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What is Mother Earth? A Name, A Meme, A Conspiracy

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Abstract

A rich appreciation of Mother Earth—in the entwined contexts of Native American, Australian Aboriginal, Western intellectual, and contemporary ecological movements—is accomplished in this paper using new perspectives and strategies: Mother Earth as name, meme, and conspiracy. This approach is developed and illustrated to offer insight into the dynamics of identity formation of individual cultures, amalgams of cultures, academic approaches, and ecological movements that span the globe, always occurring in the context of threatening, yet creative, encounters. Projecting beyond the Mother Earth example, the paper proposes a vision of the academic study of cultures and religions that focuses on gesture and repetition demonstrating that conditions of coherence, in the presence of the constant threat of incoherence, may be more valuable than discerning meaning.

Keywords

Mother Earth; Native American; Australian Aboriginal; ecology movements; identity formation; meme; conspiracy of silence

Introduction

For decades presentations of negative stereotypes of indigenous people have been common in popular media. Young audiences are deeply influenced by these media images. Disney's 1995 *Pocahontas* depicts a girl taken by force and sexually assaulted. I have an old copy of a children's Little Golden Book titled *Pocahontas* that literally lightens her skin color, page after page, as she transforms from a 'wild Indian maiden' to a well-dressed woman meeting the Queen of England. There are many other examples dating back decades. Tiger Lily, in the

classic 2003 film *Peter Pan*, is a peace-pipe smoking one-syllable gibberish speaking princess of the Piccaninny tribe. The same bar-bar-barbarian grunting was frequent for the various 'Injuns' in old Bugs Bunny cartoons. And, of course, these popular media aimed at young people are consistent with a long history of literature and even academic writings.

In recent years a few animated films, especially intended for children and families, have attempted to present more authentic characters; films such as *Moana* (2016) and *Coco* (2017). A recent 2018 addition distributed by Netflix in the U.S. and Latin America is *Pachamama*. It centers on a ten-year old boy in an Andean village who dreams of becoming a shaman. The film is named for a female figure known among the indigenous people in the Andes. Pachamama has a long history and a complex character. In Incan mythology she is a fertility goddess with close ties to the land. Yet, it appears that prior to the arrival of the Spanish she was at times a cruel goddess demanding sacrifice. She is mother to Sun and Moon and wife to her own son, Inti. She has an extensive presence in ritual with shrines to her in hollow rocks and niches in trees. In the Christian context, she aligned with the Virgin Mary. More recently she has been identified with Mother Nature and, finally, Mother Earth. Pachamama might rightly be considered a regional composite of many local figures.

Based on his travels to Bolivia and Peru, Juan Antin, the Argentine filmmaker of *Pachamama,* describes his inspiration for the film saying, 'I fell in love with the culture of Pachamama, which is how the indigenous people call Mother Earth, having respect, love for the Earth'. In a scene from the film the boy character, situated in the historical context of the oppression of the Spanish Conquest and the Incan Empire, says, 'They are taking away all our crops. We'll have nothing left to eat. ... Pachamama, we won't let you down. You'll be proud of us' (NPR 2019a). Knowing even a little of the Andean traditions reveals how this Mother Earth version of Pachamama simplifies, romanticizes, and drastically truncates the actual traditions associated with her, yet when Antin says 'Pachamama … is how the indigenous people call Mother Earth' he indicates his understanding that Mother Earth exists culturally more widely than in the Andes, with Pachamama being but a local instance of something more universal.

Mother Earth: The Challenge

This innocent Andean film example characterizes much about Mother Earth as this name has emerged over the last two centuries. I'm focused on the English-language proper name. Mother Earth is commonly

assumed to be a universal concept or an archetype. Mother Earth often represents the earth in its life-giving and life-supporting generosity. Mother Earth is regularly associated with people whose identity is connected with the earth. Mother Earth is often invoked in situations where a people's connection with the life-giving earth is threatened. Those who invoke Mother Earth often appear as victims overwhelmed by progress and the technologically and economically powerful. In this situation Mother Earth is invoked by the colonized and also by those who feel the earth is threatened by pollution and climate change. Those who invoke Mother Earth often claim moral and ecological superiority to their oppressors. Mother Earth is often romanticized. She tends to convey authenticity. Assumed universal or general, Mother Earth is exemplified with reference to carefully selected local cultural figures without questioning the obvious and extensive differences both among the many instances or the differences with the attributes posited as universal. Whereas these local figures, whose names may or may not be associated with either earth or mothers or grandmothers, tend to have extensively developed and culturally distinctive ritual and mythology, Mother Earth does not. She has strong ecological and political associations and weak theological and ritual implications.

Mother Earth is my subject, and my effort will be to suggest perspectives and strategies that help us appreciate Mother Earth as relevant to many people and cultures and situations across the globe. Reframing the inquiry by asking 'what is Mother Earth?' rather than 'who is Mother Earth?' opens us, I hope, to new insights regarding the characteristics I've outlined. By developing perspectives and strategies associated with the terms *name*, *meme*, and *conspiracy*, I think we can gain an expansive, engaging, and provocative appreciation of Mother Earth. I'll situate the use of this proper *name* culturally and historically in the indigenous cultures of North American and Australia, yet Mother Earth has also been invoked by influential Western intellectual studies that appeared beginning in the late nineteenth century. I'll consider these publications as part of a cultural as much as an intellectual phenomenon. The name has also played a prominent role in recent ecology movements.

Upon articulating the history and use of the name Mother Earth, using the term *meme* invented by Richard Dawkins to indicate a unit of cultural transmission, I'll show that the name Mother Earth functions effectively as a dense and powerful instrument to establish and confirm common identity among widely located highly varying groups of Indigenous people, among scholars who hold an essentialist or paternist approach to the study of religions and cultures, and among the

sprawling and varied ecological movements across the globe who are fighting the causes of climate change.

To show that the name Mother Earth is an effective and powerful meme serving the creation and affirmation of common identity among groups with widely distinct members, frequently engenders powerful emotion, the emotion inseparable from felt identity and reality. To understand the existence and importance of this strong emotion is important for gaining further appreciation of Mother Earth. I employ the notion of *conspiracy*, itself adding potential emotion. I posit the common practice of a conspiracy of silence in which it is deemed insensitive or inappropriate to question the universality of Mother Earth. Yet, this conspiracy of silence is considered a common feature of memes, that is, those who 'get' the meme conspire, breathe together, in the affirmation that it appears just-so. Common identity is marked by those who 'get' and properly use the meme. Strong emotion arises when the meme is questioned or misused, such being perceived as a threat to identity, even to reality itself.

While my focus will be on Mother Earth, the concerns with identity formation and the influence of active academic imaginations and inventions should be of general interest and relevance to academic studies of religion and culture. I'll conclude with comments on the way this Mother Earth study might exemplify an approach more broadly applicable in the study of religions and cultures. The challenge I faced with Mother Earth threads through the history of the academic study of religions and cultures beginning in the late nineteenth century. The challenge broadly is this: how do we create general theories, hypotheses, definitions, categories, principles to appreciate religion as distinctively human, while honoring and treasuring the empirical specificity and distinctive differences of all the cultural and historical examples? Mother Earth is additionally complicated because the name is not only an academic construct, but it also serves to help create a common identity among a sprawling collection of cultures.

North America

Teaching in Arizona in the 1980s I began to think seriously about the frequency with which I heard claims about the importance of Mother Earth to Native American people. I had spent many years in the careful study of dozens of cultures indigenous to North America and I had been physically present fairly extensively among the Navajo, Hopi, Zuni, and Yaqui. I recognized and appreciated the frequent ecological associations made to Mother Earth, yet I was confounded by the seeming claims to her commonality, even universality, among all American

indigenous cultures. I finally had to act. What at the time seemed to me most important was to search for specific and compelling evidence of Mother Earth among North American cultures. My academic training demanded this extensive and tedious approach. As I look back on my project now, I recognize something of my naivete or my self-deception in this phase of the project because I knew from the outset that I wouldn't find Mother Earth, at least as a singular uniform figure with common attributes appearing in a great many quite different cultures. I knew I couldn't simply accept that Hopi *Kokyangwuti* (Spider Grandmother) or Navajo *Asdzáá Naadleehi* (Changing Woman) or the many other culturally specific richly developed female figures were either all more or less the same or that they were all simply varying manifestations of some universal Mother Earth as so many scholars and folk have claimed. Any top-down strategy that assumed that the vast differences were only apparent or due to historical manifestation was, to me, disrespectful of cultural differences and served only intellectual theories I didn't share.

It is incontestable that there are thousands of cultures that draw important articulations of their identity from their long connection with specific physical land areas. These identity connections are often expressed in origin stories and oral histories. I once hiked into a side canyon of the Little Colorado river north of the Grand Canyon to visit the Hopi sipapuni, the Hopi place of emergence. It persists as a pilgrimage destination and is symbolically represented in the floor of kivas. Recently such cultures have been identified collectively as Indigenous. The term indigenous means originating in and characteristic of a particular region or country. It is inarguable that the differences among these many cultures—despite these distinct cultures, often in open conflict with one another, being frequently shoved together by various actors under such rubrics as primitive, native, tribal, small-scale, and indigenous—are not simply minor variations on some well-documented universal or even regional characteristics. Just contemplate the breathtaking assumptions that are necessary to even make such a claim. More generally, considering the religions and cultures that occur across the globe—Western cultures/religions, Middle Eastern cultures/religions, Asian religions, Chinese religions, and so on—one of the most common identifications of them, belying their expansive geographical presence, is to use terms of connection to region or country, if often large or vast. In some sense indigeneity, that is, identity factors tied to specific land areas, is a common attribute of cultures and religions. Indigeneity in this general sense is commonly expressed in terms of affectionate kinship connections with home, country, territory, land, language.

The immense diversity and distinctive identities among the thousands of so-called Indigenous cultures is inarguable. In North America alone there are hundreds of indigenous cultures each speaking a language unintelligible to most of the others. There are multiple language families present with differences among them being on the scale of that between Chinese and English. Given this diversity of identity that can never be reduced to either shaded variations or alternative manifestations of some posited (but by whom?) universal, it is incredulous that one should have any expectation that, especially prior to any general means of communication among all these cultures, there could possibly exist a common singular entity, trope, figure, idea, or theme identified by a proper noun in any language. Such is often the assertion for Mother Earth. The imperialist assumptions behind this expectation are chilling. Yet, armchair scholars have not been the only proponents of Mother Earth. Many persons who self-identify as Native American and Indigenous are as well. Mother Earth has played a role in creating elements of a common identity among the broad diversity of individual cultures in North America and revealing this history, telling this story, was central to my initial efforts to appreciate Mother Earth (1987). A similar story, I discovered, could be outlined in Aboriginal Australia.

The search for identity among obvious diversity gave way to my efforts to document historically when and how Mother Earth, the term, came into use in North America and what have been the associations and applications of the name through history. This effort led me to study, among many other things, two widely quoted nineteenth century historical examples that have served as prototypes and often as the only historical examples offered to document Mother Earth.

Among the earliest evidence given for Mother Earth in North America, without yet invoking the proper name, occurred at the 1810 meeting of William Henry Harrison, later to become President of the United States if for but thirty-one days, with the Shawnee leader named Tecumseh. Apparently, no chair had been reserved for Tecumseh as the meeting was about to commence. Discovering this omission, a chair was quickly found, and the following exchange was reported. ''Warrior, your father, general Harrison offers you a seat'. Tecumseh's dark eye flashed. 'My father!' he exclaimed, indignantly, extending his arm toward the heavens; 'the sun is my father and the earth is my mother; she gives me nourishment, and I repose upon her bosom'. As he ended, he sat down suddenly on the ground' (Dillon 1859: 441f).

The other quintessential example occurred just prior to 1890. A Wanapum man by the name of Smohalla, likely living in Washington State which became a U.S. state in 1889, was reported to have protested the European-American efforts to remove his people from their

ancestral lands and force changes in their lifeways by saying, 'You ask me to plow the ground. Shall I take a knife and tear my mother's bosom? You ask me to dig for stone. Shall I dig under her skin for bones? 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' (quoted in Mooney 1896: 716).

Both of these examples are the response attributed to indigenous Americans to the threatening presence of European-Americans. While neither one uses the proper name Mother Earth, both have been frequently cited as exemplifying Mother Earth. There is a certain undeniable power imbalance implied by these indigenous speakers. They portray their people in the role of victims making statements to claim some high ground and moral superiority to their oppressors. Their advantage is based on the claim to kinship with the land, specifically as like the respect due one's nurturing mother. There is also the common use of the curiously Victorian term 'bosom'[1] as evidence to remind us that these accounts exist only as reported by those among the oppressors and bearing their cultural and historical biases, style, and vocabulary.

It was not until the 1970s that any significant references to the proper name Mother Earth occurred that are directly attributed to Native Americans. There is one Native American source discussing the role of the sun and earth that occurred early in the twentieth century. Charles Eastman (Ohiyesa) was born in 1858 in a Santee Sioux family that had already converted to Christianity. He was distinguished in the late nineteenth century as the most formally educated of all Native Americans. He attended several colleges graduating from Dartmouth in 1887 as a distinguished student studying Latin, Greek, French, and German as well as zoology, botany, chemistry, physics, natural history, philosophy, geometry, political science, and history. He was also an accomplished athlete. He went on to graduate from Boston University School of Medicine in 1890. Through the balance of his life, he was active in his Lakota community as well as building bridges to

1. Bosom (n.) Old English *bosm* 'breast; womb; surface; ship's hold', from West Germanic **bōsmaz* (source also of Old Frisian *bosm*, Old Saxon *bosom*, Middle Dutch *boesem*, Dutch *boezem*, Old High German *buosam*, German *Busen* 'bosom, breast'), perhaps from PIE root **bhou-* 'to grow, swell', or **bhaghus*'arm' (in which case the primary notion would be 'enclosure formed by the breast and the arms'), or possibly a word from a substrate language. *Bosoms* in the narrowed or euphemistic meaning 'a woman's breasts' is from 1959; *bosomy* 'big-breasted' is from 1928 (earlier of rolling hills, etc.). *Bosom-friend* is attested 1580s; *bosom buddy* from 1924. *Abraham's bosom* 'the abode of the blessed' is from Luke xvi.19-31. Use over time suggests it was used extensively throughout the nineteenth century, rarely in the twentieth century.

European-American culture through government service, lecturing and writing, and being active in such organizations as the YMCA and the Boy Scouts of America.

In his 1911 book, *The Soul of the Indian,* Eastman described the religion of his people in order to, in his words, 'paint the religious life of the typical American Indian as it was before he knew the white man'. He relied on his memory as a boy for his account. This book appeared at a time when the Sun Dance was widely known and likely represented Native American religion for many non-indigenous people. Eastman appears to want to correct those who thought Sun worship was distinctive to Indian religion, writing, 'The Indian no more worshipped the Sun than the Christian adores the Cross' (1911). He suggests poetic metaphor is more appropriate than religion, writing:

> From the Sun, as the universal father, proceeds the quickening principle in nature, and in the patient and fruitful womb of our mother, the Earth, are hidden embryos of plants and men. Therefore our reverence and love for them was really an imaginative extension of our love of our immediate parents. (Eastman 1911)

Importantly it appears that Eastman's intent was to address and correct common beliefs about American indigenous religions. Interestingly he rejects the religious role of the earth as mother, yet he allowed it as appropriately metaphorical. In addressing Indian religion as singular, he also does not acknowledge the great complexity and diversity among the religions of the many and various indigenous cultures. In one other place in this book Eastman again addresses the religious roles of sun and earth. It is in the context of his outline of creation. He identifies it as Sioux (Lakota), yet considers it representative of all Native American cultures. Here he writes:

> The Sun and the Earth, representing the male and female principles, are the main elements in his creation, the other planets being subsidiary. The enkindling warmth of the Sun entered into the bosom of our mother, the Earth, and forthwith she conceived and brought forth life, both vegetable and animal. (Eastman 1911; see also Gill 1987: 131–36)

Eastman's Victorian phrasing here—particularly obvious in the words 'enkindling warmth of the Sun entered into the bosom of our mother, the Earth'—suggests he was likely aware of published references to the Smohalla and Tecumseh examples. His extensive classical education made it also likely he was familiar with the Western academic works that, by this time, had proposed Mother Earth as a cultural universal. I'll outline these shortly.

Australia

Indigenous references to the formal name Mother Earth did not begin to appear in North American until the 1970s. It was roughly the same time that similar references began to appear in indigenous Australia. In 1977 the noted indigenous theologian Djiniyini Gondarra wrote in a booklet:

> The land is my mother. Like a human mother, the land gives us protection, enjoyment, and provides our needs—economic, social and religious. We have a human relationship with the land: Mother-daughter, son. … When the land is taken from us or destroyed, we feel hurt because we belong to the land and are part of it. (See Robinson 1977: 18 quoted in Swain 1991b: 14)

A children's book soon followed in 1981 by Aboriginal author Kath Walker titled *Father Sky Mother Earth*, telling the story of the creation of the world and including this statement, 'high-technology-endowed humans … destroy the ecological balance with guns, bulldozers and pollutants—all culminating in an image of Mother Earth's body pierced with placards erected in her defense' (Swain 1991b: 14). Tony Swain at the University of Sydney carefully documented the rise, based on the aboriginal encounters with Indonesians prior to European Christians, of the figures the Father of Us All in southeastern Australia (Swain 1990: 195–232) as well as the Mother of Us All in northern Australia (Swain 1991a: 223–60). His subsequent study of the emergence and early history of Mother Earth in Australia shows that she is totally separate from these earlier figures, and he traces Mother Earth to the Aboriginal efforts to articulate differences between themselves and Christian European-Australians in terms of ecology and theology.

Swain documented accounts of Mother Earth among Australian Aborigines from the late 1970s to his early 1990s publication.

Western Intellectual Invention

Mother Earth, identified by a proper name and understood as possibly a universal figure, was the concern of Western scholars long before the name came into significant use by indigenous people. I'll sketch this history.

The great anthropologists of the late nineteenth century contributed to the invention of Mother Earth. In his 1873 *Primitive Culture*, E. B. Tylor wrote:

> 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 1871: 1, 326)

Tylor offered the Tecumseh anecdote as well as mentions of Algonquin and Comanche examples, neither, in my studies, based on reliable sources. Tylor's references to the Native American earth mother were soon repeated by Herbert Bancroft in *The Native Races* (1882), Andrew Lang in *Myth, Ritual and Religion* (1887), and several others.

Mid-twentieth century, religion scholar Olof Pettersson set out to document the full history and presence of mother earth in various mythologies and cosmologies around the world. A globally framed forerunner to my own strategic efforts in North America, Pettersson was also unable to find adequate evidence for a common ubiquitous figure. Consequently, he turned to discovering the origin and history of the idea or concept of a universal mother earth. He found that the single most influential publication developing these mother earth concepts was *Mutter Erde* (1905) by the German philosopher and religion scholar, Albrecht Dieterich. Pettersson's thorough critique of Dieterich's work was published in his 1967 book *Mother Earth: An Analysis of Mother Earth Concepts According to Albrecht Dieterich*. Tony Swain insightfully summarizes Pettersson's conclusions this way.

> He discovered that Dieterich … had upheld the doctrine of a ubiquitous belief in the Earth as a Divine Mother Goddess primarily because he could not find definite proof of this creed among the people he was originally studying: the ancient Romans and Greeks. It was essential for his argument that Mother Earth be everywhere precisely because she was apparently nowhere at all. (Quoted in Swain 1991b: 4; see also Gill 1987: 111–14)

Despite Pettersson's important critique, Dieterich's book served to establish the Mother Earth concept as it would thrive in academic literature even to the present. Mircea Eliade affirmed the importance of mother earth in his *Patterns of Comparative Religion* (1958) and his *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries* (1957). Eliade offered as evidence only the Smohalla account and a reference to Zuni.

The renowned Swedish scholar of Native American religions Åke Hultkrantz thoroughly and imaginatively considered mother earth. Hultkrantz discussed mother earth in several essays, most fully in his 1983 essay 'The Religion of the Goddess in North America'. I am confounded that Hultkrantz seems not to have been impacted by Pettersson's work which he surely knew. Based on my detailed analysis of his Mother Earth studies I concluded that:

> Hultkrantz identifies an astounding array of Native American female figures and goddesses with 'the old goddess', 'the goddess', 'Mother Earth', all of whom are for him, more or less synonymous. She is the earth and the moon; she lives in the earth, the sky, and the sea; she is goddess of hunters, cultivators, and gatherers; she is goddess of birth and nurturance and of sacrifice and the dead; she is mistress of the game and she is the corn

> maiden; she is peyote woman and the Virgin Mary. In such an approach, any figure … could somehow be assimilated into the goddess by one attribute or another. (Quoted in Gill 1987: 127; see also Gill 1987: 118–28 for a full analysis of Hultkrantz's writings on the mother earth goddess)

My critical studies of more than a dozen Western scholars from Tylor in 1873 to Hultkrantz in 1983 determined that for their evidence to establish Mother Earth only five culturally specific examples were actually provided; Hultkrantz's loose connections obviously included more (see Gill 1987, Ch 6).[2]

Challenge Summary

The seeming ubiquitous existence of Mother Earth was the invention of Western academics from the late nineteenth century through much of the twentieth century appealing to both classical sources yet also regularly invoking the same very few paradigmatic Native American examples. Academic critique shows that Mother Earth is a scholarly invention in service to the comparative enterprises of essentialist, paternist, and encyclopedic studies scantly supported by reliable accurate descriptions of cultural and historical reality. Mother Earth is but a chapter in this phase of the comparative studies of culture and religion that was strongly predisposed to grand universal patterns and categories as a way of understanding and surviving the overwhelm of remarkable difference and diversity. This style of comparison that seeks sameness, has largely, at least in academic settings, given way to comparison that finds difference and variation among exempla within common academic invented categories to be the more interesting and important. My criticism of such efforts must not be misunderstood. The inventive creativity seemed the necessary early response to the overwhelm of diversity across the globe reported by ethnography. This multiplicity was, especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, felt as a threat to the largely Christian-based, if tacitly so, understanding of human existence. The academic efforts to assert unity and universality were of the fabric of this response. It gave rise to much of the social scientific theory of the early twentieth century. There remains penchant for these ideas of unity and universality to

2. Given these Western intellectual imaginings of Mother Earth, one might suspect that these creative inventions of a universal Mother Earth are of the same fabric as the well-documented fascination common to Victorian men with dark-skinned exotic women. I think for example of Prosper Mérimée's novel *Carmen* (1845) and Georges Bizet's 1874 opera *Carmen* based on the novel. Carmen is more the *femme fatale* raising fascinating hypotheses especially given the enormous popularity of this character in the late Victorian era.

shape religion scholarship and it remains unquestionably presumed by popular and folk understanding. This approach is akin to imagining something to be indisputably foundational—*Mutter Erde*, axis mundi, myth, god—and then to use these constructed category terms as a template to make sense of the world. This approach is also that of prototype category theory.

It was not until the 1970s that indigenous people in North America and Australia began to use the proper name Mother Earth, yet it is quite likely that from the time of the earliest encounters of indigenous peoples with threatening colonizers, analogies of territory to nurturing mothers were included in the efforts to defend the importance of ancestral lands. At nearly the same time that indigenous appropriations of the proper name Mother Earth began to appear, so too was she embraced by those non-indigenous people who fought for ecological movements that were gaining strength at the time. Often these ecologically concerned folks romanticized Native Americans and other indigenous people on the basis of the assumption that Mother Earth was central to them. This practice continues.

The outlines of the story of the Mother Earth name begin to emerge. Two strands of the story arose in the nineteenth century. One comes from indigenous people who attempt to communicate to their land-grabbing oppressors the importance of their ancestral lands by invoking references to the earth being like a mother to them. The other comes from armchair scholars who were motivated by the overwhelm of diversity of cultures around the world being revealed by ethnographers. They concocted or intuited grand commonalities expressed as patterns and categories to bring coherence, order, and a sense of unity to this whole human adventure. Mother Earth was proposed and advanced as labeling such a category. Select examples that illustrate, but did not establish, the universality of this category could easily be drawn from affectionate kinship expressions of connection to home, land, territory. It is fascinating that one of these strands is firmly attached to the specific experience of historical cultural people, while the other is an intellectual strategy of those explicitly removed from the nitty gritty experience of a specific cultural life of their subjects. Yet, both serve importantly to articulate and defend long established characteristics of identity. As the story develops into the twentieth century, Mother Earth, likely influenced in part by these published strands, becomes increasing important in the establishment of a common Native American or Indian or Aboriginal or Indigenous collective identity. This development included the reverse incorporation of anything suggestive of cultural specificity to be identified as Mother Earth despite any disparity among all these associations with

the actual cultural materials. Such associations assisted in establishing a sense of primordiality and spirituality for Mother Earth. Finally, ecology movements developing into action organizations to combat climate change that share a common and natural affinity for the health of the whole earth found valuable elements of the developing history of Mother Earth.

Perspectives and Strategies

I have purposefully focused on the name Mother Earth and its specific history rather than on any possible references with ontological or theological implications—such as goddess, mythic figure, deity, or even metaphor—because I believe that it is fundamental to the appreciation and understanding of mother earth to avoid presuming any references regarding her nature beyond being a name. James Cox and others have addressed fascinating issues of the invention of gods in indigenous cultures and I have documented examples as well.[3] Mother earth might well be considered as an invented goddess in some situations, yet at present I think it more appropriate to ask 'what?' rather than 'who?' is Mother Earth. I want to offer a different approach by focusing on name, meme, and conspiracy. I'll explain.

A Name

I have long struggled with the labels and names and terms I use to identify the subjects of my studies. I have struggled with *Diné* versus Navajo, Navajo spelled with an 'h' or a 'j', Native American versus Indian or American Indian or First Nations, primitive or savage versus traditional or indigenous, Aboriginal or Aborigine when I know the term is Latin for 'of the origin', oral or non-literate or exclusively oral, and so on. The labels by which we identify our subjects of study have consequences. They shape identities and relationships. We have learned this lesson over and over across many decades. The appropriateness of terms and names is not only an issue for academics but also

3. On this point I differ from James Cox, *The Invention of God in Indigenous Societies* (2014). I do not doubt that such inventions occur and that my studies of Mother Earth as well as the Australian Numbakulla might well be examples of goddess and god that are academic inventions that eventually came to be embraced as distinctive to the people for whom they were invented. Still, I think to restrict these inventions to such a term as 'god' that cannot help but be both highly skewed to Western, even Christian, understandings and limiting to only religious, theological at that, implications. I consider these creative encounters to be broader and often of a much different character.

for everyone and it extends to all names and labels that make distinctions based on sex, gender, race, ethnicity, shade of skin color, nationality, country, ability, intelligence, age, occupation, kinship, politics, and so on. Labels invariably both include and exclude, distinguish self and other, set us off from them. As an academic, I've always felt responsible to be as accurate and sensitive as possible, yet it so often has felt bewilderingly impossible. Using a name invariably has felt like inappropriate settling. In a recent essay titled 'Not by Any Name' (Gill 2019). I reflect on this career-long struggle and the many errors and misunderstandings I have participated in, concluding that it is not possible to find non-controversial or wholly suitable names and labels for those we study. They are all loaded, and most are euphemisms for the old classic term primitive. Terms almost always essentialize, objectify, and spoil or halt relationships. We need a different strategy. I suggest that we see names and labels in terms of facilitating 'the never-ending negotiation of the processes accompanied by the experience of knowing who we, and they, are and are not' (Gill 2019: 56).

As the efforts of my research, as well as Pettersson's and Swain's, indicate, Mother Earth shows up as a proper name and as an oft-repeated name only, more so than as a documented rich cultural and historical reality for which the term mother earth refers. Mother Earth does not name an ancient universal goddess who has persisted throughout history in various manifestations in cultures the world over, or even a concept. Mother Earth is foremost a name; a name that without contention or argument bears the sorts of associations I listed at the beginning of this paper. Whatever specificity and complexity Mother Earth has is acquired by means of application in context. The name, always in English, has emerged in and applied to various encounters that could have occurred only in the period of colonization and the rise of modern ethnography; a period that saw increased encounters among diverse cultures. The overwhelm of diversity has characterized this era.

Mother Earth is a name that arose in at least three distinct, yet interrelated, situations as I have outlined. First, the rise of modern ethnography in the nineteenth century produced evidence of near unimaginable diversity among cultures around the world. Armchair Western scholars—for example, Edward B. Tylor and Sir James George Frazer—in various fields engaged strategies in the effort to discover some coherence in the face of this overwhelm. They often concocted the evidence to fit categories and category labels they invented. Invoking the name Mother Earth, or a more generic predecessor, which was their own concoction, gave a sense of consistency and universality to collections of disparate data resulting in the differences being subsumed into a few general characteristics assigned to Mother Earth. They often heavily

altered the cultural examples to fit the pattern and category as they imagined and described it. Subsequently any female figure or reference to the life-giving importance of land might be swiftly embraced as a manifestation of the pattern.

Second, colonization obviously was accompanied by the displacement of many indigenous people from their ancestral lands. Mother Earth, as proper name, assisted in the efforts of widely diverse indigenous people to articulate their common plight of being displaced from ancestral lands. It has been important in the construction of new collective identities referred to by the terms such as Native American and Indigenous. This name, while absent of broadly held common cultural richness and complexity as evident in story and rite, became a marker of common identity, that of the colonized and oppressed, the de-landed and land displaced, to these culturally diverse groups.

Mother Earth as a name enabled a synonymy with the names or terms of any and all of the specific cultural and historical evidence that might by any means be associated. Thus, the paucity of common ritual, story, and practice was easily overcome by the combined effect of including all aspects of the specific cultural practices of those incorporated through this extensive synonymy. Mother Earth, the name, thus gained the attributes of Pachamama, Changing Woman, Spider Grandmother, and many more. In turn all these figures could eventually, and usually when referenced to those outside the relevant culture, be referred to by the name Mother Earth.

Finally, beginning in the mid-twentieth century, Mother Earth, as name, was invoked by groups with ecological concerns. The driving force of this use centered in non-indigenous cultures, yet typically contributed to the romanticization of Native Americans and Indigenous cultures broadly by projecting on them some ancient and fundamental connection with Mother Earth. This use of the proper name appropriated or was inspired by a romanticized association of primal ecological awareness by this time strongly connected with cultural collectives such as Native American and Indigenous. The name invoked values shared across the many organizations eager to save the earth.

These three theaters have often entwined with the name Mother Earth facilitating the common intersection among them. These applications of the name Mother Earth all, in differing ways, meet crises of the overwhelm of diversity and difference, allowing commonality and coherence to be experienced. The challenge is to develop a strategy by which we might appreciate more fully the dynamics of the name Mother Earth as it has functioned within and between these several cultural and historical contexts.

Meme

To meet this challenge, I suggest we also consider Mother Earth, the name, as *meme*. I'm well aware of the potential for such a strategy to seem superficial or inappropriate, yet, with certain clarifications, I think it has benefits.

In the world that has emerged over the last half century, a persistent shift has occurred that privileges communication in compact immediately impactful bundles, some even using alternatives to words. Group identity and social relationships are built and maintained on Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, and endless apps with cryptic texts. The burgeoning selection of emoticons and emojis and, recently, also memojis and animojis enables many to nearly abandon language altogether, communicating in a string of well-chosen cryptic symbols. The term meme is commonly used to indicate the effective brevity of many of these styles and forms of communication. In social media, the term meme typically indicates silly captioned photos that pervade Facebook and other social media platforms.[4]

The term meme was invented by controversial British scientist Richard Dawkins who introduced it in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*. He defined it as a 'unit of cultural transmission'. He was deliberate in designing the term. The Greek root *mim-* meaning mime or mimic suited his idea; as also did the English suffix *-eme* which indicates a distinctive unit of language structure, as in grapheme, lexeme, and phoneme. And, of course, of value to the topic of his book, he appreciated the homophonic similarity of the words 'gene' and 'meme'. While Dawkins invented the term, the phenomenon it references is not new. He was giving a label, a meme itself, to that common process in which certain images, or clever phrases or a combination of both, sweep through or are widely held by a culture largely through person-to-person exchanges. Effective memes not only take hold quickly, but they also become emblematic of the identity of those who embrace the same memes: political slogans, school mascots, flags, chants, and even fashion.

I appreciate that one of the roots Dawkins considered as informing the term meme is mimetic. I have long been interested in self-moving, that is, biologically active human movement, as fundamental to

4. A brief aside. I think that the styles and media of academic communication including pedagogy have changed relatively little during this same period. Our most daring achievement remains, somewhat pathetically, Power Point. Little wonder higher education and research expertise is decreasing in its perceived value and importance beyond isolated cohorts of specialists. Marshall McLuhan remains more relevant than ever.

understanding cultural and religious processes (see Gill 2018 and Gill 2020, especially Ch 5). I've moved progressively toward appreciating that coherence, or the coherence/incoherence dynamic, is more important and interesting as a motivating value than is meaning. Coherence correlates with our feeling of fit, of congruity, of rightness, of smoothness always in tension with the opposing and threatening presence of elements of incoherence. Coherence cannot be rationally determined; it is a feeling kind of knowing. It is something we experience as just-so. However, the feelings of coherence are shaped by the accumulation of experience we have in our lives. Identity is rarely a product of some reasoned objective process. It arises in the mimetic acts of social interaction. Members of a group gesturally imitate and mirror one another. They walk and talk and dress and interact in gesturally naturalized patterns acquired through ongoing and repetitive social interaction. They live in a network of common gestures (memes).

Using Dawkins' term,[5] I propose that identity is gained and experienced in part through the circulation of common memes, efficient units of cultural transmission. Rarely is there any discussion of the meaning or significance or value content of a given meme. It is fundamental to the identity of members of the community in a felt just-so sense. Its value and importance seem essential and obvious despite there being no explicit analytical exploration of the implications of embraced memes. The power of meme is in its obviousness to those who get it and circulate it. Meme is lived and shared and often treasured rather than talked about. Like many jokes, to get the meme is an attribute of shared identity. With attention on meme involving transmission, it

5. I'm sure that some will be disturbed by my embrace of Dawkins' term 'meme' in the context of the study of religion largely on the basis of his 2008 book *The God Delusion*. I think that a proper academic study of religion has a full agenda that arises by avoiding the embrace of theological beliefs or assumptions. Yet, certainly it is difficult to consider the study of religion without seeing such theological beliefs and assumptions as important and common data that must be considered in studies of religion. I should think that a more interesting, if somewhat less provocative, position for Dawkins to take would have been for him to see these 'god beliefs' and the rich fabric of cultural materials comprise memes, that is 'units of cultural transmission'. It is impossible to deny the vast cultural evidence of the existence of religions across most human cultures through human history. Much of this evidence is characterized by 'gods'. One might consider them real in some theological sense or real as the products of enormously creative human imagination. My sense is that Dawkins' focus on delusion needlessly insults human creativity, while also missing what might be a useful application of his own invented term. One implication of what I'm doing in this paper is to show that, from certain perspectives such as a proper academic study of religion, we need not engage the question of the 'truth' or 'reality' of the referent to terms like 'god' or 'Mother Earth'. As memes, that is, as units of cultural transmission, they are powerfully effective and important.

might be thought of as units of gesture, routinized repetitive bodied enactments of identity.

It seems clear that the closer and more extensive are the routine lives and interactions of the members of a group, even if physically distanced, the richer the fabric of interwoven units of social transmission. Groups that live much of their lives physically together share an extensive body of gesturally naturalized actions, whole networks of terms and anecdotes, that provide individual members with a solid basis for the feelings of belonging to the group and the specific skills needed for living in the group. They share language; lifeways; social and religious rituals; anecdotes, folklore, and mythology; family and social structures; and much more. The mythology and ritual of a culture functions largely to gesturally naturalize networks of memes to provide the experiential grounds for feelings of belonging and coherence.

Those groups whose members or clusters of members are physically distant depend even more on what we now refer to as memes, circulated via media, to feel connected, to experience belonging, to establish and transmit group/cultural identity. Group identity can also be formed among those who rarely encounter one another face-to-face or do so in smaller atomized subgroups. This possibility is greatly enhanced in the era of modern communications and social media. I suggest that sometimes a single meme, or perhaps just a few, do the heavy lifting by providing a gesturally circulated marker of common identity embraced by members of these collective virtual groups.

The term Indigenous as proper noun, in recent years has increasingly been used to name a particular set of cultural groups. It is often conjoined with specific culture names that have long histories, such as Sami, Lakota, Arrernte, Ashanti, and Navajo. It is held and repeated by many who are often located at great distances from one another and who are culturally quite distinct from one another. Yet, by means of this name circulated through social media, in time, they feel a common identity. The anxiety of difference is quelled by the comfort of the coherence of belonging. Quite common among these groups, the meme Mother Earth has come to play a role, often either as a general spiritualization of the land with which the group identifies, or as ways of identifying one or another kind of reference to ancestral lands. As the term Indigenous itself indicates having originated or living for generations in a particular place, Mother Earth then becomes an effective and powerful meme for indigeneity itself.[6]

6. Bjorn Ola Tafjord (2019) has written about groups that have no cultural or historical connection to those who identify as indigenous, yet they appropriate the term, or similar ones, as meme to identify their appropriated romanticized elements of some of these cultures. He calls this process 'indigenizing'.

The power of Mother Earth as meme can be demonstrated in the three arenas I've identified. First, in the context of the anthropologists and students of religion who, as I discussed earlier, proclaim the common existence among indigenous (or all) peoples of an earth mother or a mother goddess, Mother Earth functions as meme. The term is an efficient marker for a unit of information that helps create common identity among cultural others for the benefit of a certain segment of Western intellectual culture. This engagement of the Mother Earth meme marks the identity of an essentialist or patternist community of scholars. Positing the ubiquity of a numinous being identified with the fecundity of the earth is to them just-so, obvious in terms of this shared view of reality. In this community of scholars, the Mother Earth meme is confirmed by citing select cultural examples that, in one sense or another, appear consistent with the meme. Consistent with the popular embrace of comparison indicating sameness, the Mother Earth meme functions to bring the feeling of coherence to a remarkably complex and diverse world and in doing so establishes the essentialist and patternist methods as being authentic, legitimate, and authoritative. Since Western intellectuals are the inventors and purveyors of this meme—the meme precedes the cultural and historical data—it asserts superiority of Western worldviews and religions.

In the second application area, Mother Earth has served as meme in the creation of amalgam or collective identities among indigenous peoples in North America, Australia, and broadly across the globe. When Navajo and Hopi and Shawnee and Lakota and scores of other people of distinct cultures across North America needed to construct a shared common identity, say Native American, typically two things happen. First, they appropriate and revalue the nomenclature by which their common oppressor collectively has identified them. Prior to the presence of Europeans, generalizing terms like Indian and Native American obviously did not exist. The term *Indian* derives from early European explorers being confused about where they were on earth, mistakenly thinking themselves in India. *Native* is an alternative to indigenous often with pejorative implications, yet prior to the presence of Europeans territory took on a specific and local identity, not a generic one (Gill 1998). Each culture held distinctive understandings of territory (Gill 1998), rather than occupying a marked-off bounded area in a much larger generic landscape. I can't overemphasize how important this distinction is. And, of course, the term *American* came from the name of the Italian explorer Amerigo Vespucci. These terms identifying a collective were appropriated and invested with distinctive referents and powers as the result of creative encounters that were often violent and oppressive. These names served to create new identities,

not needed or appropriate without the presence of a common oppressing other, more than to accurately identify existing ones.

The second thing memes do to construct a common identity, in contrast with the prior emphasis on difference and opposition among individual groups, is to give expression to some markers that explicitly distinguish the entire group in a way that emphasizes attributes considered as markers of the superiority of its members in contrast with outsiders. In the most general sense this is simply the association of superiority of being in the group rather than outside it. In the case of Mother Earth as meme it often indicates humane, moral, community, and family values in theological and ecological terms, yet rarely with much elaboration. Such markers must emphasize something common to all Native Americans, or indigenous people, that can also easily avoid any conflicting differences among the individual groups. I believe that beginning in the 1970s Mother Earth served as a meme to communicate common values in service to the establishment of shared identity among indigenous peoples in North America, Australia, and elsewhere. Above all it efficiently communicated the shared experience of having long history in which group identity is tied to particular lands. The meme allowed each who embraced it to understand and apply it in any way they individually wished, yet also assuming it to be common among the amalgam. Thus, Mother Earth can be considered synonymous with Pachamama and even the Virgin Mary without conflict. Mother Africa is perhaps relevant as a cognate meme assisting the forging of a mutual identity among the hundreds of cultures in Africa and especially as invoked by those throughout the vast African diaspora.

Mother Earth, as meme, identifies the simple and obvious importance to people of home, land, country, for sustenance and identity. Mother Earth is a meme that implicates indigeneity, yet also a context of displacement and oppression and colonization. The Mother Earth name, with foreshadowing found in Tecumseh and Smohalla, serves as identity marker for those who have suffered the threat to or actual loss of this life-giving connection to ancestral land.[7]

7. I am unaware of any instances in which Mother Earth serves as meme for contemporary migrant communities. An immigrant is literally one who has been forced to leave the land that had long provided sustenance and identity. Mother Earth, as meme, is, I suggest, a unit of cultural transmission that has supported the creative encounters that have resulted in the current global dynamics, including the widely practiced stigmatization of immigrants. The plight of displaced peoples, immigrants, is a crisis across the world today. Those who assess the impacts of climate change project that immigration will characterize increasing groups of people in the world in the near future. Given that climate change will increasingly become

The third area served by the Mother Earth meme includes movements associated with ecology and the increasingly urgent fight against climate change. While the meme is often invoked by non-indigenous ecologically conscious people, it continues in this arena to be entwined with the establishment of Mother Earth in collective communities identified as Native American and Australian Aboriginal and, more recently, Indigenous. I well remember in the 1980s my students giving me a bumper sticker depicting a green-colored globe and the words 'Save Our Mother Earth'. In the contemporary ecology advocacy period, the use of this meme may be diminishing. I examined the photographs of the public demonstrations against climate change that took place in cities around the world (20 September 2019 and 28 September 2019), conducted mostly by youth and predominantly females, clearly inspired and led by Sweden's Greta Thunberg. In this tiny sampling, I saw only one sign that referred to earth as mother and it didn't use the proper name. The contemporary prominent memes seem to be fire images and emojis, flood images, planet (as in No PLANet B), earth as home, and the circle with diagonal emoji crossing out oil and coal. I think this trend in meme evolution parallels the recent globalization and the instant communication among people the world over. The memes for regional or nation-based collectives, such as Native American and Australian Aboriginal, are being replaced or supplemented in many contexts by the term Indigenous. The universality of emojis is also shaping the ecology movement memes.

Considering Mother Earth as meme, as evident in these three areas, allows us to appreciate that the name, as meme, has in all contexts served primarily the objective of creating coherence in service to identity where existential diversity and difference are extensive. As a proper name many have identified Mother Earth as the universal figure manifest in a great variety of ways across specific cultures. Some contexts—recall Pachamama as an example of Mother Earth—give a theological coloring to this meme. Yet, there is no reason that a meme serving location-based identity cannot be highly animated and developed in the personal terms of mother kinship relationships without any necessary theological or even religious implications. Even more importantly, this meme has served in this era to create a virtual indigeneity, a social media space, that 'grounds' identity where there is no real land space to do so.

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the root cause of immigration, might the name Mother Earth find application in this intersection of migration and ecology.

Conspiracy

Conspiracy theory is itself a contemporary meme facilitated by social media and internet technology. It is commonly a term of derision when applied to those who concoct outrageous explanations for cultural phenomena based on alternative facts (also a meme), fabricated data, and misinformation, not to mention untethered reasoning.[8] Conspiracy alone suggests a uniting for malicious purposes or to secretly plot or scheme for ill intentions. It is usually not a nice word and is jarring when related to the uncontested sweetness of any mention of Mother Earth. Yet, inspired by and honoring Tony Swain's fascinating 1991 article 'The Mother Earth Conspiracy: An Australian Episode' (see Swain 1991a), I concur with him that the term might be redeemed and reinvested with implications present in the word's roots. Latin *conspirare* is literally 'to breathe together'. At its etymological roots it might convey the notion of 'to blow together' as ensemble playing musical instruments. *Spirare* is also the root of 'spirit'.[9]

An unacknowledged *conspiracy of silence* is an important aspect of the application and implication of Mother Earth as meme. I suggest this conspiracy of silence is actually a powerful attribute of most memes. While meme does some of the heavy lifting of cultural transmission, it is distinguished by being immediate and surface-level with an assumption that it bears the gravity of primacy and authority. The absence of elaboration, the hints of banality, and the presence of contradictory or incompatible evidence that characterize memes are quelled by emotional protectiveness, by accusations of insensitivity, by the defense that only certain folks can comprehend. Memes are like jokes and riddles to be got or appreciated and told but not explained. Memes are embraced because they are experienced straightaway as authentic and relevant. Even if embraced among those who have quite diverse understandings, a meme is often accompanied by an unstated conspiracy to hold and use it in common without contest. If one asks questions or raise issues, that person just isn't in the know, that person is an outsider, even a danger. Seeming incongruities that might be connected to a meme are not felt and any evidence of such is silently, yet forcefully, ignored. In the case of Mother Earth, the name/meme rarely has any suggestion of mythology, folklore, or ritual. These incongruities

8. This statement might almost literally apply to the scholars who promoted Mother Earth in their writings.

9. It is fascinating that many words have root meanings that are near opposites of their contemporary sense. I am endlessly fascinated by these oppositions and how even in so many situations the full array of possible senses or meanings remain active should we care to search them out.

are ignored. Most references to Mother Earth fit nicely on an Instagram post, a hat, a tee shirt, or a bumper sticker. Yet, Mother Earth is embraced with passion as primal and fundamental, often universal.

I offer an extended fascinating example of this conspiracy of silence in the most unusual of contexts, scientific inquiry. On 'Science Friday' an NPR program, a segment called 'Widening the Lens on A More Inclusive Science' (NPR 2019b) the host Ira Flatow played a listener comment from an Ojibwa ethnobotanist that included the statement, 'Native ways of knowing are just as valid as those taught by Western world view'. Turning to one of his guests Annette Lee, Associate Professor of Astronomy, St. Clouds, Minnesota who he indicates describes herself as 'mixed-race Lakota' he asked, 'Indigenous ways of knowing. What are these?' Lee responded:

> Indigenous ways of knowing are different than Western science in a few ways I can point to. One is that we have four parts of being human, you know. What does being human mean? So, in native way of knowing, we have our bodies, our minds, our hearts, our spirits. And in Western science it's really very much focused on just the body and the mind and that's where it stops. It leaves out the other half, the spirit and the heart. Another way that indigenous knowledge is different is that there's a very deeply imbedded idea that we are related to all living things. That all living things have spirit and we are all related. This includes things in nature: trees, rocks, stars, and people. Animals. Right. The third thing I can point to is that indigenous ways of knowing there's a strong concept that we can practice logical ways: thinking, observation, measurement, prediction, but there's always a space for the mysterious, the unknown, that's a part of it. (NPR 2019b)

The conspiracy of silence is clear in Flatow's response which was to go to a break and upon returning he asked no questions. As a scientist, especially one interested in 'more inclusive science', might one be expected to ask such questions as 'given that the term indigenous refers to thousands of cultures on several continents all speaking their own languages with quite distinct lifeways with histories spanning millennia, how as a scientist are you able to indicate that all of these people share the same anthropology, that is four-part understanding of what it means to be human?' Or perhaps, 'you have indicated that the distinction of indigenous ways of knowing is the inclusion of heart and spirit. What do these terms mean and how specifically do they become core perspectives to the advancement of scientific knowledge?' Or 'How does an indigenous understanding that all things are related differ from the fundamental Western scientific ideas of ecology or the universal applicability of chemistry or physics?' Any scientist should be asking these questions especially if there is a real interest in incorporating 'indigenous ways of knowing' into scientific inquiry.

Yet, I'd suggest that 'indigenous ways of knowing' functions as a cultural meme that addresses the creative encounter of the recently invented amalgam identity labeled indigenous with the same old colonialist adversary that is labeled Western, even scientific. For one to ask these questions would be considered utterly inappropriate and would be understood as certain evidence of the limitations and insensitivities that are commonly identified by the memes white, male, rational, Western.

Generally, Albrecht Dieterich's book *Mutter Erde* (1905) and Åke Hultkrantz's essay 'The Religion of the Goddess in North America' (1983) have gone largely unchallenged. But then the patterns and categories of the great essentialist and patternist works remain, for some, authoritative and embraced even when specific examples are occasionally challenged. I suggest that it is because the terms that mark the categories or patterns function as memes, or perhaps meme sources, and are thus enforced and protected by a conspiracy of silence.

As a marker of Native American collective identity, Mother Earth names something generic and primal, although unelaborated, to which culturally specific traditions might be implicated and incorporated. There is a conspiracy of silence related to both the surface limitations of the name as well as the marked incongruity of the generic name with the array of specific associated cultural items. When Mother Earth is identified as Pachamama or Spider Grandmother or Changing Woman, it is surely known that this identity of Mother Earth with a local figure belies an enormous incongruity of richness, yet almost never is there any challenge; silence happily prevails.

Looking back to the criticism received when I published *Mother Earth* so many years ago (see Glass 2005 for a thorough review), I now can see that I naively ignored or was unaware of this conspiracy of silence conjoined with the power of meme. That book was considered by some to be not only rude, but also certain evidence that I just plain didn't and likely couldn't get it.[10] *Mother Earth* which, in its own way, attempted to demonstrate that the figure was an important character (I'd now say meme) in the American story that included indigenous folks (both distinct cultures and an amalgam identity as Indian or Native American), scholars, and colonialists, pretty much irritated everyone. Scholars of religion that had indigenous identity harshly criticized me for being

10. This is a perhaps a common experience. I remember starting my study of religion at Chicago, prepared with degrees in math and business, taking a course on myth from Charles Long. After a few classes listening to him speak with a kind of holy reverence about this term I was confused and asked, 'Mr. Long, can you please explain to me what you mean by this word myth'? To which he immediately replied, 'If you don't know, you can't be told'.

a white male, indicating that as such I couldn't possibly comprehend Mother Earth. Consistent with the character of memes, you have to be of the group to get it. The description of indigenous ways of knowing stated by the Ojibwa ethnobotanist and Lakota astronomy professor silently carried the implication that these ways are accessible only to the indigenous. I'm pretty certain that my use of the terms meme and conspiracy will not change this evaluation. Yet, at least in the academic sphere, I still have to ask how anyone can claim to hold a worldview or ontology or epistemology that is completely closed to someone without a given identity while they themselves can claim access to both, simply on the basis of their own identity? I suggest this proposal of an exclusive ethnic ontology, spills beyond academic concerns, functioning as a strategy to coerce the acceptance of the conspiracy of silence related to indigenous identity. While I think such a proclamation is academically illegitimate, it can be comprehended by appreciating the considerable identity forming and maintaining and protecting power of the nexus name, meme, conspiracy of silence. Perhaps here, indigeneity trumps academics.

As meme Mother Earth functions effectively in many ways to create and enact identity among disparate folks conspiring together as an ensemble to use the meme to transmit identity with an unstated agreement to be silent with respect to incongruities or dissimilarities. It is the shared practice of using the meme—a highly repetitive gestural bodied self-moving process—that naturalizes it as primal and foundational.

Conclusion

When a friend of mine learned that I was writing a paper on Mother Earth, she wrote to encourage me, reminding me that there is, in her words, 'no more important subject than our Mother Earth'. Behold what conspires, breathes together, in this meme! At the moment I read it the Amazon jungles, called by many the 'lungs of the earth', were burning; Dorian was strengthening into an enormous hurricane; billions of tons of ice were melting daily in Greenland; sea levels are rising; plastic is killing sea life wholesale; microplastics pollute even the most remote areas; temperatures are rising faster than ever on record; the pristine forests of Alaska are being opened to mining and drilling; and scientists—still breathing together, conspiring to save the planet—tell us that we have but a brief time to reverse all these trends. For me the greatest source of hope is the youth around the world conspiring through memes and marches as well as embracing hard scientific fact to demand change now. 'How dare you!' they, conspiring with Greta, rightfully confront us. We gasp, a bodied foreshadowing

of what is to come. The overwhelm of all this is immediately captured, perhaps especially for an older generation, in the eco-meme, Mother Earth. Yet to comprehend and appreciate what is shifting as evident among the youth today, we might look to their memes as an important measure. Clearly these memes unite groups across the planet.

The power of this Mother Earth meme, indeed, memes in general, is its capacity to communicate critical information packaged neatly in an emotionally charged nugget that, to those who get it, seems just-so, that is, inarguable and also unquestionably authentic. It has the power to engender consensus and agreement without overt conflict. All challenges to the obviousness of the meme due to real world difference and incongruity are consistently smoothed by a conspiracy of silence. It constructs and empowers common identity among those otherwise wildly disparate.

While I've intimated something of the history and development of the name Mother Earth used as meme, I want to suggest that, like genetics in biology, memetics in culture and religion studies play a fundamental role, or ought to. Memes are communicated by mimetic repetition, gestural actions, postural orientations, and whole-bodied participation. Memes, like genes, comprise units of heredity and determinants of identity. They are passed from person to person and generation to generation by routinized highly repetitive actions. This generation and transmission of memes is a fundamental aspect of culture and religion, inseparable from our very idea of what constitutes culture and religion. To ask the meaning of memes is at once to ask the obvious since all who hold a meme in common just know. To ask the meaning of memes is also impossible to answer since the implications and nuance of a meme are often not translatable into a reasoned descriptive or explanatory statement. Memes require conspiracy; both the conspiracy of silence that forbids any questioning or discord even defying obvious evidence as well as the conspiracy that is a breathing together in repeating the meme and repeating it again in concert, a paean to identity. Memes are gesturally naturalized to provide the foundational experiential grounding for feelings of coherence and congruity and belonging and identity, always won in the context of the threat to well-being, life, and identity.[11]

11. Originally presented at Umeå University, Sweden, October 9, 2019. My thanks to Olle Sundström for the invitation. This paper has been significantly revised from its original presentation.

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