[*JSRNC* 18.2 (2024) 237–253]
https://doi.org/10.1558/jsrnc.27454

JSRNC (print) ISSN 1749-4907
JSRNC (online) ISSN 1749-4915

Submitted: 2023-11-01 Accepted: 2023-11-28

Comments on Responses to 'What is Mother Earth?'

Sam Gill

University of Colorado, Colorado, USA
gills@colorado.edu

In the fall of 2019, Professor Olle Sundström invited me to lecture at Umeå University, Sweden. I was surprised that he was familiar with my book *Mother Earth: An American Story* (1987a) and he asked me to lecture on this topic among others. I welcomed the chance to reflect once again on the topic as part of my end of career and life wrap up, hopefully offering new ideas and perspectives on the topic seasoned by the intervening decades during which I explored many topics such as Australian Aboriginal history and religions; dancing in cultures far and wide including operating my own dance studio where I taught, choreographed, and performed Latin American social dancing; religion theory; religion and technology; human self-moving from philosophical, biological, and practical perspectives; gesture, posture, and prosthesis; skill and mastery; the legacy of Jonathan Z. Smith; among other passions. The essay 'What is Mother Earth? A Name, A Meme, A Conspiracy' resulted from my rediscovering and revision of the Umeå University lecture. I thought that the various issues raised including identity formation in the areas of academia, Indigeneity, and ecology movements might well fit the *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture*, so I contacted my friend Bron Taylor, the Editor-in-Chief of this journal, to see what he thought. I was delighted by his suggestion, following peer reviews, to publish the piece with several invited responses from appropriate scholars. I'm pleased that now my comments on those responses will complete the process. Throughout my career I've enjoyed the critical responses to my work. I always learn much and these creative encounters have served the much-appreciated complement to the solitary work that characterizes the academic life, at least mine. I thank Bron Taylor, Olle Sundström, Bjørn Ola Tafjord, Greg Johnson, Joseph A. P. Wilson, and Matthew Glass for their valued contributions.

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As I prepare to make a few brief comments on each of the responses I feel it valuable to state as clearly as I possibly can, if briefly, the background and thesis of my article.

My interest is in the history and development of the use of the English language name 'Mother Earth' as it came to be used as part of a core strategy in the identity formation of Indigenous people as a collective, certain communities of academics who have done comparative studies of cultures, and the ecology movement especially in the context of the awareness of the potentially disastrous changes in climate that threaten the planet and all life.

From the outset of my studies decades ago, I persistently acknowledged and affirmed that a great many (perhaps all) cultures (peoples/communities) throughout history have developed intimate relationships with the territories (Gill 1998b: 298–313), the lands, on which they live and have lived and on which they depend for subsistence and identity. These relationships are often concretized in gendered personified forms. I now see this pervasive connection to land as an aspect of the ubiquitous human sense that identity is inseparable from indigeneity (lower case). The word 'indigenous' (lower case) originated in the 1640s indicating 'born or originating in a particular place', from Latin *indigena* 'sprung from the land, native', literally 'born in a place'. This centuries' old term includes those who identify themselves in terms of their birthplace and since we are all born of mothers, the place, the land, the territory, has strong connection with motherhood. Our contemporary common question regarding another's identity is, 'where are you from?' The typical response is to identify ourselves with specific land places, often personified at least to the extent of considering the land as gendered, and almost invariably feminine.

Given the broad historical and cultural propensity for identity markers being connected with mother and birthplace or homeland, I felt that the specific renderings of this identity marker had to be as diverse, rich, complex, and varied as are the landscapes, cultures, languages, religions, traditions, kinship systems, art, architecture, and all things cultural. This gendered land-connected strategy of forming, enculturating, and perpetuating group identity can be theological, metaphorical, symbolic, nominal, or utterly objective. The whole of comparative culture studies is founded on the proposition of some commonness that constitutes typologies, tendencies, or patterns. Yet this sameness necessary for comparison must be paired with honoring and treasuring the differences that distinguish specific cultures/peoples. Comparison is necessarily the copresence of sameness and difference in the context of the comparer's choice of terms. To me the essential diversity and distinctness among cultures is fundamental and any thought of

denying differences among cultures is to dishonor the people of distinctive cultures, to deny their identity. It also threatens our academic enterprise. Why study different cultures or even acknowledge specific cultures if our very method of study is designed to show that they are somehow all the same and that difference is but the accident of manifestation? In *Mother Earth* I described many individual distinct cultural examples and included a 'Bibliographical Supplement' (1987a: 181–91) citing sources for each of these examples.

My mother earth studies have had another complementary focus, that of this current essay, on how the proper English term/name 'Mother Earth' has come to be an identity marker for the 1) common identity among highly diverse cultures in various regions (USA, Native American, Australia, Indigenous), 2) academics (such as my former renowned teacher Mircea Eliade and my late friend Åke Hultkrantz) who insisted that there is some universal theological figure common to large regions of diverse peoples/cultures (if not all cultures throughout human history), and 3) the contemporary ecological movement drawing together large numbers of diverse communities across the globe with a common purpose and identity.

My interest in this essay is not the varying culturally specific and distinct forms of some named female expression of indigeneity already granted. To be as clear as possible on my concern, I shift from the more common 'who?' to the more functional and banal 'what?' I have suggested that the history of uses, adoptions, and functioning of a name, a common proper name in a specific language, that is the English 'Mother Earth', might be an effective way of engaging my concern. And since I have been interested in identity formation of alliances among highly diverse and disparate groups of folks (see, e.g., Gill 2018: 47–56) I have felt that the common and popular notion of meme (that means 'a unit of cultural transmission') serves well largely because it is widely embraced for its efficient and powerful work of carrying specific group identity markers. Memes have in their very use the evidence of inside/outside identity distinction. Those who 'get' our memes are 'us', those who don't are not![1]

Finally, given that there is often expressed continuity between historical and culturally distinct specific markers of indigeneity related to land, place, earth, and mother, I have felt it essential to show that such selective connections of specific and distinct cultural markers of

1. As a quick contemporary example, the term 'woke' is used to divide the US politically in sharp terms. No one seems to know or bother to indicate what the term exactly means, yet it is invoked constantly, in machete fashion to identify political position and separation.

indigeneity with the proper name 'Mother Earth' are highly appropriate. Yet, this loose association (even identity) of a meme-functioning name held by the amalgam of diverse groups with an explicit cultural historical figure requires holding at once the two as being the same while knowing full well that they are unquestionably different. I argue that the distinctive functioning of memes depends on willingly ignoring the difference. I suggest this silence amounts to a conspiracy—framed positively as part of the group life (breath) identity formation—to avoid unnecessary distractive incoherence. It is also an example of what I consider a distinctively human capacity, one from which flows the power of all things human, which is to hold that one thing is the same as another thing when we know all along that it is not.

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As Greg Johnson notes, we have had a decades' long and mutually beneficial relationship. Since my retirement and Greg's move to University of California, Santa Barbara I have missed our conversations and am pleased for this opportunity, if a bit impersonal in print and without the treasured back and forth of friendly conversation. Greg, as few others are, is aware of the breadth and passion of my work over the decades, and I appreciate his kind assessment and his thoughtful overview. I also appreciate Greg's acknowledgment that most of what I have done has been outside of established academic groups. As a known and respected scholar of Native American religions, especially Hawaiian religion and the law, he has been distinctly positioned to witness the old controversy stirred by *Mother Earth* (1987a) and to offer informed, balanced, and compassionate analysis. I appreciate and treasure his comments.

Greg is absolutely right to be disappointed that this article offers no new evidence or examples to advance and refine my old argument as he'd hoped. It also, as he points out, may disappoint in offering no attempt at new defense against old critics. Olle Sundström's invitation to lecture on Mother Earth served as a reminder of an annoying itch, ignored for decades, that in my late career/life might feel good to scratch. While I have recently written several articles in the area of Indigenous religions (Gill 2018[2]; 2020a), they have not involved

2. See especially 'Not by Any Name' (pp. 47–56); 'Mother Earth and Numbakulla' (pp. 59–68); 'Storytracking the Arrernte through the Academic Bush' (pp. 69–92); 'Mother Earth: An American Myth' (pp. 93–106); 'They Jump Up of Themselves', (Australian Aboriginal) (pp. 137–46); and 'As Prayer Goes So Goes Religion', (Navajo) (pp. 147–66).

on-the-ground primary research. My research focus shifted elsewhere in the 1990s. Perhaps, apart from scratching an itch, my principal motivation for thinking this essay worthy of publication is that, as Greg notes, I have long believed that the contribution of my work decades ago was obscured, even ignored, by controversy, and I continue to believe that a careful consideration of those issues might still be important. The article might serve, as Greg acknowledges, as valuable to those who have not read *Mother Earth* or followed the old responses. Yet rather than a summary or rehash, I have sought to state my argument clearly and cogently and to offer provocative terms for its new consideration. In his response Greg, as does Bjørn Ola Tafjord, notes that my choice of terms may have thwarted my efforts yet again. Point taken, yet I do have comments to argue their value. Greg is rightly disappointed that I have not adequately included recent developments in Indigenous communities, which admittedly are vast and rich and complex, in this article. I suppose that one might, in Greg's terms, do a cost-benefit analysis on the worthiness of this essay being published.

My choice of the terms 'name', 'meme', and 'conspiracy' was made consciously with much consideration. At this stage in my career/life I've grown weary of academic writing styles which I often find overly tedious and employing such specialized terms that few beyond in-group academics find readable and relatable. I have published many books and articles and feel that they have been read by so few and most of the folks I care most about would find them tedious and boring, even though all my writing has been in pursuit of my passion and my belief that I was engaging topics of importance. I've also grown impatient with the common academic eagerness to 'find something to be disturbed about', in the reading of colleagues' work. Although my experience may be rather tainted. My choice of the terms 'name' and 'meme' was made largely because of their banality and ubiquitous use in popular culture. I had hoped that any reader might find these words friendly. I chose the term 'conspiracy' for several reasons. First, many years ago, Tony Swain wrote a remarkable essay about the history of Mother Earth in Australia titled 'The Mother Earth Conspiracy: An Australian Episode' (1992). I found his use of the word 'conspiracy' provocative and re-orienting in the same way that I have always found much of Jonathan Z. Smith's writing. It forces one, in its evocation of the unexpected, to rethink and to reconsider. It has power as it surprises. Another reason for choosing the word is that I truly love occasions when we learn that words we use with certain senses of meaning and implications have in their etymological roots quite different and often inspiring (ahem!) meanings and implications. In my recent writings I often study the etymologies of key terms, being thrilled by the

discoveries of nuances and even oppositions that I find provocative and insightful. It thrilled me to discover that 'conspiracy' is, though obvious, rooted in 'to breathe' and is related to such words as 'inspire'. I admit I simply couldn't resist invoking this term for effect. And finally, I chose the term because as I explored the power and work the name Mother Earth exerts when considered as meme, I found that it is necessarily accompanied by the tacit agreement—that is, conspiracy—not to raise questions of difference. I'll explain further, since this point didn't seem sufficiently evident in my essay.

Johnson does what he calls a 'cost-benefit analysis' of my choice of words, concluding that 'the surface-level potential for misunderstanding and possible escalation of prior tensions around his work are simply too great to warrant adoption of these frames in this context'. Considered in the politically charged arenas of Indigenous political and legal discourse, his conclusion may be accurate. It is the same point Glass makes in suggesting how some Crown lawyer might interpret my essay. I will argue that even in the context of this discourse there is benefit.

Johnson offers an alternative to one of my contentious terms, yet, unlike Tafjord who also has concerns about my choice of terms and frames of reflection, he doesn't offer a detailed discussion of the benefits. He suggests that 'trope' is a more effective term than 'meme'. Trope, more obscure and technical perhaps, is a figurative or metaphorical use of a word or expression. Trope suggests an involved process of presenting Mother Earth as *figurative*, that is, not real, or as a figure of speech in which Mother Earth is, as is the definition of *metaphor*, applied to an object which it is not. The thing I like about meme is that it pretty much is what it is, a unit of cultural transmission. It is surface and uncomplicated. It occupies refrigerator magnets and bumper stickers and protest signs. It captures in a simple name, 'Mother Earth', the core expression of 'us', of 'who we are'. At the very beginning of my Mother Earth studies, my students gave me a Mother Earth bumper sticker that I kept displayed in my office for decades. The name appears along with simple representations of planet Earth on placards in Save the Earth Protests. As I suggest, the very basic function of meme is itself the marker of identity. If you 'get' it, you get it and all those who do experience in the 'getting' a common expression of culture that is easily transmitted without need for pledges, initiations, explanations, questions, or creeds. It is simple. It is what it is. It seemingly effortlessly carries the weight of forging identity among vastly diverse folks.

Johnson seems to hold a view of culture and religion that suggests to me something overly sober and formal, maybe a bit old fashioned.

He considers meme as violating these idealized criteria, writing, that 'the social media-inflected resonance of meme can't help but dominate in peoples' perceptions—snappy, caricatured, and packaged for short attention spans. This is hardly how Indigenous people wish to think of their cherished figures'. I suggest that, if anything in the current world is clear, it is the pervasive power of social media. The average daily time spent on social media is two and a half hours. Almost all organizations beyond the most local (and even these, as I observe folks texting the person sitting beside them) rely heavily on the snappy, caricatured, and emoji-rich messages of social media. The 'cherished' figures and ideas of most folks happily and eagerly play a major role in their social media. Memes, units of cultural transmission, create common identity among diverse folks the world over via Facebook groups, Twitter (X) threads, hashtags, websites, on and on. How is it even possible for members of the current global community of Indigenous Peoples (or academics with common concerns or those around the world wishing to save the planet) to communicate with and identify with one another apart from social media? Memes are not restricted to cute kitten posters or pithy humorous quips. As units of cultural transmission, memes have, in their immediacy and communicability, the power to create and mark communities of broadly separated and diverse parties.

Where meme exists, I argue, so too does conspiracy. Consider a Navajo woman who is active in her Navajo community and is politically active in the global work of Indigenous peoples' organizations. In her Navajo community, she is very familiar with Changing Woman (*Asdzáá Naadleehi*). She has likely had a coming-of-age ceremony, *kinaaldá*, during which she was identified with Changing Woman. She has likely attended many Blessingway ceremonies that also focus on Changing Woman. She doubtless knows the many stories of Changing Woman. Yet in this Navajo woman's online discourse and when she attends meetings and rallies of Indigenous peoples, she may refer to Mother Earth. If asked, especially by some outsider, if Mother Earth is Changing Woman, she will likely agree full well knowing that they are the same, but also not the same. Yet, the way memes function in this context, as I understand them, such dissonance is tacitly understood as being not at issue. This uncontested copresence of distinct referents is the power of the meme. I see this example as similar to the conspiracy that occurs among modern Christians. In their religious community they profess 'in the beginning God created heaven and earth'. In their secular life they feel no tension embracing as factual that the universe began thirteen billion years ago. The cosmology of the physicist is also presented as a 'story'. I call it a story to indicate that even this scientific account includes meme/conspiracy. The main event in this story is

commonly referred to as the 'big bang'. 'Big' is a relative term, so with there being nothing at the beginning what could the word 'big' possibly mean? 'Bang' is 'a sudden loud noise' yet no one with the capacity to hear existed for thirteen billion years. 'Big Bang' is a meme scientist as well as folk use to embrace a common remarkably complex finding of physics that may overtly contradict the same folks' religious views. Yet, the power of the meme is linked with the conspiracy to ignore these differences. We simply conspire to not ask the obvious questions.

I have recently focused extensively on this capacity to hold two things to be the same while knowing all along that they are not. I have come to call it an 'aesthetic of impossibles' and I see it as distinctive to being human, built into our distinctive biology (see, e.g., Gill 2020b; 2021; 2023). It is a core factor in comparison, the most fundamental operation in the acquisition of knowledge. It is essential to language, art, symbolism, ritual, mythology, story, poetry. Here I consider it operative in the joint operation meme/conspiracy.

Johnson concludes, 'if Mother Earth is in some sense metonymic of the global Indigenous movement, then both need to be viewed as being something more than a name, meme, or conspiracy'. I think it is his words 'something more than' that concern me in that at a minimum they connote some slight or irresponsibility unavoidable in my choice of terms. I see this suggestion present as well in Glass's response. I can't help but wonder if a bit of romanticism as well as a limited view of meme is behind the conclusion that 'something more' is needed than my description of how meme, necessarily conjoined with conspiracy, is at the heart of the successful creation of nationwide alliances of Native Americans and global alliances of Indigenous peoples as well as Ecology and Save the Planet movements. The point of my study is to lift the reality of Mother Earth and show how the immediate and unquestioning embrace of her as name functioning as meme creates identity in situations that are remarkably complex involving enormous diversity among those who experience a common identity even allowing the identity of Mother Earth with specific cultural ideas and figures.

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For some time, I have admired Bjørn Ola Tafjord's scholarship. I had the pleasure in 2019 to be hosted by him on an amazing hike among reindeer in the tundra above of the Arctic Circle north of Tromsø. I have admired and learned much from the work produced by 'Indigenous Religion(s): Local Grounds, Global Networks'—a multi-year project Tafjord did much to initiate and to which he has made regular

contributions—that brought scholars together (Greg Johnson among them) whose studies span Indigenous cultures around the globe. His studies are also based on his field research in Costa Rica (where incidentally I spent time studying salsa dancing), his deep knowledge of the literature on Indigenous peoples as well as of the academic study of culture and religion. His interests and knowledge extend to the history and operations of global and local ecological movements and how they intersect with Indigenous concerns. His response to my article titled 'Reinterpreting Mother Earth: Translation, Governmateriality, and Confidence' is deeply gratifying to me. I am pleased by his precise grasp of and focus on my core ideas. I find his offering and exploration of 'alternative and supplemental' terms and perspectives to be welcome and valuable. I'll briefly elaborate.

In my comments on Johnson's response, I offered explanation of my reasoned choice of terms as well as extended remarks on why I continue to believe that name, meme, conspiracy remain important. I appreciate Tafjord's detailed exposition of his recommended alternatives 'translation', 'governmateriality', and 'confidence'. I am pleased by the expansion and clarity they bring to what I had hoped to engage. I especially think that translation, also developed by Sundström, is lucid and insightful. While I have the concern that neologisms such as Foucault's 'governmateriality' seem unnecessarily specialized and jargony, Tafjord's explanation and exemplification, especially including the ecology example from the 26th United Nations Climate Change Conference, is clear and demonstrates its value in decisively offering a positive and constructive discourse regarding sensitive issues. As he writes, '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'. Tafjord's suggestion of 'confidence' as an alternative to 'conspiracy' is thoughtful and insightful, yet I think that, given how I understand the remarkable power of meme to build common identity among vastly different folks, conspiracy is the correct term to show the important necessity to embrace at once sameness and difference. I am sympathetic to Tafjord's and Johnson's concerns that my terms 'meme' and 'conspiracy' may for some readers 'come across as negative'. I hope that my further discussion of the terms may quell some of that skepticism. In sum, I believe Tafjord's alternatives offer important and welcomed expansions and complements, with clear academic rigor, to the terms I have offered.

Since the publication of *Mother Earth*, what I had hoped would be a positive and constructive discussion has been marred and obscured by controversy. I am grateful that perhaps one thing Tafjord's response

might accomplish is to move the important issues I've attempted to address regarding Mother Earth away from their association with me and my framing of them.

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The bulk of Joseph Wilson's response is his offering a variety of specific cultural and historical examples to establish that an 'ancient North Eurasian concept was transferred naturally through integrated population systems which spanned both continents during historical antiquity'. As I understand Wilson, his examples illustrate what for me is the common role of indigeneity (being born to a specific land) as an identity marker. In my essay I grant this as a given. In my 1986 book, I surveyed a number Native American cultures to demonstrate the presence of earth and mother related identity markers each being distinct and richly elaborated in culturally distinctive terms. My difference from Wilson is that where he sees one, I see many; where he sees sameness, I see diversity and distinction.

On Wilson's response I have but a couple specific concerns. He constantly refers to what he terms 'Mother Earth concept'. So far as I can tell, he does not give any explicit content or development to this concept. While the common notion of 'concept' is an 'abstract idea', I have argued in *The Proper Study of Religion* (2020) that all concepts are corporeal, that is, concepts are born of sensory bodied experience. Thus, I simply don't understand how Wilson's term 'Mother Earth concept' can be somehow given prior to the explicit bodied historical studies of widely ranging distinct cultures. To me it seems necessary to Wilson's analysis that this 'concept' must be of his invention rather than the result of the comparative study of specific examples. Following upon this top-down approach is the issue of how to reconcile the enormous diversity given detailed specificity in so many cultures as somehow being all the same, that is the 'Mother Earth concept'. Wilson's strategy is to invoke what he describes as 'multiethnic cultural continuum' as the operative cultural/historical force in forging sameness among this diversity. To amass adequate evidence to convincingly support the idea of a common element across vast historical and geographic expanses requires more top-down academic pressure than I'd be willing to embrace.

Finally, regarding Wilson's response, and for me the most concerning, is his understanding of my article and the claims I make. He reports that I claim '"Mother Earth" is not originally an Indigenous concept, but a borrowed one, conflating and homogenizing numerous local and global religious traditions'. And further that I claim 'that the notion of

one universal Mother Earth, who permeates all indigenous religions, is an indefensible generalization rooted in 20th century "armchair anthropology"'. And that I 'argued that "Mother Earth" as a supreme deity—popularly identified with "Native American" religion in general—is not anciently indigenous to the Americas, but is instead the product of a late modern universalizing syncretism between particular localized Indigenous and globalizing Euro-American folk-deities'. Most of these statements were not ones I proposed as my views but rather are my reporting of various ways the name Mother Earth has been used by others. I often critically discuss and elaborate on these historical uses. I reported these statements to demonstrate the 'challenge' of the topic, not my conclusions. Wilson simply, at least to me, misreads this section of my article. Quickly, in this article I consider Mother Earth as a name and a meme, neither as a concept nor a supreme deity. While I think the universalizing of the term 'Mother Earth' by patternist anthropologists and religion scholars amounts to more of an academic theology than to legitimate scholarship and I think it bears considerable colorings of primitivism and imperialism, I none the less understand, as I explicitly discussed, that from a largely Christian, if tacitly so, perspective the sheer cultural diversity revealed by the nineteenth century ethnographic project led to strategies of retaining some sense of coherence by academics creating common patterns. Mother Earth was used—constructed and exemplified and discussed—in service to retaining identity for the modern Western world in the face of overwhelming diversity. This is in retrospect, to me, academically 'indefensible' yet culturally consistent with the strong forces to defend and articulate one's identity in the presence of others. I do not believe that the contemporary formation of a common collective identity among many highly distinct and diverse cultures occurred. I consider the very idea questionable at best. I'm also stunned that Wilson does not even acknowledge, much less consider, the core of what is distinct to this article: name, meme, conspiracy, and the shift from 'who?' to 'what?'.

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Matthew Glass's response raises the highly important concern of the impact that academic studies of culture may have on the real subjects of our studies, on practical matters. I have long been concerned with this issue, finding it essential to the very justification of the work that we do. My book *Storytracking: Texts, Stories, and Histories in Central Australia* (1998a) considered this matter in detail. It is addressed again and again in my books *Creative Encounters, Appreciating Difference* (2018) and *The Proper Study of Religion* (2020). Hugh B. Urban (2001)

acknowledged my concern in 'Scholartracking: The Ethics and Politics of Studying "Others" in the Work of Sam D. Gill'. Glass's focus is the arena of land claims made by Indigenous peoples in Canadian courts of law that include the invocation of Mother Earth as an aspect of documenting claims to ancestral lands. I couldn't agree more strongly with Glass's proposition that academic work must be sensitive to and aware of the potential that it will impact those who are subjects of the study. There is much wisdom in Glass's quotation of C. P. Snow, 'a scientist has to be neutral in his search for the truth, but he cannot be neutral as to the use of that truth when found'. However, as we are reminded in the recent attention to J. Robert Oppenheimer, unfortunately the extent and nature of the impact of the use of our work often cannot be anticipated. That is why I am grateful for Glass's detailed description of the Canadian land claims situation and what he thinks might occur. There are several issues related to Glass's reading and response that I must address.

Authenticity is the core of Glass's concern with my article. He writes, 'put bluntly, the practical upshot I fear readers will draw from Gill's work is the conclusion that Indigenous people invoking Mother Earth in various contexts are being inauthentic'. Glass examines my use of language in the part of my article I subtitle 'Mother Earth: The Challenge' focusing on such phrases as 'so-called Indigenous cultures', 'appear as victims', 'claim to kinship with the land', and that invoking Mother Earth 'associations assisted in establishing a sense of primordiality and spirituality for Mother Earth'. Focused on these examples Glass concludes, 'if my reading is fair here, it leads me to suspect, as I said above, that the practical implication of Gill's argument is the necessary conclusion that Indigenous invocations or references to Mother Earth are inauthentic expressions of their beliefs, practices and histories'. I don't understand Glass's reasoning or his evidence. The term 'so-called' simply means 'commonly identified'. The use of the term 'victim' seems entirely accurate when it indicates, in Glass's case, a party deprived of ancestral lands attempting to get it back against the awesome powers of the Crown. To invoke Mother Earth and any culturally specific evidence of the importance of ancestral lands to identity is, I would think, a fundamental argument for authenticity of the claim made. Further I have gone to great lengths to do all I can to affirm the wide and ancient cultural presence of the invocation of land and a motherhood connection with land as a core way in which people construct and value and perpetuate their specific identity, obviously unquestionably authentic. I have done much to show that the history (restricted to the US) of the use of the English name 'Mother Earth', beginning with the nineteenth century example of Smohallah, has been

an effective strategy to communicate how essential to life and identity are specific ancestral lands. I have furthermore made, as the central argument of this paper, that the modern use of the English name 'Mother Earth' is a powerful and unquestionable way in which, used as meme, this name builds common connection among widely diverse parties, and it foregrounds the common experience of the theft and loss of ancestral lands. This is the case for Native Americans. It is the case for Indigenous peoples. Incidentally the function of the capitalized term 'Indigenous' is parallel to Mother Earth and to the modern ecological movement in creating this collective identity among disparate groups. I am well aware that in recent years there has been much interest in authenticity, rightly so, since disinformation and deep fakes are ubiquitous. Yet in its modern use, the word 'authentic' implies that the contents of the thing in question correspond to the facts and are not fictitious hence indicating they are 'trustworthy, reliable'. I think there is no question that prior to the existence of the Crown (or the US government or the Australian government, and all governments with colonizing histories) a great many cultures lived on and identified themselves with the very lands later taken from them. This seems an indisputable fact, yet of course I appreciate that this very factuality is at the center of the Canadian land claims cases Glass reviews.

What I find notable in the detailed examination of actual cases before the Crown is that Glass seems to embrace provisions of the Crown's law as unimpeachable. For example, when Glass addresses the Crown's requirement that land claims must show 'direct continuity with traditions and practices', he seems not to question the authenticity of the Crown's insistence that 'centrality and significance prior to European contact only meets the burden of proof if this can be established through rigorous cross-examination of courtroom testimony regarding textual sources—weighted more heavily than oral'. I would think that Glass's attention would be to argue the inauthenticity of the Crown as evidenced here. Clearly the very history of land law regarding indigenous or ancestral lands of colonizing governments is designed to justify their seizure and occupation of these lands. It is utterly inauthentic to demand written documentation to demonstrate such history of a people whose language has not, until recently (if then), been written.

Glass's concern that my work might be read by a Crown lawyer as evidence of the inauthenticity of Mother Earth concludes with him making three suggestions for me to rectify my errors. Apart from my feeling that this would be a blatant misreading of my work—how does one anticipate misreadings?—his suggestions must be considered. The first suggestion is that I proclaim that 'scholarship, along with science,

is neutral in regard to social and political matters'. The second, that I 'acknowledge that the practical impact of his [my] work on Mother Earth does entail moral and political questions'. And finally, he suggests the possibility that he might not have adequately understood my 'underlying assumptions' in which cast he feels, speaking of my need for revision, that I should 'indicate how he [I] might imagine his work leading not simply to our coming to "appreciate" the subjective play of a meme, but rather also relating to the ongoing efforts of Indigenous communities struggling to address their many political and legal challenges, while continuing to invoke Mother Earth as they do'.

Scholarship is never neutral on anything. Surely the whole point of trying to advance knowledge is to offer information and perspectives—hopefully insights—that might beneficially influence the world. Yet no writing can adequately predict or determine all possible readings. Certainly, modern literary theory is clear that when something is written and published, no matter what restrictions and warnings and declarations of proper use are included, the author has no control over how it is read or used. Readers will read a work in the context of their own interests, backgrounds, and needs. This is evident in Glass's reading of my paper as well as his anticipated reading of some hypothetical Crown lawyer. Academics must be as responsible and clear as they possibly can knowing that what they publish is open to being used by others in unimaginable ways. Glass's call that I should anticipate 'ongoing efforts of … communities … [in order] to address their many political and legal challenges!' reminds me of the proposition at the core of my book *Creative Encounters, Appreciating Differences* (2018). Therein I argued that academic discourse is ongoing as are the uses made of it and that the tenor of our ongoing work should be that the discourse be done in good faith, with a sense of responsibility, and a desire to see differences as vitalizing and enriching. I see this as being effected in this exchange. This is how the practical application of academic work should occur, rather than some disparaging assumption that the parties are purposefully antagonists.

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Olle Sundström gets immediately to the larger implications he sees associated with my article. He sees the issues I have addressed as clarified by locating them in the context of the comparative study of cultures and religions. He cautions that in comparison one must 'not … project traits from one member (say, *Pachamama*) of a chosen category or type (say, a fertility goddess) to another (say, *Asdzáá Naadleehi* or Changing Woman)'. It is perhaps useful to recall Jonathan Z. Smith's

articulation of the structure of comparison as involving the juxtaposition of two or more items that are different from one another in terms of some similarity brought by the interests of the one doing the comparison. Sundström noted that 'often times these concepts [that frame comparison] were concocted by Europeans, usually as an attempt to understand and interpret, but sometimes also to denigrate or honor (romanticize) a certain cultural expression'. A comparison might juxtapose Hopi *Kokyangwuti* (Spider Grandmother) and Navajo *Asdzáá Naadleehi* (Changing Woman) in terms of a concept (say mother earth) concocted by the academic comparer. The items compared come from specific cultures and are different and distinct. They are compared in terms of the traits of a concept or category brought and concocted by the one doing the comparison. A common unfortunate result of comparison is to assert the primacy of the category of comparison over the reality/authenticity of the items compared by denying (explaining away or ignoring?) the differences. The concept is projected onto the exempla. Hopi Spider Grandmother and Navajo Changing Woman, disappear in their cultural distinctiveness, simply becoming Mother Earth.

Styles or uses of academic comparison have often been distinguished as some preferring 'sameness', others 'difference'. The great patternists and the essentialists, such as Mircea Eliade, clearly sought sameness, preferring the primacy of their concocted category to the reality of their cultural and historical exempla. Jonathan Smith emphasized that difference was the more important and interesting. Both Eliade and Smith were my teachers. It is perhaps no surprise that my position is one that insists on an aesthetic of impossibles, which I characterize as retaining difference while recognizing similarity.

Sundström notes that some of our most common general concepts and categories become, to use his excellent term, 'naturalized' through repeated use, reified through this process. The results of these 'projections', again his word, enter the vernacular and become widely embraced without question. They become memes. The distinctiveness and rich diversity of items in the reified category tends to be lost. This process should be of interest to the important concerns raised by Glass regarding the impact of scholarship on practical matters. Quite convincingly Sundström explores in detail the terms 'god', 'religion', and 'shamanism',[3] to confirm the commonness of this process of projection and naturalization of concept onto the comparison of diverse and disparate exempla.

3. I'm reminded of my own early work on shamanism (see Gill 1981; 1987b).

Noting that my early examples of the rise of the name 'Mother Earth' in the US were in the late nineteenth century, Sundström draws on his own Scandinavian research to document much earlier examples in the creative encounters of eighteenth and nineteenth century missionaries, beginning as early as 1720, with the South Sami and the Nenets. Following a most interesting and detailed account of these encounters, focused on translation, Sundström concludes:

> From the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Sami and the Nenets—just like almost all peoples around the world—have been caught up in globalization, a process that was accelerated in the twentieth century. This not only expanded these two peoples' horizons from their respective local grounds, it also set them in contact with other indigenous peoples around the world.

I gave *Mother Earth* (1986) the subtitle 'An American Story' because I wanted to frame my work broadly and to show that I understood Mother Earth as a creative and powerful being among all the parties I had considered in the book. American land, I reminded, was identified in the earliest European accounts as a motherly female being. I titled the final chapter 'Mother Earth: The Mother of Us All'. The beginning paragraph bears repeating now so many years later.

> No matter how carefully and positively I have tried to consider Mother Earth in North America, to tell her American story, I believe that there will remain among some readers a strong reluctance to accept what may appear to be a certain discrediting of Mother Earth among the Indians and an attribution of a kind of creative role to scholars and other Indian observers. If taken only this way, what I have said will surely not be popular to many readers. Some will want to cite certain tribal examples of an earth-connected goddess known to them that I have not mentioned. Some will want to say that obviously one so sacred to the Indians will not be documentable in the ethnographic literature and other writings of 'white men'. Others will want to appeal to mother goddesses in the religions of Western antiquity or in cultures in other parts of the world. The emotion bound up with Mother Earth is deep. She is seen as unquestionably primordial, as fundamentally archetypal. (Gill 1986: 151)

I follow this introduction with a detailed summary of my argument not dissimilar to what I have done in my present article and what I have felt compelled to do yet again at the beginning of these comments hopefully each iteration clearer and more developed. I then concluded the final chapter and the book writing, 'These various tales have now all come together. The story of Mother Earth as told herein is an American story. It is a story in which for Americans, whatever their heritage, Mother Earth is the mother of us all' (1986: 158). I am a bit baffled by how I might have more adequately met Johnson's concerns which he expressed, 'then as now I would concede that Gill could have

done more to anticipate possible negative reactions to his work. A bit more care in packaging his claims upfront and a less rigid tone in confronting challenges afterwards would have gone a long way toward redirecting the reception history of this important book'.

While my early study was focused on the US (naively referred to as American in that offensive way we have of ignoring Canada and also largely due to my own cultural narrowmindedness) it is now clear that Mother Earth, both as an entity with a proper name and as the marker of important issues of the creative encounters among cultures as well as those between academics and their real human subjects, is of global concern. The responses here do much to establish the importance of Mother Earth and the complexity and emotionally charged aspects of every related facet. Sundström aptly brings her home with his concluding sentence: 'After all, Mother Earth, in contrast to, for example, God, has an obvious material referent in the earth we all, one way or another, call our home'.

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