
Reinterpreting Mother Earth: Translation, Governmateriality, and Confidence

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Introduction

A ‘name’, a ‘meme’, and a ‘conspiracy’. This is how Sam Gill (2024) answers the question ‘What is Mother Earth?’ 35 years after his book *Mother Earth: An American Story* (1987) came out and created controversy among Native American intellectuals and scholars. In an updated assessment of the appearances of Mother Earth in different settings, he tackles anew the positions, the concerns, and the intersecting analytical, political, and religious moves of an asymmetrical constellation of academics, indigenous people, and environmentalists. In concert such actors call, communicate, and conspire Mother Earth into being, Gill maintains.¹

He acknowledges that his sharp observations are likely to provoke some of the stakeholders. Scholars searching for human commonalities across vast cultural differences, indigenous people upholding traditional knowledge while resisting relentless colonialism, and environmentalists trying to hinder ecological destruction and climate collapse have all been filled with urgency over the past four decades as globalization has accelerated and radically changed translocal relations, material conditions, and the prospects of the future almost everywhere. Even if he argues for a critical approach to their invocations of Mother Earth, Gill actually supports their causes. He proffers inquisitiveness and transparency, brought about through a persistent examination of sources, restless introspection, and open debate not only for

1. Studies of complex interaction between scholars, indigenous people, and environmentalists from other contexts offer insights into comparable dynamics, see for example: Conklin and Graham 1995; Brosius 1997; Clifford 2013; Cox 2014; de la Cadena 2015; Tafjord 2016a, 2016b; Ødemark 2017, 2019; Johnson and Kraft 2018; McNally 2020.

the sake of academic enlightenment but also because he believes this may enhance the chances of practical success for these historical movements and their entangled projects.

Moreover, in my view, Gill's prolonged study of Mother Earth's divergent appearances reveals gestures, exchanges, and postures that in many respects are of fundamental interest to the humanities and the social sciences. It provides insight into how calling, communicating, and constituting can work also more generally, and it prompts deliberation on the ways in which we may study such actions and the entities that they generate. Our choice of terms, however, is crucial for the impression we create. The words we use will foreground some aspects of the phenomena we investigate at the expense of other attributes. Different words also evoke different feelings. I think Gill's interpretation of Mother Earth as a name, a meme, and a conspiracy can become more compelling and perhaps less confrontational if it is supplemented with an alternative set of analytical terms. To tweak the perspective and the tone a bit, I suggest we try 'translation', 'govern-materiality', and 'confidence'. Through these terms, it is possible to reinterpret Mother Earth with Gill and highlight additional dimensions of this multi-sited case.

Translation is a recurring word in Gill's work. His mentor and friend Jonathan Z. Smith (2004) stressed that translating is an analytical strategy. It is a general method for gaining a different view of things. Smith noticed not only how scholars translate heterogeneous practices into religion, but also how translations are basic cultural, didactical, political, and religious activities. Gill's studies build on these premises, often explicitly and sometimes implicitly. To translate is to carry across, compare, exchange, replace, convey, explain. Words and meanings are translated. So are bodies and practices. And different beings. Naming involves translating, whether a being is translated into words or symbols, which then stand in for her, him, or it, or whether, as Gill asserts in the case of Mother Earth, the translation happens the other way round, insofar as she is translated or called into being by means of circulating words and signs. Anyway, translations are seldom if ever unidirectional. They tend to affect everybody who gets involved. When the same or similar words are used to name distinct beings, this can indicate a class. Yet, one being may go by different names and be associated with several classes, simultaneously or in sequence, not only across languages and separate situations but also within singular language games and dialogues. Sometimes it is not straightforward to distinguish one from the other, appellation from classification, designating from modelling, translation from creation. Our sources—or originals, if there ever was one—change as we try to grasp them

with or through something else. The Italian aphorism *traduttore, traditore* can clearly apply also when the Andean Pachamama, the Hopi Kokyangwuti, the Navajo Asdzáá Naadleehi, and other female mythic figures associated with maternity and nature become Mother Earth, and vice versa.

All of the above echoes Gill's ideas about creative encounters and appreciations of difference both as historical forces and principles for the study of cultures and religions (Gill 2019, 2021). It also resonates with a perspective the historian James Clifford promotes in *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-First Century* (2013), where he highlights the dynamism of indigenous activists, communities, and traditions across North America and the Pacific as they continue to deal with colonialisms and their tremendous consequences, including ambivalent relations to non-indigenous scholarship. Clifford suggests we can get a better understanding of contemporary indigenities if we make articulation, performance, and translation our main analytical concepts, and if we consider carefully the particular but interrelated local, regional, and international contexts in which indigeneity is made manifest. This perspective takes seriously the ever-changing expressions of indigeneity. It encourages researchers to sidestep some of the analytical traps that are embedded in assessments of authenticity, for example cultural conservatism, disregard of ingenuity, and reproduction of colonial relations.²

In *Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice across Andean Worlds* (2015), the anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena takes a more radical approach when arguing that relational beings, like Ausangate in her case, always appear 'in translation'. Beings who in some circumstances may be classified as gods, spirits, other-than-human-persons, or—to use de la Cadena's term—earth-beings are translated not only into existence but also into acting when somebody relate to them or co-labor with them. These beings thus become participants in what de la Cadena calls cosmopolitics (cf. Stengers 2005, 2010, 2011; Latour 2004; de la Cadena 2010), practices that range from the micro-transactions that individuals perform in their attempts at governing their personal bodies and environments to the collective attempts that large institutions like states, churches, and sciences make at gaining oversight of entire domains of life or even of a universe at large. Scholars, indigenous communities, and environmentalists engage in cosmopolitics at various levels and invoke relational beings of many kinds. Special or uncommon beings

2. For the development of a similar perspective in the study of religion specifically, see Johnson 2008; Kraft et al. 2020. For a multi-disciplinary conversation on performances of indigeneity, see Graham and Penny 2014.

might not be recognized by everyone who partakes in an exchange, unless these beings undergo a commoning—a process of translation that entails generalizations rather than the communication of particularities, comparison with a more familiar being, and, often, a conflation of names and categories (cf. Blaser and de la Cadena 2017).

Mother Earth, as Gill describes her, is brought forth in translations that have taken place in complex and uneven situations, involving actors that have come from different backgrounds and had divergent interests across academic, indigenous, colonial, environmentalist, religionist, and many other contexts. Whether their intentions have been analytical, cultural, didactical, ecological, political, religious, or all of this and more simultaneously, they seem to have had strong incentives for performing a commoning and upscaling of some of the special beings they speak about with other names in their distinct communities, for translating these beings in a comparable direction, for conjoining them in translation, and consequently for agreeing on a common being to rally around. In this way, in settings where Mother Earth is already known, or in places where she may bring resembling respected beings to mind, she can help her proponents increase their chances of getting heard, of becoming recognized, of making themselves understood, of having their causes taken seriously, and, eventually, of getting their preferred measures put in place.

Hence Mother Earth materializes to participate in human actors' attempts at governing specific situations. Yet she appears to be more than a mere method or a medium for the achievement of other objects. The examples Gill provides, the affective reactions his analyses trigger, and the effective transactions Mother Earth participates in elsewhere, all indicate that she materializes as an object or an organism with its own agency (cf. Chakrabarty 2000; Latour 2005; Longkumer 2018; Johnson 2021). Indeed, to many who relate to her, she is a physical being who performs physical functions, in addition to having metaphysical and metaphorical aspects. When environmentalists, indigenous people, and scholars speak about her and the things she does, they often have tangible points of reference: the planet, the ecosystem, the habitat, the immensely intricate regeneration of life, including traditional practices and knowledges. The magnitude of these composite objects or organisms should not be mistaken for vagueness or, worse, a lack of substance. One name and one meme are insufficient to communicate appropriately their size, complexity, and vitality. The referents prove too substantial. But a broad and open concept, like 'Mother Earth', may convey facets of them in sensible ways.

Bodied in matter beyond words, Mother Earth becomes solid, alive, and powerful. I find it useful to think of her as an example of

'governmentality'. Alluding to Foucault's concept of governmentality and his historical inquiries of the emergence and disciplining of Modern subjects (Foucault 2007, 2008; cf. Burchell et al. 1991), the term governmentality is devised to capture the co-constitutions of complex relational objects, bodies, or organisms and to probe their regulatory capacities. The analytical potential of this neologism is being tested in a collaborative research project called The Governmentality of Indigenous Religions, or GOVMAT for short, which has grown forth from a former project named Indigenous Religion(s): Local Grounds, Global Networks.³ The concept of governmentality is thus grounded in research on cases where Mother Earth sometimes appears. As Gill shows, she often figures as a constituent part of indigenous religious traditions, most frequently across North America but occasionally also elsewhere.

More specifically, governmentality is put forth in our project to help us scrutinize, first, how instances of indigeneities and religiosities—and their combination as indigenous religion—form and become recognized. Next, we ask: Once such complex relational bodies have materialized, how do they become actively involved in governing not only themselves but also their constituent parts, others who become associated or engaged with them, and the environments in which they take place? Finally, we inquire how these bodies become both instruments and targets of regulation. If we interpret invocations of Mother Earth as instantiations of indigenous religions, then we can put these questions directly to her.⁴ However, the same questions may be relevant when she is co-constituted as a component in other complex practices, like secular scholarship or naturalistic environmentalism, and even when we consider her not primarily as a component of something else but as a complex relational object or organism in her own right. It is important to emphasize that these questions are empirical. Each instantiation should be studied in its own context. Necessarily, the answers—what Mother Earth is and how she works, and consequently, what governmentality is and how that works—will then vary from case to case.

Take Mother Earth's appearances at the 26th United Nations Climate Change Conference, or COP26, held in Glasgow, Scotland,

3. For details about the ongoing GOVMAT project, see: <https://www.uib.no/en/ahkr/163502/govmat-governmentality-indigenous-religions>. For more about the preceding project, see Kraft et al. 2020.

4. Here we may include invocations made by Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, as well as members of any other community who may co-constitute and relate to indigenous religions in different ways (cf. Tafjord 2017, 2020; Kraft et al. 2020).

in the beginning of November 2021. The Covid-19 pandemic stopped me and many others from going there in person, but some parts of this mega-event could be followed from afar as they were broadcasted through various media. The number of scholars, indigenous people, and environmentalists who nevertheless managed to gather alongside the politicians, bureaucrats, investors, lobbyists, artists, journalists, and activists of different stripes was impressive. In the cacophony of voices and visual representations that was transmitted from their meetings and demonstrations, Mother Earth—the name and meme, or the translation and governmentality—could be observed in several instances. She appeared in slogans, speeches, interviews, songs, prayers, tweets, reports, and on webpages, posters, and banners.

Two conspicuous examples: In the preamble of the Glasgow Climate Pact, the final agreed document which contains the main political promises that were made at COP26, and which expands the international commitments made in the Paris Agreement and at previous climate change conferences, one of the first paragraphs defining the premises reads:

Noting the importance of ensuring the integrity of all ecosystems, including in forests, the ocean and the cryosphere, and the protection of biodiversity, recognized by some cultures as Mother Earth, and also noting the importance for some of the concept of 'climate justice', when taking action to address climate change, ...⁵

Here Mother Earth appears on a central stage of international politics. In this crucial document that diplomats and politicians have struggled to formulate and approve, she is translated into and recognized as somebody whose physical integrity has become a common concern of humankind, requiring special action and special justice. She is summoned in what is otherwise a secular and science-informed decision-making protocol.⁶

In comparison, at a hybrid side event on November 8, she was prominent in a quite different albeit overlapping way. 'Protecting Mother Earth: Sacred Guardianship & Ecocide Law' was the heading of this event, which included a film screening, a discussion circle, and a 'Declaration of the Alliance of Mother Earth Guardians'.⁷ It was

5. See https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/cma3_auv_2_cover%20decision.pdf (italics in original).

6. For studies of some of the roles ascribed to indigenous peoples and indigenous religious traditions in earlier UN documents, see Kraft 2017; McNally 2017; Ødemark 2019.

7. <https://climatefringe.org/events/protecting-mother-earth-sacred-guardianship-ecocide-law/>

organized by a foundation called Stop Ecocide International.⁸ On the Climate Fringe webpage, where the event was announced as ‘religious service/ritual’, the following abstract provided details in the form of two questions and one affirmation:

How can the profound traditions and practices of sacred guardianship be respected/included in the existing dominant legal system? Ecocide law reflects a factual reality (both physical and spiritual)—that if we damage the Earth, there are consequences. Could this protective law be a bridging piece towards rebalancing our relationship to Mother Nature?⁹

In this occasion, the key concepts for relating to her, and for warning about consequences if we do not relate to her responsibly, are sacredness, traditions, protection, guardianship, law, bridging, and balancing. Evident in this abstract is also her ability to translate and take many names and forms. Mother Nature being one. Mundane and supernatural at the same time, her constitution here happens at an interface of cinematic and religious media and governmental disciplines like law and ecology. Emerging at this crossroads enables her to participate in cosmopolitical transactions, or what Foucault (2007, 2008) called ‘the conduct of conduct’, across otherwise disparate fields of practice.

Before, during, and after the conference in Glasgow, she appeared in numerous interconnected situations and shapes.¹⁰ The specificities of her materiality and her involvement in governing varied with those who contributed to her articulations, with the forms of her expressions, and with the audiences who witnessed and interpreted her manifestations in different settings. She took part in many language games. She provided a space for divergent deliberations. But because the overall occasion was a United Nations Climate Change Conference, notwithstanding the metaphysical connotations she spurred, she was intervening in physical and political matters of the most concrete, common, and urgent kinds. There was widespread agreement that our livelihood on the planet is at stake. Global measures are needed.

Increasingly, it seems, Mother Earth materializes and becomes recognized in acknowledgement of this pressing fact. Human beings are certainly governing her, altering her physics as well as the ideas about her, but she is also governing us, partly responding to our

8. For information about this organization, see: <https://www.stopecocide.earth/>

9. <https://climatefringe.org/events/protecting-mother-earth-sacred-guardianship-ecocide-law/>

10. See, for example, <https://www.gcgi.info/blog/1292-cop26-glasgow-hope-and-humanity-to-save-our-mother-earth-and-nature-history-will-judge-the-complicit>, <https://www.wecaninternational.org/cop26-glasgow>, <https://www.rightsofnaturetribunal.org/tribunals/glasgow-tribunal-2021/>, and <https://wsimag.com/economy-and-politics/66945-call-for-mother-earth>.

manipulations, and partly doing her own things beyond our reach. Finding sensible compromises that take her physicality and power into account, and that translate into action, is what COP26 and similar conferences are all about. Even if Gill's intellectual challenge takes place in a significantly different context, this physical and political reality remains. Appreciating Mother Earth as governmateriality may help us strike a balance between analyzing her as a relatively recent result of the human imagination, historical encounters, and the media we use to communicate or translate our ideas, which is how Gill proceeds, and analyzing her as a complex organic object who influences our lives in infinite ways, which seems to be the inference made by most people who speak about her.

Finally, confidence. Frankly, I am skeptical about Gill's proposal of conspiracy in this context, although I acknowledge the theoretical appeal of 'breathing together' as a potential metaphor or sense of conspiracy. There are places where 'breathing together' may be interpreted as better than 'believing together', which could be a comparable derivation of confidence, for example in some traditional Bribri families living on the borderlands between Costa Rica and Panama, for whom *siwá* or 'breathing' is a key concept of vitality, spirituality, history, and knowledge, whereas belief or faith and fidelity are concepts they associate first and foremost with ideas and practices imposed by missionaries, public schools, and other colonial agents or institutions (Bozzoli 1979; Tafjord 2016a, 2016b). Yet, even there, conspiracy will come across as negative. To understand the resolute responses to critique against invocations of Mother Earth, confidence might be more constructive, especially if we take it to mean trusting and sharing.

Confidence characterized the researchers, indigenous leaders, and environmentalists who stood up for Mother Earth at the COP26 summit, some by speaking from the podiums of the official meetings, others by marching in the streets, and yet others by producing and circulating content in multiple media. That confidence is performative is also underscored by the historian Michael Wintroub (2017), who has traced how it unfolded in events brought about by a French expedition to Sumatra in the early 16th century, which is to say in a chain of early colonial enterprises, encounters, and exploitations. Confidence is something that can be given or gained but also withdrawn, in 'a balance of trust' as Wintroub puts it. Based on translations of authority, confidence can increase or diminish depending on how situations and exchanges develop. It is an aspect of sovereignty and resolve, but it comes with costs and risks. The work of the anthropologist Audra Simpson, especially *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life across the Borders of Settler States* (2014), can be read as being about practices

of confidence, performed by members of Native American communities in refusal of governmental procedures that reproduce coloniality across North America and internationally. Instead of doing the transactions and undergoing the translations that are necessary in order to become subjects of the institutions that principally control the contemporary politics of cultural recognition, the protagonists of Simpson's study prefer to trust and share what they perceive as the traditional ways and the legitimate authority of their indigenous community. For Native American and Indigenous studies, critique is imperative according to Simpson (2020), especially critique of the colonial practices that are embedded in academic disciplines since they serve not only to expand knowledge about cultures and nature but also to legitimate continuing exploitation across the globe. Confident contestations of hegemonic practices can demonstrate the enduring existence of other sovereignties and propose alternative approaches to human and natural relations, if conveyed in comprehensive or common terms.

Gill's scrutiny of manifestations of Mother Earth allows us to reinterpret them both as confident refusals of colonial approaches to divinity, society, and nature and as confident confirmations of timely changes in perspective. Maybe we could even think of confidence as another sort or layer of governmentality tangible in the events where Mother Earth is exposed? Anyhow, across such events, scholars, indigenous people, and environmentalists wear it alongside and in support of one another. Trusting and sharing are needed to realize things, to validate insights, and to contest them. Yet, confidence is always a delicate matter, which leaves space for doubt and generates new challenges. The advocates of Mother Earth and critical scholars like Gill have in common that they engage in transactions that are asymmetrical, cosmopolitical, material, metaphorical, and open-ended.

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