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What Stories, Like Water, Hold: A Response to Fikile Nxumalo

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What Stories, Like Water, Hold: A Response to Fikile Nxumalo

Debbie Sonu

The stories we tell carry our beliefs, our histories, and our relationships. They orient us toward particular ways of living and being, both with each other and with the natural world, and guide us into our sense of self and our encounters with difference. They describe what is made alive and what is rendered in service.

In her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013), botanist and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, welcomes us into the story of Skywoman, who falls downward on a stream of light and looks into the dark waters below to see not emptiness, but the glimmers of many eyes gazing up at her. Carried by a council of animals, she is grounded, and upon the back of Turtle, she spreads the mud found in the clenched paw of Muskrat. As the land grows from the mud, she sings and dances her gratitude for the extraordinary gifts of the animals, forming together with them what the original peoples of the Great Lakes call Turtle Island. From the hands of Skywoman are scattered the branches and seeds of the many grasses, flowers, and medicines that abundantly flourish there.

As Fikile Nxumalo reminds me, this story is not mine to tell, but I interpret it from Kimmerer's book to show how origin stories shape the contours of our relationship to land. Within such stories is the possibility of reconfiguring our sense of what a human person is and how a person is nested within the more-than-human ecologies of life. As such, these are readings in which living (and non-living) things do not exist as separate and stable entities, but rather unfold as always more than "mere" matter, as vital and creative. We can also remember that we, as humans, are continually being made in relation to all that is outside of us: other human and non-human beings, as well as those that pass by in our dreams and memories.

In this way, all stories work as pedagogical expressions of our place in the material world. In some, like the Creation story above, the land and animal kinfolk come into a reciprocal relationship, dependent on each other and in gratitude for their shared existence. The land is quite literally made together, in commune, and when seen from this perspective, both human and animal are transformed alike. This is not to romanticize such a viewpoint, but to show by juxtaposition how stories matter in the way we teach young children about living systems and our place within them.

As another story goes: At the confluence of the great Tigris and Euphrates River, G-d places the first humans into the biblical garden of innocence. Pure, clean, and luxuriant, this garden is a mythical place of origin, where there is no old age, where ravens do not cry, lions do not kill, and the wolf snatches no lamb. All is abundantly offered for the humans, except for the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge, of good and evil. Yet provoked by the serpent, the woman turns against herself and disobeys the command. Raining down onto the terrestrial world is an evil that renders her ashamed, naked, and forbidden from touching the tree of life. The garden, once content with peace, has all but been lost, and all of creation plunges into the curse of futility and sin. Instead of union, difference and division comes to separate god from humanity, man from woman, human from earth.

No matter what our personal conviction is, these stories affect us. Even the agnostic sees how in this creation story, the natural world is not made along with us humans, but rather exists as a metaphysical landscape into which we are placed by G-d. We inhabit it, yet with no responsibility for its future sustainability, only for facilitating its eternal ruin. Instead of sowing the seeds for an abundant future, the woman in this version is the figure whose malfeasance brings nature into a state where we are perpetually searching for its lost gifts. Of course, no story ever exhausts its many interpretations, and much is left open for examination.

Remember, creation stories are not the only stories that create, and as I read Fikile's three narratives of young children and their encounters with water, I am moved by the potential of those narratives to emerge as pedagogical practices that countervail settler colonial beliefs about human exceptionalism and objective property. When children are told, both directly and through metaphor, that the natural world is an inanimate backdrop that can be observed, measured, and predicted by scientific method alone, then in that world, causal relationships are solely controlled by the actions of man; they see the world around them as a separate, even antagonistic, object available for human mastery, whether that be in the form of resource exploitation or eco-salvation.

Attending to the ethical, aesthetic, political, and spiritual tasks of education, Fikile's stories lift up the act of teaching as a gesture that welcomes reciprocal care, creativity, wholeness, and integrity. Here, we see how illustrating everyday place-based encounters can work to re-story the very epistemological frameworks that perpetuate the human-nature division, highlighting how we are not just connected, but rather emergent from our relational qualities of being, entangled within broader webs of reciprocity, and in this case, opened up by the gifts of intergenerational knowledge.

Yet as Fikile cautions, affective scenes of care and community run in tandem with the rational social order that continues to treat difference as other, and other as less than. Against settler colonial and anti-Black inheritances, the construal of nature as idyllic and innocent, or wild and untamable, lends itself to the normalized separation and ruthless exploitation of both the natural world and racially minoritized communities. Viewing children as mythmakers and visionaries in their own right, Fikile questions whose childhoods are linked to nature as pleasure or whose are linked to it as profit, or if they are connected to nature at all. Water then becomes a striking metaphor that collapses the boundaries between teacher and student, adult and child. Knowledge, like water, is in constant movement, circulating from place to place, nourishing yet sublime. Such a metaphor challenges the colonial habit of naming and securing matter as a graspable, tangible thing to own. Racial capitalism as a framework reveals how individualism, ownership, and racial disenfranchisement takes priority over our connectedness with the gifts of place and other.

Teaching, then, does not matter in this time alone. Storying with children is storying for a certain kind of futurity. As the wildfires in California and the Pantanal burn on, and despite the calls to cede back stolen land and to demand the right to life within the Black community, the narratives that shelter our terrestrial entanglements can do more to acknowledge how our stories matter in the remaking of a worldview. Fikile's stories do this by interrogating the expressions of our unfolding beliefs, begging for more capacious understandings of what young people and the more-than-human can teach us about living in this shared world.

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