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The Creation of Myth: Building a New Identity in the Wake of Climate Change

“The entire universe is to be looked upon as the Lord” (Isha Upanishad). The world we live in is a mythic realm that holds the origins of many religions and traditions, beginning with the profound secrets our ancestors shared through oral traditions that have continued into modernity. It is because of this close, diverse relationship to the Earth, one in which our identities are inseparable from, that understanding, accepting, and recovering from climate change is so devastating. While society turns to religious figures in times of grief, loss, and mourning, many myths we rely on have origins within a time that is long gone, swallowed by the Anthropocene. That is not to say myths are now unimportant and lack significance to a modern audience, but to those that do not have the same connection to certain myths as those of a particular faith, reidentified myths can uphold universal power separate from a culturally specific audience. Through a creation of a new set of myths imbued with the same messages of myths from the past, society can build a deeper resilience against climate change by forming a new identity, slowly reversing the emotional damage it has caused and pushing for a stronger community within our diverse world.

While the Earth is a land that humanity is indebted to for identity, the significance of Earth in humanity’s lives has gone unnoticed until the emergence of the Mesh, the world as it is now, without clear boundaries of past or present. It is not the fault of humanity that the effects of climate change have gone unnoticed, for “global warming plays a very mean trick,” coming close to the boundaries of our perceptions of the planet only to come “crashing into our beaches […] yet withdrawing from our grasp in the very same gesture” tricking humanity into a cycle of despair and comfort (Morton 133). Now, climate change has crashed through our mosaic glass walls, shattering our perception of sublime mountains, flourishing greenery, and thriving wildlife, merging that world with one that entails deadly oil rigs, flooding indigenous lands, and greedy capitalistic individuals. The world as it is now is not the world that our ancestors built their religions and myths on. It is a world that has collapsed from previous aesthetic notions. It is a world shattered by the Anthropocene.

These changes caused by climate change on Earth has created new activists, those willing to promote ideas of climate justice within their communities and globally. Among climate activists are writers such as Ken Saro Wiwa, who’s writing showcases a form of resilience against climate change proven powerful against oppressive periods throughout history: the power of writing for protest. Saro Wiwa himself writes of the damaging effects of the oil industry on Nigeria’s land as well as its indigenous tribes, still weak from the aftermath of European colonialism. Saro Wiwa becomes an “immortal corpse” who lives on for generations through the power of his pen, for no oppressor can “crucify ideas” in the same way they can suppress physical bodies of protest (Nixon 123, 121). Ideas can only continue to ignite the flames that they create. Through Saro Wiwa, a writer’s impact can be seen crossing time and space, not excluded to generational succession but having the ability to spread internationally, especially if the words are profound and insightful for a larger audience. This security that is brought about by a unifying reading experience makes any society, especially one living in fear of their loss of identity due to climate change, susceptible to myths that provide enticing representations of identity and definitions of what it means to exist on Earth.

While religion is a practice that is powerful, no one religion is the solution for a diverse community to reestablish a new identity within the Anthropocene. Religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Jainism, and numerous more are personal, each holding a set of texts, doctrines, and myths that are unique and potent to their communities, but might not resonate globally. But, religion is not only a form of behaviors or moral code that is defined by sacred texts, it holds elements of the universal human spirit and soul, showcasing humanity’s deep need to connect to others, an idea that awakens the moral imagination, prevails globally, and is timeless. These qualities within all religions is *religiousness*.

Religiousness creates myths in which worlds become symbolic representations of a purer plane of existence or showcase faults in society. A reader is at liberty to interpret a myth and is struck by the profound messages promoted. Religiousness can be used throughout other forms of literature, allowing modern society to create myths that represent their identities within the Anthropocene, identities that are different from the cannon of myths past. Thus, an exploration on various religious myths and their contemporary counterparts is required to equip present day diverse societies with a source of mythic literature that represents their identities, leading to deeper connections to climate change, the world as it is now, and each other. Some of these texts chosen will be analyzed from an “outsiders” perspective, that is to say that I have no personal connection to the myth as far as an interest in the themes that reside in them and my belief that they are important for people to hear. Because of their historical and personal connection to others, the contemporary counterparts matched with these myths are not meant to undermine their sacred value in modern day society. but to use the themes of these sacred text to help a broader society understand and build resilience against human inflicted climate change.

To begin with, the ancient story of the birth of Hindu God Krishna and his adventures as a child are fondly told among family and friends, holding insightful messages on class structure, family, and divine connections to the universe. At a time when Mathura, India was ruled by tyrannical, demon kings, Mother Earth pleaded to Lord Brahma, creator of the Universe, to bring a being onto Earth who could prevent such tyranny and destruction from continuing. Thus, Brahma planted one of his own black hairs into Devaki, a princess within the city of Mathura, destining Krishna to be born into the Pandava family, a noble family next in line for the throne. But, before he could be born, Lord Kamsa, the most malicious and powerful demon king, heard through prophecy that the eighth child of Devaki, who is to be Krishna, would have the power to overthrow him and start a ruling of his own. With rage, he killed every child that Devaki conceived, forcing her into hiding.

When it was time for Krishna to be born, Devaki went into labor secretly. Shortly after Krishna’s birth, she gave him to a common family so he could live a life free from danger. Krishna lives a life in which his identity as God and the next king of India is concealed with a common life, but a life of joyous dance and play none the less. One day, his new mother, Yosada, watched as her sons ran up to her, claiming that Krishna had eaten dirt. Believing that he had, Yosada scolds Krishna and asks him to open his mouth, revealing “the whole universe in all its variety, with all the forms of life and time and nature and action and hopes” inside, an image that she fears at first but is ultimately left in awe of (Donager). Overwhelmed by the sublimity of the universe within her own son’s body, Yosada forgets her observation immediately, resting Krishna on her lap and coddling him.

The themes of Krishna’s story, of a commoner who has the potential to become a hero, the value of family, and the intimate relationship that one can have with the universe, is poignant to a reader. To begin with, the themes of Krishna’s hidden identity and apparent common life are not unlike other scriptures. Jesus was born into a common family, the “carpenter’s son” among the working class (Matthew 13:55). Mohammad was a business man who earned the truth of others through his honest work (Khan). Among the great religious figures society worships, it is not their wealth or prestigious lineage that sets them on the path to omnipotence, it is their good works, passion, joy, charisma, and deep morality. This notion is appealing to modern readers due to the juxtaposition they face with contemporary media, celebrities and politicians who were born to lead or born to be in the spotlight, making their claims on the world without effort. This is a gift the average individual is not given. Society hopes, for their own sake, that a simple and honest living that is passionate and truthful can also be impactful. Krishna, with his travels as a commoner and his eventual progression back to his royal label, showcases that this transformation can happen without being born with the status to do so.

The image of the universe within Krishna’s mouth speaks to humanities own intersection with Earth, a relationship many hope to regain and strengthen as cultures tied to lands disappear due to rising sea levels. Through the loss of land, society begins to realize that identity and land are inseparable and intimate. It is this beautiful attachment to the universe that humanity can see itself in Krishna. However, unlike Yosada, who’s deep maternal love for Krishna allows her to forget her son’s power, mothers like Kathy Jentil-Kijiner of the Marshall Islands have no choice but to remember the damage of climate change because their children and other members of the Islands have no power. In her poem, “Dear Matafele Peinam”, one proposed contemporary origin myth to the birth of a resilient community, Jentil-Kijiner highlights her own voice as a mother making a promise to her helpless child to protect her from the waters that “gnaw at the shoreline” and “crunch” the island into “shattered bones,” destroying their homes and culture in a monstrous way (Jentil- Kijener). There is no recovering from this form of damage caused by climate change because humanity has no definition for an identity combined with Earth. Humanity can thus expand their emotional connection between themselves and nature by integrating identity with nature. This can be done through myths, a form of literature in which an exploration of identity is central.

Another contemporary counterpart to Krishna’s story, one that contains the elements that are previously enjoyed by a reader but accommodates for a diverse audience, is Lucille Clifton’s poem, “The Earth is a Living Thing*”*. In her poem, the Earth as a “black and living thing” with “kinky hair” is an ethnic representation of the planet imbued with the diversity Clifton brings as an author. This image of a black Earth also revises the assumption of land inherently white owned or dominated, an idea that Jentil-Kijener also fights against. Clifton’s new Earth is closer to a modern audience and concurrent with the present political climate. No one globally, especially within the United States, can feign ignorance to the significance of what it means to be black, an identity almost synonymous with the oppressed, now being correlated to the Earth. In the era of Black Lives Matter, the promotion of a black Earth implies actions are needed to help the oppressed and dying Earth, an advocacy for equality despite skin color becoming an advocacy against climate change as well. This new myth of the Earth as a black woman creates a new era of environmental justice activists that merge with the growing diversity of modern society and combines the identity of those oppressed with a land that is dying.

While exploring the aspects of newly formed identities within the Anthropocene, the human and nature relationship must be explored further as well. The Native American myths of unity with natural elements seems fitting to explore for this purpose. *The Story of Corn and Medicine* includes a series of creation myths within the Cherokee tradition, entailing how the Earth was formed and early humans interacted with animals on their new shared land. The story begins with a water beetle venturing from the sky island all animals inhabit into the sea, piling mud from the ocean floor until the Earth is formed. The animals travel down to this newly formed planet, gaining their unique characteristics based on their early days on it: the red crawfish gain their “crimson color” for venturing too close to the sun, animals staying awake for seven nights gain the gift of night vision, the plants that do the same keep their green leaves all year around, and the animals typically hunted are dispersed across the earth by two reckless boys who release them from the cave they were kept in (Mooney). The most compelling section of this creation myth is the story of human and animal conflict. Humans ruled the Earth tyrannically, animals “slaughtered for food or trampled under the humans' feet” on a land that they are meant to share (Moony). In a series of unique peacekeeping tactics, the animals form a council in which they discuss creating weapons from their own claws to fight against the humans. The deer pronounce a law of piece in which no human can kill an animal without its pardon, a rule quickly violated by hunters. To counteract the hunting, the animals create new diseases to ward of the human race. Finally, a council of plants meet to aid the humans, creating remedies for disease with their own essence, thus natural medicines are formed. Due to the plants, the balance between animals and humans is restored, but humanity’s perpetual cycle of hunting is continued.

*The Story of Corn and Medicine* is filled with the creation myths of Earth, animals, plants, and medicine, the idea of human and animal conflict throughout seemingly in line with the animal rights activists of the Anthropocene. Within modern society, humans use and abuse animals for the sake of capitalism. The most common victims of large-scale animal abuse are livestock, especially prevalent in the factory farm industry due to the “weak protections afforded to livestock under state cruelty laws” and the rampant demands of the meat industry within the United States and globally (The Humane Society). When animals and their slaughter are valuable to the monetary gain of society, it is difficult to push for a plant-based lifestyle that is not only better for health but the environment due to a decrease in methane emission from livestock. In addition, it is easy for humans to feel detached from animals, superior intellect equating to superior worth. It is clear that a modern myth pertaining to the human nature relationship must not only tackle the ideas of close relationships with animals but also the monetary benefit of using nature.

When humans and animals are portrayed as being dependent and having close, spiritual connections, the gap between human and animal lessens. In *The Golden Compass*, by Phillip Pullman, Lyra’s world is one in which each human has an animal spirit, or Daemon, a physical representation of the human soul. In this way, humans and animals have an intimate connection. Through a new world made possible with mythic creation, Pullman showcases the human soul cannot be truthfully exemplified without a wild, curious, and animalistic representation. In the film adaptation of *The Golden Compass,* director Chris Weitz explains that it was important for him to show that the Daemons are not “airy spirits”, but figures that “occupy space and have weight” and are significant entities to the created world that Lyra is in (IGN). Despite being a separate entity to humans, Daemons and humans are unified and cannot be separated, for separation causes extreme pain to both human and animal. They are together on their journeys through this world Pullman has created. This representation of the human animal relationship is both intimate and powerful in creating a new myth surrounding the reliance that humans have towards animals, especially on an Earth that they share. It becomes harder to view animals as lesser than humans from this perspective of co-dependence and deeper relation.

The human plant relationship within *The Story of Corn and Medicine* is also as important as that of the human animal relationship. In the Cherokee creation myth, the plants are the saviors, the Earth being a land rampant with disease without their creation of medicine. Yet, humans are still greedy with the land that they share on Earth, asking more and more of it while giving nothing back, accept for an increase in pollutants. Shel Silverstein’s, *The Giving Tree*, highlights the greedy relationship that humans have with nature, a greed that is eventually undermined when the true worth of nature is revealed. In the book, a boy befriends a tree, and in his childhood, they are inseparable as he “climbs up her trunk and swings from her branches and eats her apples” loving the tree as she loves him (Silverstein 7-9). As the boy grows into a busy and practical man, he becomes concerned with the monetary value of life, selling the tree’s apples for money and using its branches for a house. Eventually, the boy is an older man, who wants to escape the society he lives in, using the trunk of the tree to build a boat and sail away. Finally, the old man returns. While the tree says she has nothing to give him, this time around, all the old man needs is a place to sit and rest, spending quality time with the tree once again, making her happy. *The Giving Tree* not only showcases the relationship that nature can have with our memories, our own childhoods being intimately drawn through recollections of the trees within our own backyards or the forests that were pretend fantasy lands, but the idea that after a long life of obtaining material possessions and using nature to obtain them, humanity comes back to nature for serenity and comfort. Unlike in *The Giving Tree*, nature might not always be present to welcome humanity back with open arms, but an understanding of this builds the need and want to protect nature like society would want to protect their memories from corruption. When nature is shaped from monetary value to the value of a memory through myth, nature becomes priceless.

The final exploration of identity within the Anthropocene is an identity related to others within the growing diverse society humanity coexists within. The exploration of a myth that highlights themes of shared power, wealth, and martyrdom is appropriate to understand a new change in what it means to reside in a modern community. *Prometheus* is a Greek myth that entails the mischievous Titan, Prometheus, disobeying Zeus, the most powerful Greek God of sky and thunder. Zeus, not wanting humans to become stronger and overpower his complete control over them, denies them fire. Upon feeling sorry for the “man’s weak and naked state,” Prometheus brought them fire that he stole from Mt. Olympus (Cartwright). With fire comes the ability to create weapons and establish a civilization, all actions Zeus fears will undermine his power. To punish Prometheus for his crime, Zeus chains him to a rock and sends an Eagle to eat his liver every day, leaving Prometheus to be perpetually tormented. Due to the pity of Prometheus, humans are closer to Gods in strength and power.

The ideas of this dispersed strength and power among society has changed within the Anthropocene. The equitable distribution of wealth is scoffed at by members of every community, despite belief or political affiliation, due to the fear of losing well-earned capital. Yet, the idea of sacrificing oneself for a greater community continues to be a potent message among many myths and is still predominant in literature today. Despite this, within modern myths, a sacrifice is not necessary to help the greater good. Rather, a unifying force of unique individuals is needed, a relationship that requires small acts of giving from everyone rather than the ultimate sacrifice from one individual. *Seedfolks*, by Paul Fleischman, is a modern-day adaptation of the idea of community cooperation for the greater good. In a Cleveland neighborhood occupied by a variety of immigrant families who “barely share more than the occasional ‘hello’” a junkyard is transformed into a community garden (NPR). This garden is not only a message of a community that is coming together, it represents individual longings, of immigrants who “find memories in the soil” within vegetables they cannot find in local markets. They find comfort in this newly created community they can learn to call home (NPR). *Seedfolks* does not fall into the “melting pot” ideology of the United States that many argue against; rather, each chapter follows a different ethnic group and their unique connection to this combined garden, reflecting a trusting community that allows for individualism with no aspects of assimilation. In the issue of climate change, this mutual understanding of individual strength and identity is necessary for a society to trust one another to promote climate justice. Without respect for one another, there is no hope for climate change advocates, because every community within society would fend for themselves and their own. There must be a unified force, one that is promoted through Fleischman’s interpretation of community that can be reached globally, in order to reach large scale climate justice advocacy.

Myth has the profound ability to define and reshape Identity within the Anthropocene. Identity, the very core of Per Espen Stoknes’s barriers to understanding climate change, can be penetrated by the stories humanity chooses to tell. When societies create their own stories filled with moral principles, they are forming myths that are true to them and their current life experiences, accommodating for the diverse society we live in. If we all create stories with these poignant truths of origins or teach others how to create these stories for themselves, we are building a community of writers who have a greater understanding of themselves and a greater appreciation for their neighbors. Together, we share the Earth, humanities living, breathing, mythic relic that is unique to us all. As Tim Morton proclaims, when the world is ending, the one characteristic of humanity that is left is Intimacy, a unifying force. Our sacred lands are protected with our own truths, and we are ready to protect it, together, through the act of mythic storytelling. Our intimate connection to the Earth becomes an intimate connection with each other, a beautiful form of resilience that places us hand and hand, striding further into the Anthropocene with the past and all of its mythic moral messages ahead of us in spirit.

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