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Mother Earth Mythology

Sam Gill

Once the world was all water, and God lived alone; he was lonesome, he had no place to put his foot; so he scratched the sand up from the bottom and made the land, and he made rocks, and he made trees, and he made man, and the man was winged and could go anywhere. The man was lonesome, and God made a woman. They ate fish from the water, and God made the deer and other animals, and he sent the man to hunt, and told the woman to cook the meat and to dress the skins. Many more men and women grew up, and they lived on the banks of the great river whose waters were full of salmon. The mountains contained much game, and there were buffalo on the plains. There were so many people that the stronger ones sometimes oppressed the weak and drove them from the best fisheries, which they claimed as their own. They fought, and nearly all were killed, and their bones are to be seen in the sand hills yet. God was very angry and he took away their wings and commanded that the lands and fisheries should be common to all who lived upon them. That they were never to be marked off or divided, but that the people should enjoy the fruits that God planted in the land and the animals that lived upon it, and the fishes in the water. God said he was the father, and the earth was the mother of mankind; that nature was the law; that the animals and fish and plants obeyed nature, and that man only was sinful. This is the old law.

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This story was told in the late nineteenth century by a Sahaptin-speaking Native American named Smohalla, who lived in the state of Washington. He did not recognize the territory in which he lived by the name Washington. Neither did he recognize the rights to the land that Americans of European ancestry claimed—as they occupied his land, forcing him to live as an outlaw. Nor would he have recognized the word *myth* by which his story of the creation and history of his world would be called by them. The word *myth* has long been a problem for me in my study of Native American cultures. I dare not tell Native Americans that I consider their stories to be myths, for they know that in standard English usage *myth* denotes the fictitious, the unscientific, the false. Native Americans do not want their stories to be thought of as false, nor do they appreciate others claiming that their beliefs are unfounded. In recognition of and respect for Smohalla and many other Native Americans, I have tried to use the word *myth* sparingly, if at all. When I attempt to use it, I find myself spending more time and effort clarifying and defending what I mean than I do using the word in service to the study and appreciation of stories like the one told by Smohalla. I find the word *story* acceptable. It can be used along with descriptive adjectives to clarify the story type. Though often misleading, the use of the word *myth* persists.

Myth has a Western etymology, rooted in the Greek *muthos* meaning "word" or "speech" about the gods and supernatural. The classic Greek stories, as well as the ancient and sacred stories of the peoples of Asia, Africa, Melanesia, and the Americas, have been most commonly designated as myths by Westerners. The term *myth* may have a variety of meanings:

It may be thought of as a true story or a foundational underpinning of a society. Yet, the use of the word nearly always conveys a qualitative, even emotional, judgment. For many, referring to a story as a myth often bestows a special quality upon it—a spirituality, a primordiality, even a romanticism.

Curiously, we contemporary Westerners have difficulty using the term *myth* in a positive sense when referring to anything in our own culture. When applied to our own culture, the attributes of myth tend to invert. We seek to dispel our myths and to chastise those among us who believe in myths as being not of this age. Should a contemporary Westerner believe in such myths, he is charged with harboring a naive romanticism for the ancient past or indulging in a curious folk wisdom based on unscientific premises, or holding outright fallacious beliefs.

Since those whose stories we call myths do not seem to care for the term, I am curious as to why Westerners persist in using it. Perhaps the study of myth might best be focused upon those who use it—American and European writers, who reflect and influence Western culture to a significant degree.

In this essay I will examine a lineage of Western writers who have considered the Mother Earth figure as a Native American goddess. From their writing a story of Mother Earth emerges, a story ascribed to Native Americans but actually created by the writers themselves.

SMOHALLA'S ACCOUNT OF MOTHER EARTH

The story of Mother Earth begins almost concurrently with the story told by Smohalla in 1885, and a remarkable connection exists between the two. According to Smohalla's sto-

ry, "God said he was the father, and the earth was the mother of mankind," but he went on to say,

Those who cut up the lands or sign papers for lands will be defrauded of their rights, and will be punished by God's anger. . . .

It is not a good law that would take my people away from me to make them sin against the laws of God. You ask me to plough the ground? Shall I take a knife and tear my mother's bosom? Then when I die she will not take me to her bosom to rest.

You ask me to dig for stone! Shall I dig under her skin for her bones? Then when I die I can not enter her body to be born again.

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?

It is a bad law and my people shall not obey it. I want my people to stay with me here. All the dead men will come to life again; their spirits will come to their bodies again. We must wait here, in the homes of our fathers, and be ready to meet them in the bosom of our mother.

This statement attributed to Smohalla has been often and widely quoted. Moreover, it has served as the principal example scholars have used to demonstrate the Native American belief in the goddess Mother Earth. We may begin our analysis of the story of Mother Earth with an excerpt from the writings of Edward B. Tylor, sometimes credited as the father of modern anthropology. In his classic book *Primitive Culture*, published in London in 1873, Tylor proclaimed that

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.

However, Tylor cited only three, insignificant examples of its uses. These citations are therefore of little consequence in reporting major beliefs among Native Americans.

Within a decade Hubert Bancroft, undoubtedly influenced by Tylor, affirmed the view in his American publication *The Native Races* (1882). He wrote, "It seems long ago and often to have come into men's minds that the over-arching heaven or something there and the all-producing earth are, as it were, a father and mother to all living creatures."

Tylor's and Bancroft's views of the ancient motherhood of the earth received a fuller and more concrete expression in Smohalla's statement later in 1885. Shortly after he recited his story, two ethnologists, Albert Gatschet and James Mooney, who were studying cultures in the Washington-Oregon area, used Smohalla's statement to exemplify a Mother Earth theology they believed to be common to all Native Americans. These were the first of many such uses of Smohalla's statement.

In 1890, Gatschet, in an ethnography of the Klamath of southern Oregon, waxed poetic on the native belief in the earth as mother.

Among all nations of the world we find the idea, which is real as well as poetical, that the Earth is our common mother. "She is dealing out her bountiful gifts to her children, the human beings, without envy or restraint, in the shape of corn, fruits, and esculent roots. Her eyes are the lakes and ponds dis-

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seminated over the green surface of the plains, her breasts are the hills and hillocks; and the rivulets and brooks irrigating the valleys are the milk flowing from her breasts." [Gatschet did not indicate the source of this quotation.]

The Indian Smohalla [Smohalla] at Priest Rapids, on Middle Columbia River, and his numerous followers, called the "Dreamers," from the implicit faith these Sabaptin sectarians place in dreams, dissuade their adherents from tilling the ground, as the white man does; "for it is a sin to wound or cut, tear up or scratch our common mother by agricultural pursuits; she will revenge herself on the whites and on the Indians following their example by opening her bosom and engulfing such malefactors by their misdeeds." [Again, no source of the quotation given.]

The Earth is regarded by these Indians as a mysterious, shadowy power of incalculable energies and influences, rather mischievous and wicked than beneficial to mankind. The Indians ascribe anger and other passions to it, but never personify it in clearer outlines than the ancients did their *'Epa or Tellus*.

Although Gatschet's comments on the Indian belief in Mother Earth have had little popular impact because they have remained hidden away in a little-read book, they almost certainly had an impact upon James Mooney, who in 1896, just six years later, published a major study, "The Ghost Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890." His work became a widely read classic. In it Mooney not only quoted Smohalla's statement as a chapter epigraph, but he used the statement to exemplify the idea that

The earth, as the mother of all

created things, lies at the base, not only of the Smohalla religion, but of the theology of the Indian tribes generally and of primitive races all over the world. . . . In the Indian mind the corn, fruits, and edible roots are the gifts which the earth-mother gives freely to her children. Lakes and ponds are her eyes, hills are her breasts, and streams are the milk flowing from her breasts. Earthquakes and underground noises are signs of her displeasure at the wrongdoings of her children. Especially are the malarial fevers, which often followed extensive disturbance of the surface by excavation or otherwise, held to be direct punishment for the crime of lacerating her bosom.

Mooney's quotation of Smohalla and his romantically colorful description of the Mother Earth theology, which he declared to be common to "primitive races all over the world," stimulated the explosion of literature about Mother Earth that began at the turn of the century and has yet to subside.

Such eminent scholars and well-known authors as Andrew Lang, Albrecht Dieterich, Sir James George Frazer, George B. Grinnell, and Hartley Burr Alexander held the view that Mother Earth is one of the great deities of Native Americans. Yet only a few examples from tribal cultures in North America were cited as evidence for the statements made by these writers. None of these citations was as significant as nor has had the impact of the statement attributed to Smohalla. By the middle of the twentieth century, the statement had come to be a favorite used by the late eminent historian of religion Mircea Eliade in his discussion of Mother Earth. In his classic *Patterns of Comparative Religion* (1958), Eliade uses Smohalla's statement to exemplify Mother Earth

as she exists in the history of religions.

Before becoming a mother goddess, or divinity of fertility, the earth presented itself to men as a Mother, *Tellus Mater*. The later growth of agricultural cults, forming a gradually clearer and clearer notion of a Great Goddess of vegetation and harvesting, finally destroyed all traces of the Earth-Mother. In Greece, the place of Gaia was taken by Demeter. However, certain ancient ethnological documents reveal relics of the old worship of the Earth-Mother. Smohalla, an Indian prophet of the Umatilla tribe, forbade his followers to dig the earth, for, he said, it is a sin to wound or cut, tear or scratch our common mother by the labors of farming. "You ask me to plough the ground? . . . Such a mystical devotion to the Earth-Mother is not an isolated instance.

In Eliade's view, Mother Earth is an ancient goddess, pre-existing the rise of mother goddesses and fertility goddesses who replaced her during the rise of agricultural cults. Smohalla's statement, found in "ancient ethnological documents," is understood by Eliade as a relic of this "old worship." Although when he quotes Smohalla in his discussion of "Mother Earth and the Cosmic Hierogamies" in his book *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries* (1957) Eliade recognizes the recentness of the statement, he still maintains that the concept came from the very distant past.

These words [of Smohalla] were spoken not more than half a century ago. But they come to us from very distant ages. The emotion that we feel when we hear them is our response to what they evoke with their wonderful freshness and

spontaneity—the primordial image of the Earth-Mother. It is an image that we find everywhere in the world, in countless forms and varieties.

In the most recent generation of this literary lineage, the latest citation of Smohalla's statement comes from the noted Swedish authority on Native American religions Åke Hulitkrantz. His views of Mother Earth appear in his book *The Religions of the American Indians* (1979) and his essay "The Religion of the Goddess in North America" (1968). Hulitkrantz understands Mother Earth to be a deity of great antiquity. He writes:

It is an indisputable fact that the concept of the earth goddess has grown strongest among the cultivating peoples. . . Her origins may have been in the old hunting culture which ranged all through America until about 2000 B.C. and was maintained by many tribes until the last decades of the nineteenth century. Far away from agricultural peoples lived, in the state of Washington, those Sahaptin Indians whose chief in the 1880s was the dreamer Smohalla. [Hulitkrantz quotes the famed statement here.] As elsewhere, the earth deity is here represented as animatistic, at one with her substratum and yet an intimately experienced personal being. Many hunting tribes in North America manifest the same primitive belief in "our mother," "Mother Earth."

Even in this bare outline of writings on Mother Earth we find evidence of a highly interesting story. For even though Smohalla's remarks clearly speak to a specific crisis experienced by native peoples in that region during the last half of the nine-

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teenth century, they have been used again and again to document not only the religious beliefs of Smohalla, the theology of the Wanapum and other Sahaptin speakers, and the peoples native to North America or all of the Americas, but all "primitive" peoples the world over. Moreover, the statement has been used to document beliefs not only during Smohalla's lifetime but of hunting peoples some millennia ago. The resulting Mother Earth story is therefore a truly amazing story.

THE FUNCTION OF THE MYTH OF MOTHER EARTH

Although Tylor stated that "among the native races of America the Earth-mother is one of the great personages of mythology," the Mother Earth story that seems most mythic is the one Europeans and Americans have created in their writings on the statement attributed to Smohalla. Let me briefly tell this Mother Earth story.

Long, long ago there were hunting peoples who ranged throughout the world. Some of them lived in that landscape we now know as the Americas. Being peoples of so long ago, at such an early stage of development, they were very primitive. Their material cultures were undeveloped as were their mental capacities. Because of the simplicity of their minds they could not yet comprehend the complex idea of the heaven as a father, they could only conceive of the simpler idea of the earth as a mother. They could recognize parts of her body in the landscape in which they walked. The hills and hillocks were her breasts, the rivulets and brooks were the milk flowing from her breasts. The ponds and lakes were her eyes. From her body she gave

people their nourishment: roots, fruits, and plants. She took people back into her body upon their deaths.

As time went on some of these peoples developed, though they remained, compared to us, primitive, and eventually the idea dawned that the sky was a father and they came to realize that the sky, as father, and the earth, as a mother, came together as progenitors of all life.

Much, much later, though still long, long ago, as some of these people continued to develop, they finally discovered agriculture and agricultural cults arose among them. With this development the earth mother was replaced by fertility goddesses and mother goddesses who were separate from the earth itself.

Some of these ideas were known to our ancient ancestors who lived in Greece who wrote them down. These writings have been passed down to us. In this way our ancient ancestors provided us with an understanding of all of the forms that cultures and religions take as they are developing. We are now in the fullest and most advanced stage of development.

Since those archaic times many peoples and cultures developed as we have, but some did not. They remained primitive while we became civilized. Even today there are primitive people who may speak to us of the beliefs of the archaic peoples of millennia ago. Just a century ago, shortly after Washington became a state in North America, a man there spoke of the belief in Mother Earth as it existed among ancient hunters. His name was Smohalla.

This story is remarkable in several

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respects. During the last one hundred years it has gradually developed in the writings of some of our most eminent students of culture. Smohalla's single statement provides almost the only cited evidence on which to base the story. Most remarkably, the story is not about Native American beliefs at all; it is not even about Native Americans. If it were, a great many more examples from their culture would be present. Standard academic procedure used to document the presence of a trait in any culture or culture group requires the exhaustive analysis of the available data. In the case of the study of Mother Earth as one of the great goddesses in the mythology of North America, this clearly was not done by any one of these writers in the lineage outlined above. The questions that come most immediately to mind are: Do these writers' views about Mother Earth accurately represent Native American beliefs? What were these scholars really writing about? A little reflection on these writings and especially on the use made of the statement attributed to Smohalla suggests that historic and ethnographic accuracy were largely irrelevant to the Mother Earth story and in fact would lead us away from what is important about the story. We must consider both the Mother Earth story as it emerged through European and American writings and the one told by Smohalla as myths, for curiously both are stories told about the "other".

At the time Smohalla told his story, he was one of only a few hundred Native Americans in the Washington-Oregon area still holding out against American plans to confine Indians to reservations. Throughout his lifetime there had been pressures to radically transform the native way of life. Early in the nineteenth century trappers and missionaries came

into the area. Their success encouraged settlers to seek land in the Northwest Territory. By midcentury the U.S. government procured treaties that effectively removed the Indians from desirable lands. Statehood for Washington and Oregon followed. Reservation lands were reduced so that gold mining and settling could expand. Any hope held by the native peoples that they might retain their traditional way of life was destroyed when Chief Joseph was captured in 1877. Smohalla and his followers persisted in attempting to live according to these old ways. They dreamed of a time when the Americans would be destroyed and the old ways could be restored to the Indians. Smohalla and his followers practiced a ritual born of and shaped by this crisis. They met in a churchlike building and included obvious Christian ritual elements in their meetings. The story he told in 1885 must be viewed against this historical backdrop.

Smohalla's story tells of the creation of a world by a god who, in his loneliness, scratched sand from the bottom of the water that covered the world. From this sand he made the land. This god created human beings and furnished the world abundantly with plants, animals, and fish. He gave humans wings so they could travel wherever they liked. But many people came to inhabit the land, and the stronger ones oppressed the weaker ones. They drove the weaker from favorite lands and fisheries, killing most of them. This angered the god and "he took away their wings and commanded that the lands and fisheries should be common to all who lived upon them. That they were never to be marked off or divided."

Though this story is set in the time of creation, it is clearly a story about the oppression that Smohalla and the Indians suffered at the hands of the

American settlers and the U.S. government. It directly reflects the Indians' situation at the time of the storytelling. Not only does it make their oppression meaningful by incorporating it into the creation story, but it offers the hope that, as in the story, God will eventually punish the oppressors and command that the lands and fisheries be common to all.

THE MYTH OF ACADEMIA

The European-American story of Mother Earth must also be seen in its historical and cultural context. Beginning as early as the first voyage of Columbus in 1492, the European-Christian world faced constant challenges to its most basic beliefs concerning the shape and extent of the world and the nature of humankind. Since the middle of the nineteenth century with the rise of anthropology and comparative studies of culture and religion, thinkers and writers have been challenged to comprehend the patterns, themes, and ideas that would enable them not only to understand the hundreds of newly emerging or discovered cultures but also to interpret them in Western terms.

Smohalla lived in a world collapsing from the unwelcome presence of others. Europeans and Americans found their conceptions and knowledge of the world threatened by their encounters with strange and exotic peoples who were unlike themselves.

The story of Mother Earth as told by Europeans and Americans is a story of the development of human religiosity and culture. It is a story of the evolution of religious structures and forms, a story enriched by the patterns and categories derived from Western antiquity. It is a story of a society's growth from the simple to the complex, from the primitive to the civilized, from a nonliterate to a literate culture. It is a story in which

Native Americans, by virtue of the statement made by Smohalla in 1885, could be placed at a very early stage of cultural and religious development. The story of Mother Earth helps resolve the crises of the Western worldview by providing it a basis on which to incorporate the worldview of these "others."

Surprisingly, when the two stories are compared, they share more than might at first be expected. Both stories respond to a situation of encountering some "other." Both expand and develop an existing view of the world so that those "others" might be understood in such a way as to make the relationship with them meaningful, if not manageable. Both respond creatively to an encounter characterized by dominance and oppression. It is clear that both stories serve the most basic needs of the story creators and tellers. And it is clear that both articulate foundational values—unquestionable assumptions and perspectives that underlie all that is seen and done.

According to these observations I would suggest that myth should be thought of as the story on which truth is based, rather than thinking of myth as a true story. Myths are stories that articulate that which is itself not subject to verification or validation. This is a logical definition of myth, positing that in questions of truth there must be some base on which truth-judgments are made. If one could isolate that base, it would necessarily not be subject to a demand for validation. For if it were, another unquestionable base would have to be posited. If this base for truth is called *myth*, we could not ask whether myth was a true story. We would assume rather that myth is the foundation on which truth is based. Given this view of myth, we may understand why myths are set in the

Though this story is set in the time of creation, it is clearly a story about the oppression that Smohalla and the Indians suffered at the hands of the American settlers and the U.S. government.

ancient past. This kind of story has nothing to do with the historical past. The temporal setting of "in the beginning" or "long, long ago" marks the mythic quality of the story—the quality of articulating that which is most fundamental.

It is commonly thought that myths provide for human beings a vehicle by which they may return to the paradisiacal conditions of primordiality, to be refreshed in the pristine conditions of the newly created. Perhaps a complement to this view is the understanding that myths function as a means by which human beings can articulate that which is most fundamental to them through the revision and re-creation of their stories, a kind of eternal renewal. Rather than returning to the primordial era of creation, the condition of primordiality may be carried along through history to give grounding to that which, in the present, is deemed by a culture to be most fundamental, to be beyond question. Myth thereby serves the creative capacity to effectively respond to crises and change while maintaining tradition and identity. The word *return* suggests a connection between the primordial setting, which is essentially a mythic marker in a narrative, and history—a return in time to the beginning, a reversal or annihilation of history. I do not think history is reversed or destroyed in myth; rather, the experiences of history are digested and recreated through the ongoing mythic process of producing newly vitalized articulations of that which is most fundamental to any people.

It is because of mythic qualities

that the validity of neither story we have considered is subject to question. Smohalla's story has obvious Christian influence and is clearly shaped, if not wholly formed, to meet the crisis situation being experienced. But it would be senseless to argue that the story could not possibly be correct in its assertion about the creation, because it can be historically documented that the story was formulated in the nineteenth century. From the point of view of Smohalla and his followers, this story articulates the grounds upon which they can in a crisis retain any meaning in life, which means that their very lives depend upon the story.

Likewise, in terms of the Mother Earth story that emerges from European and American writings, although our first question is whether or not they are historically and ethnographically accurate, it is in one sense an inappropriate question. Were these writings primarily scholarly in character, the question would be appropriate, but they are mythic. To even suggest that Mother Earth might not have existed in the religious traditions of Native Americans or other tribal peoples throughout the world constitutes heresy. It challenges the very foundations of one of our important beliefs of the world. For Westerners, Mother Earth is not a hypothesis: She is a figure whose existence, structure, and character is the basis upon which many of the disparate and diffuse cultures cohere meaningfully. She is of our myth; she is primordial; and her story is not subject to questions of historical or ethnographical accuracy.

While it is clear that those writers who created the theology of Mother Earth had no ill intent toward Native Americans (indeed, there is abundant evidence that the opposite was often true), they nonetheless participated

in what can only be termed a logic of dominance and conquest. Native Americans have been forced to participate in this same logic. This may seem harsh, but the fact cannot be ignored.

In the story told by Smohalla, the message of dominance is clear. The story was told in the midst of a history of oppression and is about oppression. The Indians are oppressed, and the white Americans are the oppressors.

In the European-American story of Mother Earth the logic of dominance appears under the rubric of the dichotomy between primitive and civilized. Here it may be more subtle, but also more sinister.

Each taken in the context of its own historical background, both stories show the creativity not only of human beings, but of the genre and process I am identifying as myth. These stories not only share a common history, they have a common landscape and characters. The characters are not fictitious imaginings, but living human beings. Seen in this light, this logic of dominance, oppression, and conquest is not confined to the innocence of interesting stories idly told. Rather, these stories, especially the European-American Mother Earth story, articulate unquestionable principles and assumptions that have been fundamental to a long history of U.S. government policy toward Indians (characterized at best as paternalism), to a long history of missionization (that denied the religious freedom of Native Americans), and to the military and legal enforcement of the removal of Native Americans from the lands they have occupied for millennia. This mythology has articulated the categories and theories that have also shaped the academic study of Native Americans. It must be acknowledged that a logic

of domination and conquest has motivated and shaped even this academic study.

This last point is conclusively demonstrated by Anne Doueili in her article "Trickster: On Inhabiting the Space between Discourse and Story," published in *Soundings* (Fall 1984). She focuses on a century of academic study of Native American stories in which the protagonist is a trickster, a fool, a buffoon. These stories include Coyote (popularized in the Coyote and Roadrunner cartoon), Raven, Raccoon, Spider, and many others. For a century, Western scholarship has posited a common figure as appearing in all of these stories. They called this figure Trickster. The intellectual problem has been to explain how Trickster can be both wise and foolish; a player of malicious tricks as well as a hero; the epitome of rudeness, yet considered sacred. The following is Doueili's startling conclusion to a review of twentieth-century scholarship on the Trickster:

The traditional discourse about Trickster is a discourse which reflects a cultural bias; by imposing on Indian culture its own frame of concern, Western culture turns the discourse about Trickster into a discourse by Western culture about Western culture, with Trickster serving only in a nominal function so that the discussion may begin. This is a form of domination and repression of which any discourse about any "Other" must be guilty unless that discourse is self-questioning, that is, unless it involves a questioning of the very language it itself uses and a questioning of the discourse of which that language is a part. (p. 297)

Mother Earth and Trickster both owe their existence to a logic of con-

Western scholars and writers in their study of myth have been creating their own mythology.

quest and dominance; they are characters in a mythology of dominance, in "a discourse by Western culture about Western culture." In a sense, so too does the modern use of the word *myth*, for in its principal use as a category by which to understand the "other" and in our tendency to characterize myth as archaic, it participates in the logic of domination. The advice of Doueishi is well put. In a modern pluralist world, a world obviously shaped by the logic of conquest and dominance, it is essential that the language used in discourse about every "other" be analyzed. The word *myth* has become increasingly important to this discourse, and, in many of its uses and implications, it has not escaped the logic of dominance. Western scholars and writers, in their study of myth and in their creation of such figures as Trickster and Mother Earth, have been creating their own mythology. Yet they have steadfastly refused to apply the category "myth" to their own work.

Perhaps the simplest way to avoid the logic of conquest and dominance is to apply the categories usually reserved for dealing with "others" also to the task of understanding ourselves. This is what I have attempted to do, both in the way I have suggested the term *myth* be understood and in viewing as myth a lineage of Western writings on the figure Mother Earth.

Now, throwing caution to the wind, risking emotional reprisals and knowingly committing the act of heresy, I ask the question: Were the European and American writers correct in a historical and ethnographic

sense? There are many rich and wonderful female figures known in Native American stories. Some are related to the earth, but most are not. Almost none are understood as the earth personified, and those who approach this do not have a developed story tradition or ritual presence. This should not be surprising, since there are hundreds of distinct tribal cultures in North America, each with a different language, religion, and culture. How could anyone expect to find a goddess common to all in such diversity?

While in terms of the story of Mother Earth this observation is insignificant, it is important to show conclusively that Mother Earth in North America is of the myth created by Westerners, not a historic and ethnographic reality to native North Americans. But upon applying the term *myth* to the writings of our own mentors, some complex questions arise. These scholars have been authoritative because they were believed to have acquired their knowledge of "others" through careful observation and to have based their conclusions on plentiful and carefully documented sources. What is shown in the case of Mother Earth is that no North American evidence exists. Mother Earth emerges not from ethnographic documentation but from an imaginative construction. What scholars have been writing about was not the "other" at all, but about their own views of human history. As a result, the general populace, as well as scholars, now accepts without question Mother Earth as a historic and ethnographic fact in native North America and throughout the world. This raises the most fundamental questions about what constitutes responsible scholarship. What is the difference between scholarship and mythmaking, between fact and

fiction? Is there a connection between some styles of scholarship and writing, some ways of seeing "others," and oppressive political and economic perspectives? Is not the formulation of self-expression in the guise of stating knowledge about some "other" a powerful means of dominating those others? Is this activity not somehow participating in the political, social, and economic oppression of the "others" while being understood as objective observations motivated only by a humanistic interest?

A final issue is perhaps most remarkable. Among Native Americans today there is much evidence of a deep and abiding belief in a figure they identify by the name Mother Earth. She is often paired with Father Sky, the Great Spirit, or the Creator. Examination of the history of this figure shows that she arose in the process of the formation of the pan-Indian or pantribal alliance among Native Americans who, in this century, have increasingly forged a common identity in the face of a common experience of oppression and loss. As Indian peoples lost the land base on which their various tribal identities depended, the Mother Earth figure grew in importance among them.

What seems to have happened is that the oppressed Native Americans have appropriated the mythology of their oppressors. Indians acquired what they knew to be expected of them, a belief in a figure known as Mother Earth. But, as often happens with the oppressed, the Indians transformed the Mother Earth concept through their own creative mythic processes to articulate for them what was most fundamental; that has been

the survival of their identity as Indians even without tribal lands, without continuing tribal identity, and without tribal languages.

Mother Earth arose among Western writers so that Native Americans could be understood and somehow likened to white men. By identifying Mother Earth as a major figure in Indian mythology, these writers were able to place Native Americans in a schema of the evolution of cultures and religions in which those representatives of Western civilization stood at the top. In contrast, Indians in recent decades have, through their appropriation of Mother Earth, attached to her the qualities that articulate distinctively "Indian" in contrast to and clearly superior to "white" American attributes. Indians are of the earth (specifically of the American soil); they care for and nurture Mother Earth, who in turn cares for and nurtures them. They do not plow or mine, tear, waste, or desecrate the earth as they see "white" Americans doing. Thus Mother Earth helps Indians retain their identity, their pride and dignity. By holding Mother Earth as their goddess, Native Americans have articulated what is most distinctively Indian, and they have done so by appropriating and transforming the myth of their oppressors.

Mother Earth, as she currently exists in Indian religions, is primordial, a creator, a nurturer, a bona fide goddess in every sense of the word, even though we may understand that historically her origins are not only very recent, but doubtless owe much to the mythic views of Westerners on Mother Earth. ■

What scholars have been writing about was not the "other" at all, but about their own views of human history.