we encounter empowering and sacred ritual, caused by and causative of this ‘space’.”¹⁴ Taussig also interrogates the definition of the sacred, noting the negation built into the word “sacred” in its meaning as “accursed as well as holy, impure as well as pure.”¹⁵ He expands upon this quality of the sacred, adding that “this sense of negation as within and constitutive of the sacred” is evident in discussions of taboo, itself connoted as a combination of “sacredness, purity, danger, the unclean, the uncanny, and the forbidden.”¹⁶

The quality of negation in the sacred, as well as the power of transgression in creating a “charged space” in which to encounter “empowering and sacred ritual,”¹⁷ are both key components of Taussig’s theory applicable to understanding the profound

¹² Michael Taussig, “*Transgression*,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 349

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid 350

¹⁵ Ibid 349

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid 350

appeal and success of Gishwhes. In the middle of the 2015 Hunt, Collins sent out an email to the participants to encourage them to keep up their efforts: “This is the time to persevere! This is the time to press on! This is the time to embrace kindness, shame, artistic liberation and outfits you wouldn’t be caught dead in. In short, this is the time to Gish.”¹⁸ The qualities that define “Gish”ing are the same as those that define the sacred for Taussig, in that they are combinations of juxtaposed qualities (accursed, holy; purity, unclean; shame, liberation), creating a negation that does not snuff itself out but instead sustains itself in a manner similar to the “electricity” Taussig discusses.¹⁹ (349).

Further, Collins’ words place an emphasis on the value of transgression, which is enabled by most of the items assigned during the Hunt. As such, the individual items and the Hunt overall can be seen as micro- and macro-creations of the “charged space” that Taussig values and sees as fostering the experience of “empowering and sacred ritual.”²⁰ The items of the Hunt are transgressive in that they ask participants to step outside the “mundane realm of normalcy” in order to act against convention, revealing the world to be “a playground of limitless possibility.”²¹ For example, asking participants to film “Carry On Wayward Son” being played on a chapel organ asks them to transgress norms about the division of the profane/ordinary (pop culture music) and the sacred/respected (chapels and other religious spaces). In order to complete this item, participants must first confront their current perception of the delineation between these domains, question the legitimacy of these demarcations, and finally experience the transgressive event as pop music is played on a chapel instrument. Though there is a goal of completing the task in

¹⁸ Misha Collins, *Update: Email from Misha*, August 5th 2015, Email.

¹⁹ Taussig 349

²⁰ *Ibid* 350

²¹ Misha Collins, *Gishwhes 2014 Diploma*, Sept 9th 2014, Email.

order to earn points, both the organizers and participants have shared multiple times that it is often the experience of completing the task – as Taussig might say, the moment during which the transgressive boundary erupts into being and is electrically charged in an empowering ritual – that is most meaningful.

This particular example of an item can be understood more broadly through Gishwhes' mission to encourage the participants to create transgressive art, and to believe in the positive power of these experiences both for the participants and the world, whether in a "subtle or even monumental way."²² In her email concluding the 2014 Hunt, Louis expressed her conception of what participants created with their items that year:

"Some of what you created is clearly 'art' as our society understands the definition. But some of the other items? Art? How can a person covered in syrup soliciting hugs be art? Well, Misha and we here at GISHWHES headquarters believe whenever something wild, weird and abnosome [abnormal + awesome] is created or done that causes someone to stop in their tracks in disbelief at what they're seeing or hearing, art has just been created. Getting someone to break out of their mindless routine and really notice the world around them - even if for just a moment - we think, makes us all just a little better. Or at the very least a little weirder - and weird is good."

What Louis, Collins, and the Gishwhes organizers term "abnosome" and refer to as something that "causes someone to stop in their tracks in disbelief" and "break out of their mindless routine," Taussig again might understand to be the moment of transgression, as the items highlight "fearsome barriers" even as they are "crossed."²³ Turning again to the chapel item, it can be seen as providing the opportunity to see "Carry On Wayward Son" as something worthy of a chapel's space, and to see a chapel as something as accessible as a pop song – in both cases, the item invites participants to confront a traditional delineation even as they tear it down.

²²Jean Louis, *A Parting Missive from Miss Jean Louis*, August 8th 2014, Email.

²³ Taussig 350

Taussig would also commend the organizers and participants in Gishwhes for their preservation of the “messiness” of the items and their transgressions. Taussig notes that accounts of experiences that deal with the “force of negation, and hence of transgression” are often censored, virtually erasing them even as these accounts discuss “periods outside normality, [...] involving an enclosed, set-apart, theatrical-like space of make-believe for the representation and visceral realization of sacred force.”²⁴ He notes that “depictions become increasingly balmy and innocent,” leaving the experience “bleached.”²⁵ Accounts of Gishwhes resist this sanitation, describing items in plain language that preserved their visceral, uncomfortable aspects (like the syrupy hug Louis referred to), celebrating their worth *for* these qualities rather than in spite of them. She added, “Do and be art! Be it with drool flying out of your mouth, hair plastered to your head, and eyes flashing. Let your materials jolt the world awake and splatter it with a deluge of freakishness, laughter, and kindness.”²⁶ During Gishwhes, Collins has said, “‘Food’ becomes ‘art.’ Art becomes trash. Trash becomes clothing,”²⁷ adding that it is a time for those who know that “beauty can be found in the detritus.”²⁸ This conscious preservation of these dual qualities calls to mind both Taussig’s definition of the sacred’s quality of negation and also, again, his emphasis on the importance of the transgressive

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Collins, 2015 Coffee Table Book 243

²⁷ Misha Collins, *2014 Coffee Table Book: Spread Your Wing*,. Pterodactyl Flight Path Books, Washington DC: 2014.

²⁸ Collins, 2015 Coffee Table Book 1

moment itself, where, in the “empowering and sacred ritual”²⁹ the “impossible becomes possible.”³⁰

Collins, Louis, and the participants’ expression of hopes for and experiences of Gishwhes’ effect on their behavior and perspective on the world beyond the week of the Hunt would please Taussig, who lamented the inescapability of “the utilitarian theme that such excitements were merely part of a social narrative whose function was to enforce the status quo.”³¹ In their quotations, many of those involved with Gishwhes employed the same “surreptitious countermoves [as the scholars] searching for an escape from such a tedious conclusion,” admitting to the delight they took in their transgressions and expressing a positive outlook on the endurance of the experience’s impact on their rejection of habitual normalcy.³² Esther G., for example, describes their experience: “I scared a couple of old ladies and a few Wal-Mart employees...but I think they secretly enjoyed the chaos, as I did!”³³ Collins summarizes this experience in the introduction to the 2015 Coffee Table Book with the assertion that Gishwhes is “about taking a break from the ordinary and about the insights that can be born of breaking routine and defying expectation. And finally, [it is] about finding out that freedom is actually here, now, waiting for us.”

In understanding this phenomenon, we must also confront the basic issue Taussig might take with applying his theory to Gishwhes – the event is not religious. As such, the argument could be made that the use of his theory is *a priori* inappropriate for the event.

²⁹ Taussig 350

³⁰ Collins, 2014 Coffee Table Book 1

³¹ Taussig 351

³² Ibid

³³ Collins, 2015 Coffee Table Book 209

However, as a counterargument, I offer the perspective in the process of interrogating the legitimacy of applying religious theories to something like Gishwhes, and in the process of applying them, we are afforded an understanding of both the phenomena and the theory that might otherwise be excluded from our knowledge. Further, just as being asked to reconsider the place for a pop song and the uses of a chapel space during the Hunt provides a meaningful transgressive experience that makes complex the understanding of their traditional domains, the application of theories of the sacred to a secular event prompts us to question why and how we delineate the secular from the religious, and the appropriateness of this demarcation.

To elaborate, it is important to recognize the “knee-jerk” rejection of the idea that religious theory can be applied to secular topics, and interrogate that. Taussig draws on Durkheim in the construction of his theories, and Durkheim’s own exploration of the sacred is key in understanding the ways in which the conflation of religious and sacred have habitually excluded the application of particular theories to secular topics.

Durkheim observes that religions “presuppose a classification of all the things, real and ideal, of which men think, into two classes or opposed groups generally designated [as the] profane and sacred.”³⁴ Further, Durkheim puts the agency of delineation between the sacred and the profane into the hands of humans. He distinguishes the sacred as that which human-made “interdictions protect and isolate,” while the profane is that to which “these interdictions are applied and which must remain at a distance from [the sacred].”³⁵

Durkheim does not conclude that the sacred is necessarily a real force to which humans

³⁴ Emile Durkheim, “*Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*,” in *Theory and Method in the Study of Religion*, ed. Carl Olson, (Toronto: Wadsworth, 2003), 218

³⁵ Ibid 221

naturally flock. Instead, he puts forth that the sacred is simply “things set apart,” in the context of a “unified system of beliefs and practices.”³⁶ Pals elaborates on Durkheim’s delineations, stating that the profane and sacred do not correspond with the “natural” and the “supernatural.”³⁷ With this emphasis on human agency and the decentralizing of the necessity of divinity in constituting the sacred, it is easier to see that there is room for discussions of the sacred as it exists and is reached through secular experiences, which in turns allows room to make more complex our understanding of what constitutes the nature of the sacred.

Those who have participated in Gishwhes, whether as members of a team completing items or as organizers and judges witnessing the outpouring of submissions during and after the Hunt, have spoken to the event’s profound effect on them. The experience often has a lasting impact on participants, as the possibilities the transgressions revealed to them during the Hunt radically change the way they conceive of the structure of their daily lives after Gishwhes is over, more aware now of the “infinite possibilities”³⁸ of seemingly rigid constructs such as a chapel organ. From explaining the demarcations between the ordinary and the extraordinary through the language of the profane and the sacred, to the explication of the powerful effect of the act of transgression on the conceptions of these domains, Taussig’s theory provides useful tools to understand the appeal of the items assigned during the Hunt and explains the enduring effect of engaging in Gishwhes after the week is over. In turn, the applicability of this theory to a secular topic affords the opportunity to more closely interrogate the

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Daniel Pals, *Nine Theories of Religion*. (New York, Oxford University Press: 2015), 91

³⁸ Collins, 2014 Coffee Table Book 1

theory itself, as it dislocates the sacred from the religious, thereby expanding our detailed understanding of the religious, the secular, and their relation to each other and to the concept of the sacred.



GISHWHES 2015 introductory video
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Am5WFvNcIo>



The Flash in a particle accelerator

<http://www.symmetrymagazine.org/article/august-2013/the-flash-invades-jefferson-lab>



An angel made of feminine hygiene products

<http://i.imgur.com/YASW7D5.jpg>



Roller-blade through a museum

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VEm8iifQvis>



Play Carry on Wayward Son on a Pipe Organ

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jXuSZYlinK0>



Construction Paper Dress

https://41.media.tumblr.com/4eb1dbbb4318d1fea2603ad84376c581/tumblr_nsucwnFKIx1rqwg1do1_500.jpg



Write a Wake-up Song for NASA

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FuTjpAQjbto>

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World Records! https://www.gishwhes.com/world_records.php