

Exploring The Environmental Impacts of Origin Stories

By Jasmine Tremblay D'Ettorre

In light of the ongoing climate crisis of the twenty-first century, the call for re-conceptualizing our relationship to nature has come to the forefront of public discourse; some argue that going beyond attempts to address isolated symptoms and considering the deeper social and cultural roots to the problems we face is a necessary exercise in climate-conscious activity.¹

This paper will explore how macro-and micro-narratives influence and shape interactions with the natural world. Some excerpts from Biblical and Indigenous origin stories will be explored as examples of macro-narratives, with specific emphasis on how they have shaped narratives of and relationships with the natural world. It will then be argued that an imperative aspect of climate justice is the transformation of dominant narratives and that centering marginalized ways of knowing and practice can inform how we ought to conceptualize grander narratives with ecosystems. Finally, the Indigenous practice of gardening will be offered as a case study of how daily micro-practice can be narratively important for climate justice.

In conceptualizing how the climate crisis informs the current state of our world, we may often turn to factually pessimistic statistics to inform our understanding. There is a large amount of literature on this topic, although centering some statistics in this discussion will offer some insight into the severity of the situation. Human activity has directly contributed to an 82 percent fall in wildlife biomass since 1970, the destruction of more than half of all natural ecosystems, and will also be the oncoming cause of the eradication of one million species.² The 2021 IPCC Report noted that human-driven climate change is already irreversible in some countries for at least the oncoming century to millennia, contingent on immediate mitigation action.³ Political and economic restraints suggest that the feasibility of maintaining a global climate warming below 1.5 C degrees is bleak at best.⁴ Discounting new projects, historically committed Co2 emissions from

existing fossil-fuel reliant infrastructure represents more than the entire carbon budget remaining for a 1.5 C degree limit on emissions.⁵ These statistics demonstrate the dire consequences of certain “key stories about economic growth, about technological progress, about nature as an object to be used or conquered, about profit and success”⁶ that have had extreme impacts on our current epoch of ecological crisis.

As Lynn White Jr. signaled fifty years prior, “our ecologic crisis is the product of an emerging, entirely novel, democratic culture. The issue is whether a democratized world can survive its own implications. Presumably, we cannot unless we rethink our axioms.”⁷ These words have a haunting and somber effect in a contemporary world where the ecological crisis of the 1960s has snowballed into a global catastrophe, particularly within a societal structure that struggles to survive its implications. In mainstream political and economic discourse, our axioms, narratives, and stories-we-live-by have not been significantly challenged. I argue that we must significantly and consistently challenge dominant narratives about human-nature relationships, and center Indigenous practices and ways of knowing, specifically regarding how we ought to think about sacred land. Macro-narratives inform our social structures. David Korten outlines four stories that are central to Western imperialist civilization that have had profound and negative ecological implications:

There is the ‘prosperity story’ which promotes worship of material acquisition and money, the ‘biblical story’ which focuses on the afterlife rather than the world around us, the ‘security story’ which builds up the military and police to protect relationships of domination, and the ‘secular meaning story’ which reduces life to matter and mechanism. These stories, he maintains, perpetuate injustice and lead to both alienation from life and environmental destruction.⁸

These metaphors contribute to the conceptual and moral project of establishing Western legitimation, which itself is founded on an ecologically unsustainable set of axioms.⁹ These stories exist around us in advertisements, political discourse, multimedia, news reports, and institutional pillars. Arguably, one of the most dangerous myths that has emerged throughout the course of human history is the concept of human exceptionalism or anthropocentrism, which in its many forms, can implicitly or explicitly endorse human dominance over the natural world. What we forget is that such myths are constructed, and they are not “immediately recognizable as stories, and need to be exposed, subjected to critical analysis, and resisted if they are implicated in injustice and environmental destruction.”¹⁰ How might we go about challenging the influences of anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism that underpin Western civilization?

Perhaps we ought to start from the beginning. Narratives of origin and genesis can offer profound insight into the shaping of human existence and the subsequent ways of life that have followed suit. In 1967, Lynn White Jr. published a paper titled “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” which examined the relationship between Christianity and modern attitudes towards nature. He argued that, in his time, an unprecedented ecological crisis had emerged, and that “unless we think about fundamentals, our specific measures may produce new backlashes more serious than those they are designed to remedy.”¹¹ His essay, totaling a mere six pages, has been described as “one of the most significant articles to appear in environmental studies in the second half of the 20th century.”¹² The technological and scientific movements that led to subsequent industrialization and ecological unsustainability achieved dominance in the Middle Ages, and so, White argues, we ought to examine the fundamental assumptions and developments of this time.¹³

As previously noted, the ‘biblical story’ is one of the fundamental roots of Western legitimation. White argues that the victory of Christianity over other religions can be seen as one of the greatest psychic revolutions in the history of our culture.¹⁴ In the ‘post-Christian age,’ it may seem as though the fundamentals of our thinking and language have moved beyond Christianity, yet arguably we continue to live, “as we have lived for about 1700 years, very largely in a context of Christian axioms”¹⁵ in the West.

The Judeo-Christian story of origin has been interpreted as centering man as dominant over natural life, thus establishing a dualist separation between man and nature. Some go as far as to infer that God’s will encourages man to exploit nature for his own ends; this interpretation (or misinterpretation) has historically established Western Christianity as arguably “the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen.”¹⁶ Comparatively to other religions, Christianity is somewhat unique in its cosmology. Pagan animism, for example, had a starkly different account of nature. In Antiquity, it was deemed important to placate the spirits in charge of trees, lakes, or mountains before altering these spaces. After the dominance of Christianity was asserted, in its place a mood of indifference to these spaces notably emerged.¹⁷ It is worth noting that Christianity is a complex faith with a multitude of practiced interpretations of first texts, although it is argued that a misinterpretation of the Judeo-Christian dogma of creation has contributed to a Western endorsement of ecologically unsustainable practices.

A letter written by theologian Richard Holloway to the author of *Genesis* offers an interesting insight into this issue. Holloway laments that our current ecological crisis finds its roots in a drastic misinterpretation of *Genesis*. In addressing the author, he notes “you were a creative writer, an artist, and writers play around with words in ways that non-writers don’t always understand. It is the way you have been misunderstood that bothers me. In fact, not understanding you have brought the world you wrote about so lovingly to a moment of great danger, a danger I want to tell you about.”¹⁸ He continues to detail how he wishes that the author had written a prologue concerning the art of reading, as readers of this great poem have interpreted the text as a piece of journalism and instruction, rather than literature.¹⁹ The infamous instructions as to how man ought to engage with nature are centered in this letter: “And God blessed them, and God said to them, Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”²⁰ Taken literally, these words offer dogmatic instruction that man ought to subdue the natural world at his whim, although great writers never directly tell us about something, they show us.²¹ Holloway contemplates this issue and questions the author’s intent in a fashion that preserves the sanctity of the

text while lamenting about the sorrow it has indirectly brought about:

Were you writing with a premonitory sorrow over the meaning of these words? In a single sentence, you captured humanity's arrogance, its belief that it owned or had dominion over the earth, and could do anything it liked with it. And that's what we have done [...] All because we didn't know how to read what you had written. Because we read your words not as a warning, not as a fable that required interpretation, but as an instruction manual to be followed to the letter. Look where it's got us.²²

Holloway continues his letter by detailing how the younger generation is rebelling against this misinterpretation, that the author of Genesis would admire them and would want to write something to help them.²³ Not only is this letter poignant, but it also points to the importance of the art of reading. When we examine the axioms, myths, and stories that are fundamentally imbued in all aspects of our lives, we must engage with them and read them thoughtfully and critically.

If we truly want to critique and transform dominant stories, we must highlight the stories that have been marginalized and re-center them into public spheres. This act of re-centering stories of resilience and eco-consciousness offers alternative and liberatory bases for thinking about our epoch of crisis.²⁴ There is profound value in centering eco-conscious narratives in our own micro-practices, as these are the stories we will need "to survive by, as the earth becomes increasingly hostile to human life and the lives of countless other species."²⁵

The exploration of alternative origin stories can offer insight into how we ought to think about our relationship to nature and how people have thought about this relationship for centuries. As someone writing from Canada, it seems intuitive to center this land's first peoples' origin story as a parallel to Genesis. Although globally there are a multitude of origin stories from various religions, spiritual practices, and ways of life that also center eco-consciousness and have been marginalized in the West.²⁶ The Iroquois/Haudenosaunee origin story of Skywoman can be centered to offer insight into the macro-and-micro narratives that inform Indigenous philosophies of life. In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer centers this story as

that which holds her peoples' beliefs, history, and relationships, and notes that it not only speaks to "where we came from, but also how we can go forward."²⁷ As she notes, similar to creation stories everywhere, cosmologies are understood as a source of orientation and identity in the world, and we are inevitably shaped by these stories no matter how distant they might be from our current spheres of consciousness.²⁸

The intricacies of the Skywoman story are complex, so a few choice excerpts will be examined in order to demonstrate the centrality of eco-consciousness, keeping in mind that this exploration is novel at best and does not capture the depth of this oral tradition. Robin Wall Kimmerer's re-telling of the story is captured as such:

A column of light streamed from a hole in the Skyworld, marking her path where only darkness had been before [...] A great turtle floated in their midst and offered his back for her to rest upon. Gratefully, she stepped from the goose wings onto the dome of his shell. The others understood that she needed land for her home and discussed how they might serve her need [...] Skywoman bent and spread the mud with her hands across the shell of the turtle. Moved by the extraordinary gifts of the animals, she sang in thanksgiving and then began to dance, her feet caressing the earth. The land grew and grew as she danced her thanks, from the dab of mud on Turtle's back until the whole earth was made. Not by Skywoman alone, but from the alchemy of all the animals' gifts coupled with her deep gratitude. Together they formed what we know today as Turtle Island, our home [...] Like any good guest, Skywoman had not come empty-handed [...] In her grasp were branches—fruits and seeds of all kinds of plants. These she scattered onto the new ground and carefully tended each one until the world turned from brown to green.²⁹

The explicit demonstration of human-nature relationality in this excerpt offers insight into how old stories of origin and new stories of life can be medicine for our fractured relationship with the earth, "a pharmacopeia of healing stories [allow] us to imagine a different relationship, in which people and land are good medicine for each other."³⁰

For a long time, the first people lived by original instruction found in origin stories like Skywoman; in contemporary times it is seen that these original instructions have been cast aside by dominant forces. The question emerges as to “How can we translate from the stories at the world’s beginning to this hour so much closer to its end? The landscape has changed, but the story remains.”³¹ Kimmeler notes, “the stories that might guide us, if they are told at all, grow dim in the memory. What meaning would they have today? [...] as I turn it over again and again, Skywoman seems to look me in the eye and ask, in return for this gift of a world on Turtle’s back, what will I give in return?”³²

In the Western tradition, it is evident that man is placed at the top of a hierarchy of human and nonhuman beings, but in Indigenous ways of knowing, humans are encouraged to look towards other species for guidance on how to live and learn with the natural world; we can turn towards non-human species who have inhabited the world for much longer than human existence, look towards the way that they exist, and follow by example.³³ If we are working under the assumption that, at best, we ought to and can transform dominant narratives and re-center marginalized narratives of eco-consciousness. Or at worst, we still require the latter narratives in order to survive even if it is infeasible to center them in public discourse, we ought to examine how these narratives can inform micro-narratives of daily life.

By examining practices of gardening in terms of relationality and origin, it can be seen that “gifts from the earth or from each other establish a particular relationship, an obligation of sorts to give, to receive, and to reciprocate.”³⁴ Micro-narratives of gardening, specifically Indigenous gardening, can offer insight into how macro-narratives and grand stories of creation and philosophical tradition inform daily practice. Resilience in an era of ecological crisis can be framed in a multitude of ways; it can be approached at a macro-policy level for example, but I argue that in centering stories of daily practice (like gardening), we can conceptualize how micro-narratives can inform a shift towards a larger and more ecologically conscious shared narrative. Indigenous ways of knowing are deeply interconnected with relationality to nature. Skywoman, for example, is described as the co-creator of the world, but also as an ancestral gardener.³⁵ In examining the practice of gardening, we can see how this grand-

er narrative can inform and be informed by daily practices.

The benefits of gardening are intuitive: “findings from a study on the impacts of a community garden in a socio-economically marginalized neighborhood in Toronto found that participants experienced stress relief, increased food security, and had opportunities to build relationships across cultures through the preparing and sharing of food.”³⁶ In the face of contemporary colonial barriers to mitigation and adaptation, these communities continue to protect land, water, food sources, health, and wellbeing.³⁷

The difference between Indigenous and contemporary Eurocentric practices of gardening is stark. Those uninterested in traditional gardening and harvesting practices often use resources in a way that does not acknowledge the sanctity of space. This is clear in the extreme example of industrial agriculture, although it can also be conceptualized in localized accounts of differences in gardening. As Dancing Water Sandy notes, those who do not understand traditional knowledge take resources without thought to the philosophical implications of things, spaces, and places:

They are taking a resource, but to us it’s not merely a resource, it’s a place. We look at it as a whole, not just a berry or apple [...] It’s a different relationship with nature. There is still artistry, but it’s based in reciprocity, not control. For example, prior to harvesting from an area, we do an offering to thank the Creator and the plant, because the Creator gave us the gift of life for another day and the ability to travel out on the land safely. We thank the plant because it is ultimately sacrificing a lot of itself. Harvesting is not simply an act of taking, it is reciprocal and heavily embedded within cultural practices. Control isn’t the objective, it’s about gratitude and an expression of interconnected relationships with the land.³⁸

It is argued by Timler and Dancing Water Sandy that Euro-Western science, in some cases, is only just beginning to recognize the importance of relationships to food sources, despite the long-standing and ongoing evidence found within Indigenous knowledge systems.³⁹ Additionally, the discussion of gardening within academic circles is largely Eurocentric and rarely accounts for the an-

cestral Indigenous food and gardening practices that hold the link between identity, belonging, and food as a conceptual basis.⁴⁰

Individual and kinship daily practices can inform and re-centralize traditional philosophies of eco-consciousness. In gardening we can see that there are methods available for bringing cultural practices into large-scale contemporary gardening that give thought to the land. There are multiple ways that sensitive relationships with nature can enhance wellbeing, specifically in highlighting a reciprocal relationship of responsibility and care between human and nonhuman entities.⁴¹ Thoughtfully engaging in micro-narratives and micro-practices can be seen as a liberatory exercise. Gardening, for example, is not simply about harvesting. It is also concerned with how and where you are harvesting, who you're doing it with, and how you go about sharing and demonstrating respect for the practice of gardening.⁴² In contemporary times, political discourse concerning the climate crisis is riddled with deniers who point to climate science as a myth yet refuse to acknowledge the grounded and existent myths that have constructed our civilizations and led to our current situation. In looking at micro-practices of gardening in Indigenous communities, the link between macro-narratives and daily practice is clear: they inform one another reciprocally.

Critiquing long-standing and dominant Western macro-narratives in a fashion that reveals how they impact daily practice and larger institutional ways of thought is necessary. It is also necessary to re-center macro-narratives that offer alternative means of thinking about our relationship with the natural world. If these stories cannot be successfully centered and highlighted in public dominant discourse, they still hold value for the individual-agent as an alternative mode of thought for how to engage with the world, food, other people, and themselves in a fashion that prioritizes interconnection and interdependence with natural spaces.

In conclusion, the examination of the ecological impacts of origin stories can offer us a deeper understanding into the ways that long-standing narratives can impact our attitudes, ideologies, and practices. The purpose of this paper is not to compare the validity of certain origin stories over others, but rather examine how interpretations of these texts have had profound impacts on collective consciousness regarding environmental mat-

ters. In revealing how certain narratives inform our micro-practices, such as gardening, this paper has aimed to explore and reveal how narrative and practice informs, strengthens, and encourages certain attitudes towards nature. Challenging and exploring the origins of long-standing dominant narratives is an important and liberatory exercise that can offer the individual (and hopefully the collective) a better understanding of how micro-practices are informed, and how they are narratively important for social justice.

Endnotes

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