“Nature” vs. Nature:
An Analysis of the Nature Character in Two Creation Stories and Their Practical Implications

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Abstract

Sacred stories are an entryway into societal attitudes, and so are worth examining in relation to the most pressing societal issues, including the climate crisis. This project contributes to the larger climate conversation by asking what the "Nature" character in the Christian and Algonquin Anishinaabeg creation stories tell us about the societies' attitudes towards the natural environment. Drawing on narrative theory and thematic narrative analysis, the study investigates this question in the context of Ottawa, Canada, tracing the relationship between mythological frameworks, attitudes, and practical behaviour.

The findings resist easy conclusions. Rather than confirming a straightforward relationship between myths and practice, the analysis reveals a more complex – and sometimes surprising – picture. What does emerge consistently is that the two creation stories encode a fundamental connection between human and other-than-human nature – a connection that contemporary Canadian society may have lost sight of.

The broader implication is urgent: if we are willing to read our creation stories closely and to interrogate our assumptions about them, they may provide a pathway for rethinking our environmental attitudes. At a moment of ecological crisis, this may be not merely illuminating, but necessary for our survival.

Acknowledgments

I started the process of getting a master's in religious studies without any idea about what it entailed. A completed thesis seemed like a far-away dream. A huge round of thanks is in order.

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Introduction

Project Overview

Understanding sacred stories and what they tell us is far from the only entry point to addressing the climate crisis, but it is one worth deeper consideration. This project aims to contribute to the larger conversation about the Earth, its climate, and our continued well-being, by answering the question, *what does the "Nature" character in a creation story tell us about a society's behaviour towards its natural environment and how has this been borne out in the Canadian context?* To this end, I examine what the "Nature" character in two distinct creation stories tells us about how their respective peoples orient themselves towards the natural environment.

I chose to study the two most prominent narratives in the land I inhabit: the Christian Genesis narrative of the Garden of Eden, and the Omàmiwininiwag narrative of Sky Woman and the Otter.[1] I chose Sky Woman and the Otter, Indigenous to this territory, because I wanted to amplify a narrative that has long been considered superstitious and irrelevant to mainstream Canadian society. I chose Genesis, with its connection to the violence of centuries-long colonization, because it seemed to loom so much larger in my day-to-day consciousness and that of the people around me.[2] Though Canada's Christian origins and stories continue to shape its

[1] In English, the Omàmiwininiwag are often referred to as Algonquin Anishinaabeg. I predominantly use the Anishinaabemowin term (Omàmiwininiwag) term out of respect for the language and recognition that Europeans too often referred to many Indigenous Peoples with completely foreign and sometimes inaccurate names that were easier to say in European languages. Names are important and, as someone with a difficult name, I appreciate the importance of friction and effort, if required to properly respect others' names.

[2] On North American societies, cultures, and institutions being based in Christianity: Lori G. Beaman, *The Transition of Religion to Culture in Law and Public Discourse*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2020), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003007319, 4-5; *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, Preamble, Part 1 of the *Constitution Act*, 1982, c 11. https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/const/page-12.html; Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*, 2nd edition (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2019), 563-565; Roger O'Toole, "Religion in Canada: Its Development and Contemporary Situation," in *Religion and Canadian Society: Traditions, Transitions, and Innovations* (Canadian Scholars' Press, 2006), 8.

institutions and belief structures, the Genesis myth is also impactful on a global scale. Adam and Eve are central religious figures in Christianity, but also prominent in Judaism and Islam. This means that over half of the global population,[3] is familiar with this myth. How might this privileging of Abrahamic narratives, specifically Christian cosmogony, I wondered, influence our lives?

The final component of my research question – the Nature character – reflects my desire to unpack what "counts" as Nature in Christian and Omàmiwininiwag worldviews. I aimed specifically to understand what each worldview considers Nature, "its" place in the larger universe, and how humans are encouraged to relate to "it." I suspected there is a connection between the understandings presented in creation stories and how a story's people behave toward Nature, conveyed at least in part by the story's characterization of "Nature."

Throughout this thesis, I use the term "Nature" as a proper noun that refers specifically to nature's character/set of characters and how it is/they are portrayed in the creation myths under analysis. This treatment will allow me to a) treat the stories as literary works, which they are, and b) analyze Nature's role, function, and relationships in each story as a concrete person rather than an abstract concept.

My intention is to connect these understandings to behaviour towards Nature – can I see traces of the worldviews underpinning each myth in how people live today? These questions aim to address one contributor to the current climate crisis: ways of living encouraged by religio-spiritual beliefs spread by easily absorbable ("sticky") mythologies.

[3] Conrad Hackett et al., *How the Global Religious Landscape Changed from 2010 to 2020* (Pew Research Center, 2025), https://doi.org/10.58094/FJ71-NY11, 180.

Mythology: Sacred, Sticky Scripts

> "If any of us could come to our own culture as a foreign anthropologist […], we might well be astonished at the attitudes that we take for granted." – Elaine Pagels[4]

Scholars across disciplines can generally agree on one thing: Stories are important. As humans, we love stories and, by some fluke of neurobiology, tend to remember them better than disjointed pieces of information.[5] Narratives have been used widely to transmit Knowledge and information, connecting generations and communities. Kovach reminds us that "[…] stories situate us in place and time; they localize history and maintain an oral tradition of passing on knowledge."[6] Narratives, or, as they are commonly referred to, stories, [7] are crucial to humanity.[8] As Thomas King has said, "The truth about stories is that that's all we are."[9] We begin narrating as early as three or four years old, when we first can put verbs and nouns together.[10] Coincidentally, this is also when we start encoding our experiences into conscious memory.[11] Cognitive scientists posit that this might be related to the fact that our brains process and retain what we learn from stories better than from other media that might present similar information,

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[4] Elaine H. Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* (Random House, 1988), *xix*.

[5] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 2nd ed. (Taylor and Francis, 2013), 138.

[6] Kovach 2021, 75.

[7] According to narrative scholars, a narrative is "the representation of an event or a series of events." (H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, 2nd ed., Cambridge Introductions to Literature (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 13). Narrative theory makes a distinction between a *narrative* and *story* – the latter, rather than being the representation of the event(s), are the events themselves, the characters involved in those events, and the setting(s) the events take place in (Abbot 2008, 19). For the purpose of my thesis, I will use the terms interchangeably, though I will be referring to what narrative scholars describe as narratives.

[8] Kent Puckett, *Narrative Theory: A Critical Introduction*, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2016), https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139522502, 2.

[9] Thomas King, *The Truth about Stories: A Native Narrative*, The Massey Lectures Series (House of Anansi Press, 2003), 2.

[10] Abbott 2008, 25.

[11] Abbott 2008, 25.

such as essays.[12] Heath and Heath, in their well-researched inquiry into *what* makes some ideas "stick" while others effortlessly slide out of our brains, argue that part of stories' "stickiness" lies in their ability to make us *feel*.[13]

Not only do we remember information that moves us, but we also reconstruct it in ways that resonate with what we already know.[14] This means that, while we often use stories to tell us about the world – fictional or otherwise – we also use them to tell us more about *ourselves*.[15] Human beings see ourselves in stories, even those that are, on the surface, not reflective of our experiences.[16] Heath and Heath, commenting on a psychology study about how audiences receive narrative information, note that we mentally simulate stories when we hear them – we mentally experience what the characters experience.[17] And, as performance psychologists have long understood, our brains cannot simulate something mentally without activating the same brain structures that a real-life *action* would activate.[18] Not only do we empathize with characters in a story, but we also mentally experience the same things, although in a way that reflects our own lived experience. This is why, often, the same story can resonate across generations and

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[12] Raymond A. Mar et al., "Memory and Comprehension of Narrative versus Expository Texts: A Meta-Analysis," *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* 28, no. 3 (2021): 732–49, https://doi.org/10.3758/s13423-020-01853-1, 745.

[13] Chip Heath and Dan Heath, *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die* (Random House, 2008), 165-203. The entirety of chapter 5, Emotional, addresses how emotions are partly responsible for how well ideas are remembered and acted upon.

[14] Rolf A. Zwaan and Gabriel A. Radvansky, "Situation Models in Language Comprehension and Memory.," *Psychological Bulletin* 123, no. 2 (1998): 162–85, https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.123.2.162, 168, 171, 175-176.

[15] Roy F. Baumeister and Leonard S. Newman, "How Stories Make Sense of Personal Experiences: Motives That Shape Autobiographical Narratives," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 20, no. 6 (1994): 676–90, https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167294206006, 676-677; Alan Parry, "Why We Tell Stories: The Narrative Construction of Reality," *Transactional Analysis Journal* 27, no. 2 (1997): 118–27, https://doi.org/10.1177/036215379702700207, 120, 122.

[16] Zoë Walkington et al., "The Impact of Narratives and Transportation on Empathic Responding," *Poetics* 80 (June 2020): 101425, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2019.101425, 6.

[17] Heath and Heath 2008, 210.

[18] Mark R. Dadds et al., "Imagery in Human Classical Conditioning," *Psychological Bulletin* 122, no. 1 (1997): 89–103, https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.122.1.89, 101.

cultures – across contexts, people see *their* experiences baked into a narrative, regardless of the original author's context or intentions. Stories, then, are made and remade (interpreted and reinterpreted) according to an audience's contextual and contemporary preoccupations.

Stories allow humans to make sense of the universe and the players in it. Chilisa comments on this phenomenon, writing, "Folktales and stories can, for example, serve as valuable tools for awareness-raising on values that promote love, harmony, social justice, solidarity, and human rights." [19] Stories, then, transmit worldviews by promoting or exemplifying a particular understanding of the world, including which beliefs and behaviours are valuable. Myths, as the canon for religious and spiritual traditions, have the same ability within religious and spiritual traditions. They transmit and build *religious* worldviews, structures, and sanctioned behaviours, informing identities, values, and worldviews.[20, 21] Paden supports this idea, writing that, "Myth […] names the ultimate powers that create, maintain, and re-create one's life. […] Myth as world script not only explains the world but also constructs and governs it."[22]

Cosmogonic Myths

I chose to study creation stories because, as a nigh-universal component of mythology, they provide insight into the very foundation of a society's heart and mind. Mythologies provide scripts for the relationships and interactions between key players, including gods, animals,

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[19] Bagele Chilisa, *Indigenous Research Methodologies* (SAGE, 2012), 112.

[20] Jessica Holzhausen and Kevin Grecksch, "Historic Narratives, Myths and Human Behavior in Times of Climate Change: A Review from Northern Europe's Coastlands," *WIREs Climate Change* 12, no. 5 (2021): e723, https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.723, 5; David G. Horrell, *The Bible and the Environment: Towards a Critical Ecological Biblical Theology*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2015), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315656205, 26.

[21] Paden also corroborates the idea of myth (sacred stories) playing an important role in society in his important work, *Religious Worlds: The Comparative Study of Religion*: "Myth articulates the foundations of what is sacred. It is […] an account of the origin of all that is thought to be great, real, or holy in one's universe." (1988, 8).

[22] Paden, 1988, 73.

plants, and the Land, by outlining what is possible and desirable in their universes. These scripts shape the beliefs of those who follow a given tradition or culture. The creation myth is a key part of these scripts, providing an account of the origins of the world and humankind,[23] as well as the cast of characters and their respective roles.[24] If a society's mythology provides a full manuscript outlining how the universe works, its creation story is the opening act that sets out the society's basic logic and assumptions about the world. Creation stories are prevalent across distinct mythologies, providing a common ground upon which to compare mythologies' underlying logic and worldviews.

Myths both shape and are shaped by a society's worldview and beliefs.[25] These worldviews shape how people in that society behave and consequently, the kinds of societies those people create. Traditional stories, along with the logic and assumptions embedded therein, are thus one contributor to a society's practices, even if that society's members do not believe the stories are real or true. Often told to us in our youths, these stories play a role in our development and provide the building blocks for our beliefs and attitudes. The characters, scripts, and practices they convey thus form the basis of a society's worldview. These practices can influence how people interact with one another and with the world around them. Stories' influence can span many generations – even if a cosmogonic myth was introduced thousands of years ago, it can continue to be relevant. Furthermore, since creation narratives provide a society's

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[23] Anthony F. Aveni, *Creation Stories: Landscapes and the Human Imagination* (Yale University Press, 2021), 10.

[24] Malcolm Skilbeck, *Loving and Studying Nature: Celebrating the Earth through History, Culture and Education*, vol. 10, International Explorations in Outdoor and Environmental Education (Springer International Publishing, 2021), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-80751-1, 164.

[25] Skilbeck 2021, 164.

understanding of the physical world's origin, they also forge a link between people and how they interact with the natural world.

Creation myths are a vital component of religious canon because they outline how a group sees their origins and how they got to be who and where they are, also outlining roles, responsibilities, relationships, and limitations. Researchers have used these narratives to understand communities' traditional values and beliefs.[26] Creation stories describe how the earth was made and outline the relationships between beings, including where they land in the hierarchy.[27] In this way, they provide a framework to understand oneself, society, and the world.[28] Origin myths paint a vivid picture of a society's values, summoning and transmitting them with each re-telling.[29] They also explain how societies came to be a certain way, transmitting what might be termed prejudices or misconceptions, while also transmitting social values and ways of being.[30] The Genesis story, for example, places Adam and Eve's disobedience as the origin of women's pain during childbirth and of labour's difficulty – because they ate from the Tree of Knowledge after God told them not to, life came to be as the storytellers knew it.[31]

The ways creation stories are both told and interpreted shift over time to accommodate for changes in their society's worldview or environment, as I will demonstrate. Their underlying

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[26] Chilisa (2012) provides several examples in her book on pp. 141-3. In one example, the Māori creation story shows the importance of breath in traditional thought and therefore signals the inappropriate nature of smoking. In Southern Africa, the Tsawana and Sotho-speaking people, who have now assimilated the insidious misogyny of Eurocentric ways of being have a creation story that shows evidence of gender equality.

[27] Horrell 2015, 26.

[28] John A. Grim, "Indigenous Traditions: Religion and Ecology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (Oxford University Press, 2006), https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195178722.003.0013, 284.

[29] Paden 1988, 86-9, 91.

[30] Brian Boyd, "Part 3: Evolution and Fiction," in *On the Origin of Stories* (Harvard University Press, 2009), https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674053595-007, 196-197.

[31] Richard Elliott Friedman and Shawna Dolansky, *The Bible Now* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 150.

messages are not fixed, but rather changing, depending on who tells the story and who hears and interprets it. While I did not know the reasons behind the importance of a creation story before I embarked on my research journey, I intuitively appreciated their role; it only made sense that the "first" story would have an essential role to play in a community.[32] Creation stories are world-building in action – and the worlds they build are as apt to be transformed by history as the physical world is.

Unconscious Religion

Stories are not the only tools humans use to build their worlds. Social and public institutions, too, have a hand in world-building and keeping religious symbols, beliefs, and practices alive. As scholars like Lori Beaman have pointed out, there is an interesting trend towards the recasting of religion as culture in supposedly – and sometimes constitutionally – secular states. [33] Beaman further argues that the religious hegemony in these nations is made disturbingly clear by the preferencing of Christianity to other religions, including, but not limited to, Islam.[34] Attempting to hide religion in plain sight threatens the ideas of secularity and democracy and veils a culturalized religion's creative and even policing power. This is contrary to the honesty and transparency encouraged by Indigenous epistemologies and was one of the original motivations behind my research. I noted, through careful observation and academic study, that Canada and similar Western societies were based quietly and firmly on Christian worldviews and sought to bring this phenomenon to the forefront for discussion.

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[32] While creation stories may not be the first to be conceived of in any religion or even the first ones told, they do signal the *beginning* of a religious community's world and are thus the first story *to have occurred to/coincided with* that community.

[33] Beaman 2020, 126.

[34] Beaman 2020, 132.

Christianity's staying power is partially attributable to its current ability to quietly lurk in the Western consciousness. Over centuries, since it became the Roman Empire's preferred religion, Christianity, and especially the Catholic Church, has been loudly and repeatedly criticized for its hunger for power. Dependent on a certain level of popularity, as all religions are, Christianity has been forced to morph and adapt to stay alive and relevant, listening carefully to public opinion to determine its shifting boundaries and making itself smaller to keep its seat at Canadian society's table.

It may seem obvious to scholars of religion that Christianity pervades our society, but it is much less recognized in the popular consciousness. This "unconscious religion" is how religious values remain hidden in plain sight and maintain their socio-political power, staying out of sight – and out of reach – of public scrutiny. Symbols and stories have a well-documented and still not fully understood sticking power and, if their continued presence remains unacknowledged, there is a real possibility that our ignorance may have unintended consequences. Narratives are particularly important to unpack, given that deeper immersion in a narrative results directly in being less skeptical and analytical – this is why the books we re-read or the movies we rewatch still impact us, even if we know their endings.[35] The more entrenched a story is in a group, the more difficult it is to critically examine that story.

In the spirit of curiosity and with a heightened awareness that our unquestioned beliefs could have undesirable consequences, I wondered: If religion has an enormous creative power, what has it been used to build thus far? Have those constructions worked for us? Is this world we have built the only one that we know, or are there alternatives? Since climate change is at the

[35] Richard J. Gerrig, *Experiencing Narrative Worlds: On the Psychological Activities of Reading*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2018), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429500633, 164.

forefront of the contemporary collective consciousness, I decided to explore religious world-building through the lens of our relations with nature.

Climate in Crisis

Climate change is one of, if not *the*, defining issues of our time. Prompted by changing weather patterns and alarming scientific reports, I, like so many others, asked myself, "How did we get here?" The answer, I know, is multi-faceted. My search has taken me in myriad directions, but this answer is mine. Conclusions drawn in this thesis are contextual and not meant to be universal, black-and-white answers – merely a small refraction of an enormous, famously intractable problem.

I hypothesize that how societies behave towards their natural environment correlates to how their creation stories treat and portray Nature. I argue that present-day Canadian society continues to be influenced by the logic found in the Genesis story – that of Christianity – despite the miles and millennia that separate us from its development. This thesis discusses how the logic, scripts, and beliefs found in creation myths were baked into the social consciousness that shapes our societies. In this way, certain ideas about humanity's place in this world have closely followed us to this day, all along impacting our behaviour towards ourselves, non-human beings, and the Earth. I hope an enhanced view of the core beliefs that have gotten us here – the good, the bad, and the ugly – will inform how we move forward in our relationship with our environment.

I am far from the first to posit that religious or sacred narratives are somehow related to how we treat our planet and its other inhabitants, and therefore, climate change. There is a significant amount of literature on the Bible and its ecological implications. Notable scholars, such as the renowned Lynn White Jr., have argued that the Bible, particularly Genesis 1:26-28, is

at least partially responsible for the anthropocentrism that is characteristic of our contemporary attitudes towards Nature. Almost as soon as White argued that Christian thought had a large hand to play in the burgeoning and undeniable environmental crisis in 1967, religious studies scholars began to argue to the contrary. The phrase, "dominion over" in Genesis 1:28 has been particularly controversial.[36] Illustrious scholars of religion like Cohen, Friedman, and Dolansky have analyzed Genesis' context and reception, demonstrating that ancient Jews and Christians did not see it as permission to abuse the environment.[37]

Other researchers reach altogether different conclusions, instead agreeing with White's assessment. This school of thinkers encourages more eco-friendly/eco-justice-oriented readings of the Bible, and Genesis in particular. Horrell, for instance, encourages an ecological, critical reading of the Bible, one that is based on historical study, informed exegesis, and theological tradition, but also contemporary science and the acknowledgment that biblical interpretations are *constructed*.[38] This last point is salient and bears repeating: biblical interpretations are constructed. The Bible itself does not "say" anything about the environment or how we should relate to it and the creatures in it. There is, then, no *one* way of relating to Nature according to the Christian Bible.

The Bible's ambiguity about our relationship to Nature has allowed religious leaders and thinkers to argue on both sides – for and against an ecological reading of the Bible. Regardless of biblical accuracy, Christian orthodoxy has been heavily influenced by the anthropocentrism taught by early Church Father Augustine of Hippo and medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas,

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[36] From the King James Version: "And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth."

[37] Cohen 1989, 5; Friedman and Dolansky 2011, 173.

[38] Horrell 2015, 124, 128.

who both believed that God created Nature for human beings to thrive and that humans were at the top of the earthly hierarchy.[39] This hierarchy, analyzed extensively (and criticized) in Lovejoy's *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea*, posits that each creature has a specific, unchanging role that contributes to an orderly (read: good, godly) universe.[40] Humans' place in that hierarchy is above the rest of Nature, simultaneously Nature's masters and primary beneficiaries – earthly "acting managers," supervising God's creation on His behalf – and God's underlings. Seeing Nature as primarily human-serving remains prevalent in Western Christianity, despite the slow and recent move towards more ecological views that emphasize stewardship and stem from increasingly louder calls for climate action. [41]

On the other hand, Indigenous spiritualities, which are intricately connected to the Land, are more explicit about the relationship we are meant to have with Nature. The world is seen as *living* – everything is animated with spirit.[42] According to Anishinàbeg author Stephen McGregor, "This would become the fundamental principle of Anishinàbeg spiritual beliefs: that the spirit of the creator existed in all things, living and non-living."[43] Indigenous spiritualities also unambiguously promote and embody a deep respect for all of Nature and place a strong emphasis on maintaining good relations. The respect extended to other-than-human beings emerges from and is embodied by the belief that all beings (human and non-human) are persons

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[39] Hart 2006, 68.

[40] Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Harvard University Press, 2001), https://hdl-handle-net.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca/2027/heb05488.0001.001, 61. Lovejoy criticizes the Great Chain of Being primarily on a philosophical basis, rather than centring his argument on ethics or social justice; he focuses on the historical reasoning behind the idea and points out its flaws. This contrasts greatly with Indigenous thought, which contradicts the Great Chain of Being ontologically and axiologically.

[41] Hart 2006, 65, 70, 83; H. Paul Santmire and John B. Cobb, "The World of Nature According to the Protestant Tradition," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (Oxford University Press, 2006), https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195178722.003.0005, 123, 140-141.

[42] Stonechild 2020, 1.

[43] Stephen McGregor, *Since Time Immemorial: "Our Story": The Story of the Kitigan Zibi Anishinàbeg* (Kitigan Zibi Education Council, 2004), 7.

with their own experiences and perspectives.[44] This awareness is embedded in ceremony and protocol, which are not relegated to special religious holidays, but rather part of daily life.[45] Indigenous spiritualities encourages what non-Indigenous peoples might call sustainability. Scarcity signals an imbalanced relationship, which requires relational repair, an inherently spiritual activity in Anishinaabeg cultures.[46] Indigenous spiritual beliefs place humans as *part of* Nature, as one aspect that is related to all other aspects and whose responsibility is to respect its kin.

Across cultures and belief systems, the Land plays a crucial role in religion and its proliferation. Deloria phrased it elegantly: "No movement can sustain itself, no people can continue, no government can function, and no religion can become a reality except it be bound to a land area of its own."[47] Christianity and Indigenous spiritualities, though discrete, agree on the importance of physical territory.

Reflections on Methodology

> "Because qualitative research is interpretive, the stories of both the researcher and the research participants are reflected in the analysis." – Margaret Kovach[48]

In light of Kovach's words, it is prudent and necessary for me to be transparent and clear about who I am and what I bring to the study. Furthermore, I have chosen to present my research in *narrative* form. Following the example of well-known and highly regarded scholars in the Humanities, like Marina Warner and Stephen Greenblatt, as well as Indigenous scholars and

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[44] Grim 2006, 301; Stonechild 2020, 35; Viveiros de Castro 1998, 469, 477.

[45] Stonechild quotes Elder Mosôm Danny as saying, "We do not have a religion, but rather a way of living that includes prayer, worship. […] It is a close relationship with the Creator in all aspects of our lives." (2020, 127).

[46] Stonechild 2020, 19.

[47] Deloria 1970, 179.

[48] Margaret Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts*, 2nd ed. (University of Toronto Press, 2021), 26.

writers like Kathleen E. Absolon (Minogiizhigokwe), Bagele Chilisa, and Margaret Kovach, I bring the personal into the academic, disclosing not only my scholarly analysis, but also the personal journey that brought me from the beginning of my research to one of its major conclusions (the end of my master's). It seemed apt to structure my thesis on sacred narratives as a story itself, both to reflect my subject of study and to demonstrate how narratives function in real-time. Because I could not possibly recount all the details of the past three years, especially not in the allotted space, I selected the thoughts and experiences that I thought most relevant and helpful to adequately (re)present my project. This, too, illustrates one of my key points: stories, by necessity, are *representations* rather than a full download of Truth – either for brevity's sake (as in my case) or for potentially more contentious reasons (including, unfortunately, manipulation).

By recounting my learning journey in this way and telling my reader what to expect, I hope to be transparent about my lack of omniscience. My perspective is but one of many, though I have considered a plurality of others. This approach also "shows my work," as high school math teachers asked us to do. For additional transparency: I hope this format also proves more compelling.

My Origin Story

I was born in Peru but raised away from my family's home country, mostly on traditional, unceded Omàmiwininiwag territory – in the areas known as Gatineau and Ottawa – where I wrote this thesis. Regardless of geography, I was brought up to be a good Peruvian girl: Catholic, hard-working, and polite.[49] For the first five or so years of my life, my religiosity

[49] Kirsten Lesage et al., *Catholicism Has Declined in Latin America Over the Past Decade* (Pew Research Center, 2026), https://doi.org/10.58094/93CE-0A97. According to 2024 statistics, Catholicism in Peru has decreased

wasn't anything serious, more cultural than anything, at least until my dad's work took us to Seoul, Korea. There, in the mid-late 1990s, I attended an American Christian school. I would later learn that the kind of Christianity I picked up during my primary school years was theologically, qualitatively, and stubbornly different from that of my parents, household, and people. During my stint at this school, where Bible studies was its own full subject and teachers had funny haircuts, a very popular animated movie with an award-winning soundtrack came out.[50] I became obsessed with it and the biblical story where it found its inspiration, and watched it repeatedly, as children are wont to do. I also *loved* Jesus, less as a holy figure or saviour – though I may not have understood, much less admitted, that back then – and more as a character who was deeply interesting in an imitable way, like one might now relate to a YouTube influencer. I was interested in what biblical characters were wearing, what their lives were like, what kinds of food they ate. In a move that my sisters tease me for even now, my eight- or nine-year-old self begged my mom to let me "eat like Jesus," which a) I knew very little about, and b) apparently involved a lot of lentils and olive oil.

A few years later, we moved to Ottawa for my mom's career. My religious education continued in the Catholic schools I attended, but my religious fervour ebbed. Instead, I began learning about other – related, but distinct – ancient cultural groups: the Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans. An imaginative child, I readily absorbed this information, especially about mythology, which, in my child-brain was *obviously* different from religion. I was hooked.

But the young are easily distracted. The grand narratives and characters I loved faded into pleasant memories as I marched gamely into adolescence. My teenage years likewise allowed me

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from 76% to 67%, demonstrating that despite its decline in my home country, Catholicism remains the majority religion.

[50] The animated film in question, *The Prince of* Egypt, continues to be one of my favourites.

more freedom over my religious practices; my parents no longer required me to attend mass on Sundays, and so I stopped going. By the time I reached post-secondary, Catholicism was, for the most part, a distant memory. I accompanied my parents to mass on Christmas and Easter, if that. In the meantime, I studied health science and psychology in the pursuit of a medical degree, steeping me in the scientific method and the pursuit of the highest possible level of objectivity, learning all along that Truth could be uncovered through double-blinded randomized controlled trials and rigorous quantitative analysis.

My early adulthood brought with it a series of doubts in the worldview that had been carefully instilled in me. By the time I graduated with a bachelor's, I began to question the universality of the scientific truth. How could I trust authorities that claimed to understand the human body when there were, for example, a litany of pharmaceuticals whose mechanisms we could but speculate about? Clearly, there were things scientific tools and methodologies could not ascertain. I found this deeply disconcerting and turned away from the medical field, perplexed by what I deemed human arrogance.

Still, I was blinded by the layers of privilege conferred by a middle-class upbringing and chose not to continue my questioning. My mid-late twenties, during which I was establishing a new career, confronted me with the difficulties of adulthood in a capitalist society. Then, I landed work as an administrator with Indigenous-led organizations, which required learning about Indigenous cultures and contemporary issues. The meager four years of Canadian education I had at the primary and secondary levels was an insufficient primer for this lesson in Canada's bloody and difficult history with Indigenous Peoples. My professional education shattered the naïve illusions I held about the country I now called home. My eyes were opened.

My professional career also encouraged me to learn about Indigenous worldviews. I found that these, though diverse, were fundamentally different from the Western worldview I was born, bred, and lived in. My increasingly deep relationships with Indigenous individuals and communities also allowed me the privilege of seeing more of Indigenous Knowledge and cultures. I saw the ways Indigenous entrepreneurs and innovators wove in an understanding of communal well-being, spirituality, and environmental stewardship and responsibility into their operations and lives more broadly. I began to be in spaces with Elders, whose lessons I seemed to internalize only later, upon months or even years of reflection and experience. I heard stories from multiple Indigenous cultures – creation stories and otherwise – noting similar threads between the cultures that shared territories, or who were traditionally neighbours, and understood that they were key to cultural continuity. The more I learned, the more I felt that Indigenous ways of knowing and being made a great deal of sense, much more sense than what I thought I knew so far. This gap, I thought, these differences in worldview had a lot to do with where we find ourselves as a global society.

I started graduate school in search of an answer to my burgeoning questions. I was on the precipice of a career change into psychotherapy, hoping to put my skills and education in health sciences and psychology to good use. The master's program I wanted to apply for required three courses in religion or religious studies. Not thinking much of it, I shopped around for courses that tickled my fancy and landed on something that resonated – Indigenous Peoples and Christianity. I knew about both, I figured, so how hard could it be? I ended up falling head over heels in love with the discipline, astounded at how religion could be simultaneously silently and loudly pervasive. I began to see its role in shaping the world around us, for better and worse.

My accidental detour into the field of religious studies meant that I knew too little to easily choose a thesis topic. How could I possibly contribute something I might consider meaningful? But then I recalled the writing advice I first came across as a child: "write what you know."

What did I know? Perhaps an excessively existential question for an academic task, but it was important to me to take inventory of and make use of my existing resources. I knew about my background and identity. Privileged, certainly, tempered with a dose of responsibility; I have immigrant parents to make proud, friends and colleagues who would inevitably ask about my research, especially if it at all related to my career in Indigenous "issues." I knew, therefore, that my research had to be meaningful and useful past sating my own curiosity, although that was important too. I had entered my master's with the inkling that I wanted to study mythologies because I have been addicted to them since I could write on my own, so that was a given.[51] I counted my certainties on one hand: useful research about mythologies that leveraged what I already knew.

To know what might be useful, I looked to the world around me, but not before looking into the world within. During my search for a thesis topic, it so happened that one of my best friends was learning how to facilitate sound baths, during which a practitioner uses instruments and their voice to create sounds that induce relaxation. She needed someone to practice on, and I figured it would be silly to pass up what I saw as, essentially, a free guided meditation. I entered the meditative space with one question: What could I possibly write about? I was not disappointed. While I lay in meditation, I was struck by the idea of Gaia – the Greek primordial

[51] The popular use of the term "myth" connotes a falsehood or an exaggerated story. I am using it according to its technical definition, which instead denotes a traditional story that is used to explain the world and its phenomena.

goddess, often considered a personification of the Earth. I felt certain this concept could contribute to my search and took the insight with me: Earth as a person, a character. And when I looked further afield to the world around me, I saw how an understanding of the Earth as a character or a living being had the potential to provide insights about the most pressing issue of our time: planetary climate crisis as a threat to long-term human survival. This climate crisis, which we are at least in part to blame for, will be the death of our species and a plethora of others if we do not change our ways.[52] But by what mechanisms could the Earth as portrayed in mythology have anything to do with climate change?

I drew further from my well, into the realm of psychology. The research shows that the narratives we know and tell about our world and ourselves affect our behaviour, often lying dormant in the subconscious, difficult to recognize in the light of day and equally challenging to combat.[53] Climate action is still slow, despite decades of scientists urging governments and the public to act quickly, lest humanity pollute itself into a mass grave.[54] We have known about the greenhouse effect since the nineteenth century and the environmental movement we are familiar with today had its origins in the 1970s, but our progress remains slow.[55] I wondered – were *stories* getting in our way?

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[52] Katherine Calvin et al., *Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, First, ed. Paola Arias et al., with Hoesung Lee (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), 2023), https://doi.org/10.59327/IPCC/AR6-9789291691647, 5-7; 16-17.

[53] Melanie C. Green, "Transportation into Narrative Worlds," in *Entertainment-Education Behind the Scenes*, ed. Lauren B. Frank and Paul Falzone (Springer International Publishing, 2021), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-63614-2_6, 87-88.

[54] Kristoffer Ekberg et al., *Climate Obstruction: How Denial, Delay and Inaction Are Heating the Planet*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2022), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003181132, 6; "History of Climate Action," CFR Education, Council on Foreign Relations, February 13, 2025, https://education.cfr.org/learn/timeline/history-climate-action.

[55] Svante Arrhenius, "On the Influence of Carbonic Acid in the Air upon the Temperature of the Earth," *Philosophical Magazine and Journal of Science* 5, no. 41 (1896): 237–76; Bert Bolin, *A History of the Science and Politics of Climate Change: The Role of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, 1st ed. (Cambridge

The last puzzle piece was my acquaintance with traditional Indigenous ways of knowing and being, which, to my knowledge, emphasized a relationship with the Land that involved being attuned to its needs and avoiding extraction. The Indigenous people I work with are primarily from Canada; they hold Western stories, but their ethos lies elsewhere. Could it come from their traditional stories and beliefs? More importantly, could we non-Indigenous people learn from that?

I knew enough, then, to start a project, one that braids my personal, academic, and professional experiences together and applies the resulting lens to a pressing and relevant issue. The topic is not the only piece of this research with personal significance; the approach, too, is meaningful. This thesis is a snapshot of my learning thus far.

Establishing a Theoretical Approach

I began this project knowing very little of the research process in the Humanities, especially as it pertained to Indigenous Knowledge. I knew from my professional life that Indigenous communities and individuals mistrusted academics after generations of exploitation by researchers. I was clear on not wanting to repeat the mistakes of my predecessors, but I was less clear on how I could do the research I wanted to do without being exploitative or without trying to shove Indigenous ideas into Western paradigms. I did not yet know how to learn in a way that did not feel like betraying these instincts, so I turned to decolonial scholars for answers.

I discovered that methodologies are rooted in epistemology, which is often defined as the theory of knowledge, or – more descriptively – as beliefs about knowledge, including how it is

University Press, 2007), https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511721731, 7; Frédéric Samama, *The Enigma of Climate Inaction: Why Are We Doing Nothing (or Almost Nothing) in the Face of Catastrophe?*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2026), 1.

produced and who that production involves.[56] This is one of the basic pieces of a scholarly worldview, but it is also affected by a broader worldview obtained from socio-cultural conditioning – one's origins, so to speak.

Western epistemologies and Indigenous epistemologies, having emerged on opposite sides of an ocean, are different.[57] Indigenous Peoples did not inherit their epistemologies from Greco-Roman philosophers[58] but rather developed them "based upon an animistic philosophy that views the human entity as but one entity within the relational family."[59] Academia's Western origins and its continued use and promotion of Eurocentric thought, ideals, and aspirations[60] often creates a constant tension that Indigenous researchers must navigate. [61] Kovach observes that "Indigenous thought, unprepared to separate reason and spirit, did not espouse an evolutionist theoretical perspective. As a result, Indigenous Knowledge systems were viewed by Western scientists as mere superstitions."[62] The validity of Indigenous

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[56] Margaret Kovach, "Doing Indigenous Methodologies," in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 5th ed., ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (SAGE Publications, Inc., 2018), 218, 229; Kovach 2021, 52.

[57] Neither Western nor Indigenous epistemologies are monolithic; within each, there are multiple schools of thought. The differences and similarities I outline here are an attempt to establish overall patterns that focus primarily on the *dominant* epistemologies.

[58] "Life on this continent and views concerning it were not shaped in a post-Roman atmosphere. The entire outlook of the people was one of simplicity and mystery, not scientific or abstract. The western hemisphere produced wisdom, western Europe produced knowledge." Vine Deloria Jr., *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*, 3rd ed., Avon Books 64477 (Avon Books, 1970), 11.

[59] Deloria 1970, 11; Kovach 2021, 35.

[60] Debassige, for example, wonders, "'How can students [and others], steeped primarily in hegemonic Eurocentric consciousness, become aware of the nature of their cultural conditioning?'" (2010, 16).

[61] Debassige, Brent, "Re-Conceptualizing Anishinaabe Mino-Bimaadiziwin (the Good Life) as Research Methodology: A Spirit-Centered Way in Anishinaabe Research," *Canadian Journal of Native Education* 33, no. 1 (2010): 11–28, 154. On pages 13-14, Debassige notes the tension between the distinct epistemologies, "There is a tenuous relationship in which Traditional people who are also scholars in academe continuously find themselves situated. Traditional scholars work through the tensions within and between teaching and learning environments that are distinctly Indigenous, and schooling environments that are primarily steeped in Western European intellectual convention." See also Kovach 2021, 10-20, where Kovach reflects on her role in creating space for Indigenous thought and practice in academia, which has historically silenced and marginalized Indigenous worldviews. Kovach refers to this phenomenon as "Eurocentrism" or "Western dominance".

[62] Kovach 2021, 65.

epistemologies, then, is rarely taken for granted in the academy, so it is crucial to centre these when learning about or researching alongside Indigenous people and communities.

It is also worthwhile to note some essential components of Indigenous epistemologies. Indigenous epistemologies are holistic; they recognize that Knowledge comes from many sources. This includes human sources (mind, body, heart, spirit) and non-human sources (animals, plants, the Land, dreams, and spirit); all loci are valid sources of Knowledge.[63] It is transmitted in various ways, such as through traditional teachings, stories, and dances.[64] In various Indigenous cultures, Knowledge is gained through personal experience and is fundamentally *practical*.[65] It is an extension of our bodies – not only what we do with ourselves, but also how we interact with the world around us, including the tools and art we create.[66] Indigenous Knowledge is thus embodied and *used* in day-to-day life. Indigenous Knowledge is also *alive*; it is contextual and results from a myriad of relationships, which means it are ever-changing and must be embodied (enacted) to make sense.[67]

The changing nature of Indigenous Knowledge is due to a responsiveness to contextual shifts.[68] Indigenous cultures were developed in relationship with the Land and well-adapted to

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[63] Jean-Guy Goulet, *Ways of Knowing Experience, Knowledge, and Power among the Dene Tha* (UBC Press, 2008), 30; Kovach 2021, 68-9.

[64] Jan Hare, "'They Tell a Story and There's Meaning behind That Story': Indigenous Knowledge and Young Indigenous Children's Literacy Learning," *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy* 12, no. 4 (2012): 389–414, https://doi.org/10.1177/1468798411417378, 392.

[65] Goulet 2008, xxix.

[66] Kathleen E. Absolon (Minogiizhigokwe), Kaandossiwin: How We Come to Know (Fernwood Publishing, 2011), 119; Oy Lein Jace Harrison and Lucia Eyzaguirre, "Recovering Stories as a Liberatory Practice: An Introductory Workshop to Community-Based Research," June 15, 2024.

[67] Absolon 2011, 132; Debassige 2010, 18; Kovach 2021, 70-71; Patterson et al. 2023, 3.

[68] Kovach cautions her reader against seeking a one-size-fits-all approach to Indigenous methodologies: "Because so much of Indigenous ways of knowing is internal, personal, and experiential, creating one standardized framework for Indigenous research is impossible and inevitably soul sapping for Indigenous people. […] personalizing an Indigenous conceptual framework […] must be based on Indigenous thought and imbued with an Indigenous sensibility and ethics." (2021, 48).

its perpetual changes, requiring attunement to their surroundings. Despite the colonial project's forced displacement of Indigenous people, traditional cultures have remained steady in encouraging this attunement to the Land and its inhabitants. In practice, this means listening for and responding to subtle signals, as well as expanding the base of Knowledge where new information becomes available. Not only do Knowledge and their associated methodologies adjust to their physical and geographical contexts, but also to their cultural, social, and relational contexts. There is no one-size-fits-all approach, nor a one-size-fits-all answer. Knowledge is derived from a combination of traditions, place, lived experience, and inward knowing.

Another key piece of Indigenous epistemologies is Indigenous axiology, which is an understanding of and appreciation for Indigenous ethics, values, and spirituality.[69] Unlike Western axiology, which is often described as "the study of values" and separated from Western epistemology, Indigenous axiology is *embedded in* Indigenous epistemology.[70] Indigenous Knowledge is inherently imbued with an Indigenous understanding of ethics, which is largely based on the idea of *relationship* and building/maintaining good relations with all kin (human and non-human; self and community). Since Indigenous ways of knowing require knowledge to be practiced and acted upon, Indigenous axiology and epistemology are further intertwined with day-to-day life – one is expected to live in a way that is congruent with the community's values, ethics, beliefs, relationships, and one's experiences. To know is to practice. To know is to live.

The inextricable link between Indigenous epistemology and Indigenous axiology has practical consequences for Indigenous methodologies. Since relationships are fundamental,

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[69] I will use of the terms "religion" and "spirituality" almost interchangeably, but I recognize that scholars and non-academics alike may have negative perceptions of religion. Whenever an author has specified a distinction between the two terms *for them*, I will use the term that they use to describe a connection with the sacred that involves specific rites, rituals, and practices and/or the term they have declared a preference for.

[70] Kovach 2021, 68.

researchers employing Indigenous methodologies must prioritize good relations throughout their research projects. This goes further than universities' formal ethics approval processes, which typically only cover the retrieval and storage of information and are often framed in a way that minimizes harm. Indigenous methodologies, on the other hand, are more concerned with maximizing meaningful and tangible benefit for all involved. The researcher's responsibility extends far past due dates, considering also what happens after the project is finished, specifically what community gets in return and how the Knowledge exchanged during research is held or shared. To be an ethical researcher, I must be an ethical person.

Weaving a Hybrid Approach

Equipped with a new understanding of my epistemological options, I was free to reconsider the theory and method underpinning my analysis. Searching the Western research toolbelt for congruence with Indigenous ways of understanding, I grounded my research in narrative theory, as it is suitable for analyzing stories and has been applied in multiple disciplines, including literature, psychology, and education.[71] Thematic narrative analysis is my primary method.

I strive to employ principles of Indigenous methodologies and practice doing research in a good way throughout this project. I maintain good relations with storytellers and the communities they come from by following their respective protocols and intentionally taking time to know them as individuals.[72] My project, then, emphasizes respect for the stories and the

[71] D. Jean Clandinin, *Engaging in Narrative Inquiry* (Routledge, 2016), https://doi-org.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca/10.4324/9781315429618, 9; Puckett 2016, 120.

[72] Example of protocols: I provided an honorarium for both storytellers but distributed them differently depending on their respective protocols – the Catholic priest asked me to donate the money to the church, as he could not personally accept it. In Indigenous communities, it is expected that Elders and Knowledge Keepers receive honoraria or a gift in exchange for sharing their knowledge and time – it signals reciprocity. I also brought the Elder a tobacco tie (*semaa*).

people they belong to, responsibility toward the communities who are touched by my work, reverence for the beliefs shared with me, and reciprocity. An important piece of this approach is ensuring that the storytellers are comfortable with my work and its conclusions and engage in ongoing conversations with them to determine how each community can best benefit from my findings. My analysis employs a decolonial lens, thus allowing me to use various media as "texts" (including oral stories) and to consider various sources "valid" (including intuition and dreams).

Thesis Outline

> "Writing […] creates pressure to fragment information by creating themes and categories, thus forming a reduced and de-contextualized analysis, […] Indigenous approaches keep stories and voices within a wholistic context and let the readers make their own conclusions and interpretations." - Absolon (Minogiizhigokwe)[73]

As Absolon's words intimate, this thesis is artificially fragmented for ease of reading, though the information therein is inextricably linked. The monograph is divided into three sections: two chapters and a short conclusion. The chapters discuss the Christian and Omàmiwininiwag creation stories, respectively. The two myths both exist orally and textually, but the Christian myth is predominantly understood as a written text, while the Omàmiwininiwag myth is mostly an oral one. Since no story is ever fully only written or only oral, I examine both narratives in written and oral form.

The chapters begin with the stories themselves, then shift to historical and exegetical context-setting before diving into a narrative analysis of the Nature characters in each cosmogonic myth. The analyses explore each story's salient themes and messages,

[73] Absolon 2011, 152.

demonstrating their commonalities, differences, and the practical implications of these. The conclusion summarizes my findings and proposes a pathway toward continued learning.

A Note on Expectations and Terminology

This project moves between two separate origin stories and their associated cultures, resulting in the need for me to define terms I will use throughout, as well as to set my reader's expectations.

Indigenous storytelling does not often parallel the story structure we Westerners are used to. Western stories typically have a clear beginning, middle, and end, which can be referred to as the three-act structure. Indigenous stories, by contrast, do not necessarily share that structure, and may prove disorienting to readers who are expecting Indigenous narratives to follow Western frameworks. This thesis presents both Western and Indigenous stories, so it is crucial that we maintain open minds to both their structures, lest we miss the point altogether.

Another crucial point about Indigenous myths is that non-Indigenous people may not be able to access them in their entirety. This is partly a result of the pre-eminence of oral storytelling in a myriad of Indigenous cultures, and because the myths are sacred and therefore not to be shared indiscriminately. Kimmerer aptly summarizes the idea that not all stories are apt for all contexts in Indigenous ways of understanding,

> "We [Indigenous Peoples] are told that stories are living beings, they grow, they develop, they remember, they change not in their essence, but sometimes in their dress. They are shared and shaped by the land and the culture and the teller, so that one story may be told widely and differently. Sometimes only a fragment is shared, showing just one face of a many faceted story, depending on its purpose."[74]

[74] Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 1st ed. (Milkweed Editions, 2013), 386.

As a non-Indigenous researcher, it is my responsibility to respect the cultures and Peoples I learn from, which involves protecting their intellectual property. I therefore share only what I have been given explicit permission to share from my conversations with the two storytellers. All other story fragments are drawn from existing literature.

There are a handful of terms that I utilize throughout this thesis that I have gathered from my professional and academic experience with Indigenous Peoples. When terms are capitalized, it is to show respect; these should be seen as proper nouns. The definitions listed here, unless specifically noted, are based on my experiential knowledge and understanding of each word or phrase. "Knowledge" refers to Traditional Indigenous Knowledge, which is "a body of understandings that have accumulated over time and been informed by the worldviews of the communities that have generated, practiced, refined, and modified them."[75] "Community" refers generally to members of Indigenous communities, which may comprise a First Nation, for example, or simply be used as shorthand for a group of (Indigenous) people one has a relationship and/or responsibility to. "Right relations" denotes relationship(s) based in reciprocity and the desire for mutual well-being. To do something in a "good way" means to centre relationality, respect, and collective wellness for humans and other-than-human beings, including the Earth itself; it means to act in a way that is consistent with Indigenous worldviews. "Terrestrials," originally coined by transdisciplinary scholar, Bruno Latour, signifies all beings on Earth, human and other-than-human alike.[76] Finally, "the Land" refers to the physical environment, that is, the Earth, including the Skies and Waters.

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[75] Natasha Tassell-Matamua, "Indigenous Knowledges. What They Are and Why They Matter.," *EXPLORE* 21, no. 3 (2025): 103144, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.explore.2025.103144, 2.

[76] Lori G. Beaman and Lauren Strumos, "Toward Equality: Including Non-Human Animals in Studies of Lived Religion and Nonreligion," *Social Compass* 71, no. 3 (2024): 406–24, https://doi.org/10.1177/00377686231170993, 411.

This expanded understanding of key terminology and what constitutes a story allows us to properly consider two distinct origin myths and their practical implications for the ways we choose to orient our lives. The literature establishes the need for us to carefully examine the assumptions we may carry about ancient stories because the stories and the assumptions we hold about them hold very real power over the lives of individuals and communities. However, origin stories also come from significantly different circumstances and contexts than our own, so it is important that we wrestle with our assumptions by looking to the texts and their contexts. Was Genesis truly anthropocentric, as scholars like White have claimed, or is a contemporary lens fogging our view? And, if we are indeed hindered by our modern ideas, what might a clearer picture of the Christian creation myth look like?

Chapter One: Genesis

Chapter Introduction

I began my project with a bias against the Christian creation narrative I had grown up with. Without much knowledge about the narrative's history, it was easy to take at face value and, in my view, felt clearly anthropocentric. Then I did my research.

Along the way, I discovered that the historical meanings did not always line up with my contemporary preconceptions. This chapter mimics my learning journey, looking to the Genesis cosmogonic narrative, as well as the extensive literature about it, to unearth what the Christian version of the story conveys about Nature. The written and oral versions are included herein to allow for a holistic analysis.

The chapter begins with the authoritative (biblical) written story and an oral retelling, allowing my reader to (re-)familiarize themselves with a myth that millions of us take for granted. The story is followed by an overview of its history, including its prominence in the Christian canon despite its Jewish origins. I then examine how the myth was interpreted as Christianity was established and matured, including an example of contemporary retelling and interpretation by a Catholic priest I spoke to. Finally, I weave the history, reception history, and contemporary interpretation into an analysis of how Genesis conveys Nature, emphasizing how it portrays other-than-human Nature, human Nature, and the relationship between humans and other-than-human Nature.

The Story

The Written Version[77]

Genesis 1

1 In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. 2 And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. [… And God made the light, Heaven, the waters, the Earth, grass, herbs, fruit trees, the Sun and the stars, fish and fowl, beast of the earth] 25 […] and God saw that it was good.

26 And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. 27 So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. 28 And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.

29 And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in the which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat.

Genesis 2

[…] 16 And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: 17 But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die. […] 20 And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field; but for Adam there was not found an help meet for him. […] 22 And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man.

Genesis 3

1 Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast […] And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden? […] 2 And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden: 3 But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it […] lest ye die. 4 And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die: […] 6 And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, […] she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat. 7 And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons.

14 And the LORD God said unto the serpent, Because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life: 15 And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise

[77] Selected verses from Genesis 1-3 (KJV).

his heel. [16] Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee. [17] And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree […]: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; […] [19] In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.

[21] Unto Adam also and to his wife did the LORD God make coats of skins, and clothed them. [22] And the LORD God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever: [23] Therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken. [24] […] and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life.

An Oral Version

Though practicing Christians and Jews may have first encountered the written version in the Bible or the Torah, others, especially those who grew up in non-Abrahamic Western contexts may have heard a more informal version. I wanted to capture the richness of oral storytelling – even in a context that preferences an authoritative written version – so I sat down with a Catholic priest who worked at the church I grew up in and who agreed to talk about the Christian creation story with me.[78] I told the priest, Father Lindsay, that there was no expectation of rigorous preparation, rather, I was looking for an organic conversation where he could lean on his expertise.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Father Lindsay's retelling was remarkably similar to the biblical account. Interestingly, the storyteller mentioned multiple times that he was forgetting details and offered to retrieve his Bible for greater accuracy. Though unnecessary for this project, this

[78] To guide the session without being overly rigid, I prepared three prompts: a) Please tell me the Christian origin story as you know it; b) What, if anything, do you want your audience(s) to take away from that story?; and c) Keeping this story in mind, and putting it in the context of your spiritual/religious/cultural tradition, how would you define "Nature"? What is its relation to the divine and humanity? I sent the prompts in advance for transparency.

deference to the details presented in the Bible is illustrative of the book's authority in the Christian tradition – even in Catholicism, which is less scriptural than Protestant denominations.

I present Father Lindsay's retelling here to mimic that informality, but also to show how even conversational retellings contain the same narrative elements:[79]

> "The first chapter presents the big picture. Before God, there was nothing. On the first day, God said, 'Let there be light,' and then separated the light from the darkness. And the second day he separated the waters above from the waters below from the firmament. And the third day he separates the land from the water and his vegetation on the land. And then the fourth day, he fills the sky with the sun and the moon and the stars and puts vegetation on the land. And then on the fifth day, he puts the fish in the sea and the birds in the air. And then on the sixth day, he creates the animals and the human beings.
>
> At the end of each day, the Bible says, 'And God looked at his creation and saw it was good.' And then at the end of it, when he was finished his work, he looked at it and said, 'It was very good.' The order of creation comes from God. It reflects God. It's all good. And then he tells the human beings to, you know, be fruitful and multiply. He told that to the fish of the sea, to the birds, be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.
>
> Then the second chapter is complementary to it, but it's not the same. And there he starts talking about the garden, the garden in the east. And then in this garden, he puts Adam, which just means man, and tells him to till the soil. Adam also names the animals, he's a guardian of the animals in the garden.
>
> But he's given a test. He's given a test with the tree of knowledge of good and evil. God says, 'Eat of any tree in the garden or any plant,' notice that he doesn't talk about eating the animals, 'but of this one tree you're not to eat, from the tree of knowledge of good and evil.' Then the serpent sneaks up, comes up to Eve, and he says, 'Can you eat of all the trees of the garden?' She says, 'All but the tree of knowledge of good and evil, of that we can't eat or touch.' With that comes the Fall, and the third chapter of Genesis spells out the problems Adam, Eve, and the serpent will now have."[80]

[79] I have edited Father Lindsay's retelling of Genesis 1-3 lightly for clarity and succinctness, but it captures the gist of the story he shared.

[80] Father Lindsay Harrison, "Storytelling Session," (Ottawa, Ontario), April 10, 2025.

The Story's Origins

The Christian myth's history overlaps with that of the Omàmiwininiwag because of colonization, as I discuss in Chapter Two, but also because both myths as we know them are a result of intercultural contact and consequent syncretism. The Christian cosmogonic myth is not an "original" work, but rather, was adopted from the Hebrew Torah. How the story was interpreted across faiths differs, but the story itself is the same.

The Jewish Torah, which comprises Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, can be seen as a result of Hebrew exile into Babylon between 597 and 539 BCE. During this time, Hebrews were deported from their homelands in Judah to the bustling city of Babylon, where they faced the humiliation of their God not intervening or saving them from this fate and the further mortification of a thwarted uprising in the 580s.[81] In Babylon, the Hebrews became acquainted with Babylonian ways of being, which included annual, public recitations of the Babylonian creation story at the New Year's festival, read from centuries-old tablets.[82]

In the meantime, the Hebrews were facing the real threat of cultural forgetting, steeped as they were in a world that was not their own. They were released back to Judah once Persian emperor Cyrus II conquered the city.[83] Upon their return, the Hebrews were forced to rebuild what had been razed to the ground – physically and culturally. Terrified that their culture would undergo permanent contamination by Babylonian ideas and stories, the Hebrews began to weave their own stories into one, authoritative text that would keep their cultural memory in case of any future apocalypses. In this, they took a cue from the Mesopotamians they had suffered under, and

[81] Richard Elliott Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (Summit Books, 1987), 98-100.

[82] Friedman 1987, 152-155; Stephen Greenblatt, *The Rise and Fall of Adam and Eve: The Story That Created Us* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2018), 27.

[83] Friedman 1987, 155.

thus were born the Five Books of Moses, known also as the Torah or the Pentateuch.[84] Even though the stories that went into the Pentateuch were not new, this ensured a definitive version that could be referred to in times of crisis and confusion. [85] The Hebrews became the People of the Book.

Although we do not know who curated the volume originally, researchers think that the Torah as we know it today was compiled from at least four separate sources. In 1878, biblical scholar Julius Wellhausen described and categorized these.[86] The four sources were named Jahwist (from approximately 950 BCE), Eloist (around 850 BCE), Deuteronomist (around 600 BCE), and Priestly (approximately 500 BCE).[87] Genesis is thought to be a result of Jahwist, Eloist, and Priestly authors/editors.[88]

The compiled Hebrew story made its way into the first authoritative Christian version of Genesis, found in the Septuagint, a Greek translation.[89] By the time I became acquainted with the story in the 1990s, Genesis had been translated many times over; the version I was most familiar with was the King James Version (KJV), a 1611 English translation of the Hebrew Torah. [90] The story I grew up with, then, carries with it all the well-documented limitations of any translation.[91]

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[84] Greenblatt 2018, 33.

[85] Friedman 1987, 160; Greenblatt 2018, 35.

[86] Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, trans. J. Sutherland Black and Allan Menzies (Adam & Charles Black, 1885), https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044010510303.

[87] Friedman 1987, 25-27.

[88] Friedman 1987, 53.

[89] Andrew Louth et al., *The Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (InterVarsity press, 2001), *xl.*

[90] Louth et al., 2001, *xliv.*

[91] A personal example of translations' difficulties: The English word "realize" does not have a direct translation in Spanish. The closest colloquial match is *"darse cuenta,"* which (back translated) means "to take into account." There is a connotation of instantaneous understanding in the word "realize" that does not translate well into its Spanish counterpart(s).

Because every language encodes something intangible that can be hard to translate as a non-native speaker, I understand that my analysis may inherently miss some of the nuances of the original Hebrew. Nevertheless, enough biblical scholars and theologians have grappled with the subtleties of translation in the past two millennia to give me confidence in my reading being sufficiently loyal to authors long gone.

Every story is slippery, especially those that endure. The ways lasting stories are interpreted can shift wildly from one context to another. The Christian origin myth is no different – even though it is a written and theoretically unchanging account. The story remained generally the same through the years: God created the world, including Adam and Eve, then the serpent's deception led to them disobeying God's only rule, resulting in punishment for all involved. What clergy, theologians, and laypeople *got* from the myth, however, changed over time. And some of these interpretations have had lasting impacts.

As I familiarized myself with the complex history of the Christian creation story and its interpretation, it became clear to me that the point of my study was not to pin down "original" versions of either the Christian or Omàmiwininiwag myth for my analysis. Rather, the point was to understand the wide sweeps of ideas and interpretations they have elicited. To this end, then, it became vital that I trace the narrative *around* the narrative that opens Genesis. To better understand the impact narrative interpretation has on attitudes towards Nature, I focus specifically on dominant interpretations over time, who they were shaped or guided by, and what these had to do with Nature as a character or entity.

The Story's Reception, Critique, and Elaboration

Early Christianity Through Early Modernity

The earliest Christian theologians in the first few centuries of the Common Era held Genesis – especially its opening chapters – close to their hearts and minds. Louth et al., in their compilation of early Christian commentary on the Scriptures, assert that the first few chapters of Genesis were uniquely influential on the development of Christian theology, more influential than the remainder of the Old Testament.[92] The diverse group of men known as the Church Fathers believed that a proper understanding of humanity's creation and downfall helped put into perspective the importance of God's incarnation as Jesus.[93] The two figures were seen as counterpoints: where Adam represented sin, Jesus represented salvation; where the former was cursed to die after disobeying God's explicit orders, the latter was resurrected and an embodiment of God's will come to life; Adam is born of the earth and Jesus of heaven; Adam faced the tree of knowledge, while Jesus was forced to contend with the wood of the cross.[94] Without the severity of Adam's mistake, then, it was much harder to see the magnitude of Jesus' greatness or the meaning of his sacrifice, so it became of utmost primacy to create this illustrative dichotomy.

On other details, the Church Fathers were less united. Committed to differentiating themselves from their Jewish predecessors and the polytheists that they lived among, early Christians were initially wary of this origin myth that sounded uncomfortably familiar in its fantastical nature to pagan myths.[95]

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[92] Louth et al. 2001, *xxxix*.
[93] Louth et al. 2001, *xlviii*.
[94] Louth et al. 2001, *xlvii*.
[95] Greenblatt 2018, 75.

Furthermore, discussions about how the myth was written and the details that were left out was well-established. Verses like Genesis 1:26, where God says, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness," (who are "we"?) are missing key details that any curious reader would want answers to. So Jewish, Christian, and Muslim leaders, scholars, and exegetes posited explanations and corresponding narratives.[96] The Jewish tradition of *Midrash* (expanding on unchanging Scripture in a way that can adapt to an ever-changing context), arguably encouraged the proliferation of noncanonical stories. This inspired other, complementary literary works that attempted to round out the story and explain its more questionable elements, such as *The Life of Adam and Eve* (*The Life*), *The Apocalypse of Adam*, and *The Testimony of Truth.*[97]

The Life began to circulate widely in the first few centuries of the Common Era, possibly an original Hebrew work, translated first into Greek and then into many other languages.[98] It recounts the story of what happened to Adam and Eve after the fall, as well as their deaths. In it, the couple's children are told the events that led to the fall by both Adam *and* Eve, giving the woman a say in her story for the first time.[99] Similarly, *The Apocalypse of Adam* is from Adam's point of view, as he shares his experiences with his son, Seth. In this version, God is jealous of the creatures who have grown stronger than He and withholds knowledge maliciously, making Eve's disobedience heroic.[100] *The Testimony of Truth* is from the serpent's point of view, prompting the reader to ask why a good or kind god would withhold knowledge, and making the

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[96] James L. Kugel, *The Bible as It Was* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), 29, 56; Michael E. Stone, *A History of the Literature of Adam and Eve*, Early Judaism and Its Literature / Society of Biblical Literature, no. 03 (Scholars Press, 1992), 4; Roberto Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets in the Qur'an and Muslim Literature* (Routledge, 2013), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203037256, 84, 91.

[97] Greenblatt 2018, 66-67.

[98] Greenblatt 2018, 67; M. D. Johnson, "Life of Adam and Eve: A New Translation and Introduction," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2, ed. James Hamilton Charlesworth (Doubleday, 1985), 252.

[99] Johnson 1985, 249.

[100] George W. MacRae, "The Coptic Gnostic Apocalypse of Adam," *The Heythrop Journal* 6, no. 1 (1965): 27–35, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2265.1965.tb01071.x, 28.

serpent the hero.[101] The questions the creation story invited, with its loud silence on critical topics, threatened both Christian theology and the theological integrity of Jewish sacred texts, so both communities had a stake in finding a solution.

The solution came first from Hellenized Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria in the early decades of the Common Era.[102] Until this point, the stories in the Torah were meant to be interpreted as historical accounts, but Philo's training in Greek philosophy sharpened his eye for subtlety and deeper meaning within stories.[103] He began applying the philosophical method of allegorical interpretation to the Torah, allowing other Hellenized Jews to see and read Genesis 1-3 in a new light.[104] This shift from historical to allegorical interpretation of the Torah set the stage for centuries of Jewish exegesis, later influencing Christian Church Father Origen of Alexandria's approach to the same texts.[105]

Origen, born in the second century CE and the son of a Christian martyr, was a pious man and a prominent voice in the early Church (second and third centuries CE). "[…] he became the greatest early Christian advocate for the allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures," according to literary historian Stephen Greenblatt, who traces the history of Adam and Eve's story.[106] Although some of Origen's writings were later considered heretical, the allegorical approach to exegesis persisted in Christian circles and was expanded by Origen's followers.[107]

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[101] Greenblatt 2018, 66-67.

[102] Pagels 1988, 64-65.

[103] Greenblatt 2018, 77; Pagels 1988, 64-65.

[104] John Marenbon, *Medieval Philosophy* (Routledge, 2006), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203968765, 25; Pagels 1988, 64-65.

[105] Greenblatt 2018, 76-77.

[106] Greenblatt 2018, 78.

[107] Paula Fredriksen, *Sin: The Early History of an Idea* (Princeton University Press, 2012), 112; Origen, *Origen: On First Principles: A Reader's Edition*, First edition, trans. John Behr (Oxford University Press, 2019), *xiii*.

Then, in the fourth century CE, Augustine of Hippo's commitment to understanding Genesis seismically shifted Christianity's approach to it.[108] Born out of Augustine's insistence on understanding history to understand his present, his spotlighting of the origin story and view that it should be interpreted literally brought Genesis 1-3 a new level of fame and attention. As Greenblatt notes, Augustine had a major role in this story's continued relevance in Christianity.[109] This is a strong statement, given that the Church Fathers generally saw the creation story as an explanation for the state of the world and, as I have mentioned, the bedrock of Christian theology.[110] Genesis was important anyway, and Augustine's reintroduction of literal exegesis made it even more so.

Early Christians debated hotly about the nature of our first sin, and therefore which parts of human nature were corrupt. Was our downfall disobedience or unstoppable sexuality?[111] Tatian the Syrian (120-173 CE) taught that the tree of knowledge's fruit specifically conveyed carnal knowledge,[112] despite there being no mention of sex in the biblical text. Clement of Alexandria (150-c. 215 CE) and his contemporary Irenaeus (125-202 CE) rejected Tatian's hypothesis, arguing that sex was natural and, though there was a sexual component of Adam and Eve's disobedience, the most offensive part – the real sin – was disobeying God.[113] Clement's and Irenaeus's views shaped Christianity for centuries, arguably until the present.[114] Among

[108] Fredriksen 2012, 113-114; Greenblatt 2018, 80.
[109] Greenblatt 2018, 97.
[110] Louth et al. 2001, *li*.
[111] Pagels 1988, 27-28.
[112] Pagels 1988, 27.
[113] Pagels 1988, 28.
[114] Pagels 1988, 28.

these views are the assumption that sex must only be for procreation, and that our drive for sex outside of procreation is sinful.[115]

Augustine's move back towards literalism settled the debate once and for all with his concept of original sin. He argued that the Fall was a permanent rupture of humanity's primordial goodness, resulting in not only death, but also a now-indelibly flawed nature that warred with the universal order.[116] Before the Fall, he posited, all was well; the inherent perfection of God's creative fingerprint meant prelapsarian sex was not lustful or indecent, work was not backbreaking, and soul and body were united.[117] The rational mind ruled, allowing for the proper use of God-given free will.[118] But Adam and Eve abdicated this gift by using their free will to turn against God through their disobedience, shattering the prelapsarian unity of body and soul.[119] This made bodies vulnerable to death, as they were now separate from the immortal soul. Since Augustine saw Adam and Eve as the literal protoplasts of our species, he reasoned that all their descendants would inherit through sex, which requires a temporary divorce from reason and, therefore, an abandonment of the soul.[120] Human nature was now a sexually transmitted disgrace. This evocative and pessimistic idea – that we are permanently stained by Adam and Eve's actions – has followed us since his time.[121]

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[115] Pagels 1988, 29-30.

[116] Fredriksen 2012, 115-116, 122-123; Pagels 1988, 141.

[117] Marco Damonte, "God, the Bible and the Environment: An Historical Excursus on the Relationship between Christian Religion and Ecology," *Relations* 5, no. 1 (2017), https://doi.org/10.7358/rela-2017-001-damo., 30; Fredriksen 2012, 120-121.

[118] Fredriksen 2012, 121.

[119] Fredriksen 2012, 12

[120] Fredriksen 2012, 122.

[121] Pagels 1988, 150.

The Middle Ages ushered in a new era for Christianity alongside serious political changes, where the religion was not only state-sanctioned but held the seat of power.[122] Thus a small band of believers was transformed into an early iteration of the powerful institution we recognize today. The political movement signalled also a shift in geography, such that the areas with a Christian majority were no longer in Southwest Asia and North Africa, [123] but rather in western Europe. Regardless of these major upheavals, the way Christians understood their origin myth did not meaningfully shift throughout the Middle Ages, at least initially.

The period began with a heavy reliance on patristic biblical commentary.[124] According to Schroeder, the most influential patristic sources for medieval scholars and theologians interpreting Genesis were Jerome's Vulgate – the authoritative version of the Bible of the time – and his commentary on the Hebrew original, as well as Augustine's *Quaestiones Genesis* (*Questions on Genesis*) and *De Genesi ad Litteram* (*Concerning Genesis*).[125] Early medieval biblical commentators like Remigius of Auxerre (c. 841-c. 908)[126] mostly compiled their commentaries from the Church Fathers' works and – on occasion – more recent sources, rather than starting from scratch.[127] The ways medieval commentaries drew on the Church Fathers showed their preferences; as with all compilations, there is creativity in the curation of a new resource.[128] They did not often present new theological ideas, but rather highlighted existing

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[122] Richard William Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970), 15-16.

[123] Southwest Asia and north Africa, or SWANA, is a more specific and geographically accurate name for the geographical area commonly referred to as the Middle East.

[124] Joy A. Schroeder, ed., *The Book of Genesis*, The Bible in Medieval Tradition (BMT) (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 6. Schroeder's text is a translated and edited collection of medieval Christian commentary on Genesis.

[125] Schroeder 2015, 10.

[126] Schroeder 2015, 6.

[127] Schroeder 2015, 12.

[128] Schroeder 2015, 12.

ones, focusing mostly on ensuring that their readers understood scriptural historicity and language. This was an astute way to further entrench beliefs into the Christian framework, providing textual evidence for what had already been hard-won as orthodoxy. Genesis continued to be central, then, still acting as the bedrock for an overarching narrative spanning the Old and New Testaments in which Adam's Fall was merely the preface to the eternal salvation Jesus would bring.

What we see during the medieval period is therefore an expansion and explanation of the theology seeded by the Church Fathers through literal-historical readings of Genesis. In Remigius of Auxerre's *Expositio super Genesim* (*Exposition on Genesis*), for instance, we see Augustine's idea of the Fall changing nature itself echoed – the former's interpretation of Genesis 1:21 is that, by being ambiguous about "every living creature," the Bible pointed to animals' inherent mortality ("mutability") and thereby separated them from humans, who were originally created to be immortal.[129]

The distinction between humans and (other) animals was made clear in Remigius' interpretation of Genesis 1:26, where God creates man. Here, he reinforces not only difference but also privileges humans as being inherently closer to God because we are upright and physically closer to heaven.[130] In his reading of the following verse ("Let us make man in our image, after our likeness."), Remigius invokes the Trinity – who else would the "us" be?[131] This follows the early Christian emphasis on interpreting this Hebrew story in a way that underscored

[129] Schroeder 2015, 56. Schroeder has translated excerpts of the *Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis*, volume 136, a 1999 edition of Remigius' *Expositio*. All numbering of chapters and verses in this thesis correspond to those of the King James Version (KJV). Where my sources have used different versions of the Bible to number the chapters and verses, such as Schroeder, who uses the Vulgate numbering, I have cross-referenced the passages in question with the KJV and referenced the verse(s) as it (they) appear(s) in the KJV.

[130] Schroeder 2015, 58.

[131] Schroeder 2015, 58.

Christian theology. Remigius also threads in Augustinian ideals about prelapsarian sexuality, commenting that there was no lust before the fall and that arousal was a conscious choice, rather than a drive or a primarily physical response.[132] The patristic disdain for the "worldly" – the physical, embodied realm – in favour of the heavenly or spiritual realm is apparent. Interestingly, Remigius' commentary on the Christian creation myth simultaneously encourages a reverence for nature and all its creatures – including worms and scavengers – because all are God's creation and, when viewed correctly, have the potential to inspire wonder.[133]

Later in the Middle Ages, as Christian mysticism began to proliferate, more commentators began to introduce allegorical and mystical interpretations of Genesis. In the twelfth century, German nun and mystic Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) followed the medieval Christian female tradition of expressing her faith and understanding of the scriptures through letters and songs, rather than in formal commentaries.[134] Her writings emphasized deeper meanings to be found in the creation story, garnered not from exegesis, but from mystical encounters and visions.[135] It is noteworthy, too, that Hildegard's interpretation of Genesis was more favourable towards women than those of her predecessors. She subtly stressed the ways the first man and woman were complementary to and made for each other, both of God's creation, shifting the blame for the Fall from Eve to the Devil.[136] The overall exegetical emphasis remained on literal-historical readings, however, building on the thread of patristic analysis and setting the tone for Christian understandings of Genesis.

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[132] Schroeder 2015, 14, 72.

[133] Schroeder 2015, 58.

[134] Schroeder 2015, 20.

[135] Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, trans. Mother Columba Hart and Jane Bishop, Classics of Western Spirituality (Paulist Pr, 1990), 73-90; Hildegard of Bingen, *Solutions to Thirty-Eight Questions*, trans. Beverly Mayne Kienzle et al., Cistercian Studies, v. 253 (Liturgical Press, 2014), 39-42, 44-47.

[136] Hildegard of Bingen 1990, 77, 79.

Christianity flourished in Europe, maintaining a stronghold even after the Black Death in the fourteenth century.[137] As the survivors rebuilt over the next two centuries, the seeds of renewed interest in classical philosophy and art began to take root and proliferate.[138] The nostalgia for civilizations past wafted into Christianity, infusing it with a new flavour that smacked of the Church Fathers.[139] Scholars and theologians turned to early Christian sources, weaving their works together with that of Greek philosophers, resulting in very little movement on the Genesis front. The focus remained squarely on re-asserting the accuracy of the Christian origin myth's interpretations to date, as if to say, "We had it right all along, and what we have learned since has only affirmed us."[140]

However, the "discovery" of the Americas in 1492 presented a major stumbling block to this approach. Until that point, the Christian mainstream maintained that Genesis was a universally applicable story, that it told the story of how all humans came to be and how our circumstances became as they are.[141] The Taíno, the Indigenous people of Guanahani, where Columbus first landed, were not accounted for by existing understandings of creation.[142] The Indigenous group's existence alone was shocking – how was it possible that there were peoples the Spanish were not familiar with?[143] More pressingly, how were these people naked and unashamed, as though they lived in Eden itself? Were they part of the lost tribes of Israel?[144] But

[137] Southern 1970, 169.

[138] David W. Kling, *The Bible in History: How the Texts Have Shaped the Times* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 7, 9.

[139] Kling 2004, 9.

[140] Kling 2004, 9.

[141] Anthony Pagden, *The Fall of Natural Man: The American Indian and the Origins of Comparative Ethnology*, Cambridge Iberian and Latin American Studies (Cambridge university press, 1982), 19.

[142] Guanahani is now known as San Salvador Island in the Bahamas.

[143] Pagden 1982, 4.

[144] Pagden 1982, 156.

the Taíno were savages; they did not know about the Trinity or the Bible, which was shocking and, frankly, unacceptable.[145] Rather than update Christian cosmology, it instead became paramount that the Europeans reconcile these new groups – because, as it turned out, there were many communities who Genesis did not seem to mention at all – with existing Christian beliefs. The first book of the Bible had not changed significantly in a millennium and a half. As a revelation of God's Divine Word, and as a cornerstone of Christian theology, the creation account could not be moved without severely compromising the faith in its entirety. So it wasn't.[146]

Copernican heliocentrism, published in 1543, was similarly disorienting to the Christians, whose universal model had thus far relied on anthropocentrism and therefore, the centrality of Earth to the rest of the universe.[147] To top it all off, the Catholic Church had split and there was a new faction of Christians to contend with in the sixteenth century: the Protestants, who claimed that their version of the religion was truer to its origins, based on the scriptures (first and foremost) and early Christian sources.[148] Exegesis of Genesis was ongoing, given its importance to Christian theology, but the majority of thought leadership from past exegetes, including Augustine, Jerome, and Thomas of Aquinas, remained unchanged.[149] The creation narrative was unmoving, but the *scientific* (literal) explanations for its events were revised in light of more

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[145] Pagden 1982, 13-14.

[146] Greenblatt 2018, 240; Pagden 1982, 6.

[147] Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Losing and Finding Creation in the Christian Tradition," in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans*, ed. Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether, Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions Publications (Harvard University Press, 2000), 8.

[148] Timothy G. Pearson, *Becoming Holy in Early Canada*, McGill-Queen's Studies in the History of Religion, no. 70 (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014), 26.

[149] Euan Cameron, "Celibacy and Marriage (Gen. 2)," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible and the Reformation*, 1st ed., ed. Jennifer Powell McNutt and Herman J. Selderhuis (Oxford University Press, 2024), https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198753186.013.42, 588.

recent scientific understanding.[150] The top notes of Genesis' interpretation by Christian theologians and scholars were persistently literal-historical.

The insistence on the six-day creation of the universe as we know it, a literal Eden, and the origin of human fallibility (and misery) due to humanity's mother and father endured in Europe. Though Christianity was transformed by the Reformation and then the Enlightenment, the literal-historical thread that wove through early Christianity into modernity was tenacious, and this view of creation was fiercely promulgated in the colonies overseas.[151] Adam and Eve's believers clashed against Indigenous cosmogonies and won, subduing other stories of humanity's origins and establishing their stories as Truth.[152]

As Europeans settled on Turtle Island, constructing new nations, this Christian Truth and the worldview it inspired became encoded into Canada's foundations – our constitution, our institutions, and our legislation.[153] Concurrently, nineteenth-century scientific discoveries like Darwin's theory of evolution paradigmatically shifted ideas about the Genesis myth's literal and historical accuracy.[154] The biblical tale could not possibly be accurate if taken literally, so theologians accommodated their interpretations to ensure their faith's foundations held steady. As a result, Christian authorities either dismissed evolution altogether, allowing Genesis to continue being seen as the literal, historical truth, or they encouraged a level of allegorical

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[150] John Rogerson, "What Difference Did Darwin Make?: The Interpretation of Genesis in the Nineteenth Century," in *Reading Genesis after Darwin*, 1st ed., ed. Stephen C. Barton and David Wilkinson (Oxford University PressNew York, 2009), https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195383355.003.0005, 75.

[151] Greenblatt 2018, 281.

[152] Jennifer Grenz, *Medicine Wheel for the Planet: A Journey toward Personal and Ecological Healing* (Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2024), 7-8.

[153] *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, Preamble, Part 1 of the *Constitution Act*, 1982, c 11. https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/const/page-12.html; Grenz 2024, 7-8.

[154] Greenblatt 2018, 284.

interpretation that accommodated for new scientific evidence.[155] Either way, Adam and Eve were here to stay. This is how my child-self found Eden, centuries later: pervasive, ostensibly authoritative, and quite unruffled by the passage of time.

The Story and Nature

This section enumerates what the Christian cosmogonic myth conveys about Nature, emphasizing the themes presented in the story itself, as well as those promulgated by influential exegetes. I have divided this analysis into subsections, each of which addresses one major theme or characteristic of Nature in Genesis: what the story says about the nature of other-than human Nature; what it says about human nature; and what it tells us about the relationship between humans and other-than-humans.

On Other-Than-Human Nature

There are several main ideas about other-than-human Nature that Genesis and its exegetes propose: that humans are unique among creation, that Nature is simultaneously a passive gift and a danger, and that Nature's fate is inextricably tied to ours.

Human Uniqueness

Christianity's belief in our uniqueness among all species appears in the body of Genesis itself. In this myth, we are the only animal that is given a soul, the only species with an explicit spiritual dimension. Genesis 1:26 is often used to invoke this idea: "And God said, Let us make man in our image […] and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth

[155] Rogerson 2009, 88-89.

upon the earth." Not only does this verse privilege humanity, but it also places Nature in a passive role, where its fate is first decided by God and then by humanity.

Theologians and scholars have supported and built on this claim; for example, based on this verse, Remigius of Auxerre (c. 841-c. 908 CE) argued that Nature was made specifically for humans and our use.[156] He also used this logic to explain the physical differences between humans and non-human animals, proposing that humans have two legs rather than four "so that [they] would know that they should pursue heavenly things rather than earthly things."[157] Adam's naming of all the living creatures in Genesis 2:19-20 demonstrates his position of superiority to Nature, as well as his responsibility to care for it. After all, who names someone they do not care for?[158] Once more, however, Nature does not have agency, even of its own naming – it is humanity who names all of creation. Having that spiritual tie to God conveys great privilege.

The earthly hierarchy placing humanity at the top is present throughout Christianity's history, even in apocryphal literature. The idea of humans being unlike non-human animals was at least circulating widely, perhaps widely enough to be considered a mainstream view. *Vita Adae et Evae* (*The Life of Adam and Eve*), which began to be disseminated in the first century, shows the first people's horror at the realization that, after the Fall, they must also eat what other animals ate:[159] "And they walked about and searched [for food] for nine days, and […] found

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[156] Schroeder 2015, 58.

[157] Schroeder 2015, 59.

[158] Nicholas Epley et al., "On Seeing Human: A Three-Factor Theory of Anthropomorphism.," *Psychological Review* 114, no. 4 (2007): 864–86, https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.114.4.864, 864.

[159] Greenblatt 2018, 68.

only animals' food. And Adam said to Eve: 'This hath the Lord provided for animals and brutes to eat […].'"[160]

The anthropocentric attitude persisted into the seventeenth century, when Milton published *Paradise Lost*, the reimagining and expansion of the Genesis myth. The epic poem alludes to Milton's attitudes about Nature, which illuminate the popular thought of his time. One illustrative example can be found in book VIII, where Milton's Adam says:

> "My Maker, be propitious while I speak.
> Hast thou not made me here thy substitute,
> And these inferior farr beneath me set? […]
> So fitly them in pairs thou hast combin'd;
> Much less can Bird with Beast […]
> So well converse […]
> Wors then can Man with Beast […]."[161]

The corresponding Bible verse, Genesis 2:20, explains that among all the animals, "there was not found an help meet for [Adam]," necessitating Eve's creation.[162] The biblical version is significantly less dramatic, not going so far as to describe the hierarchy between man and animal in such stark terms. From this textual difference, we can extrapolate that Milton saw a clear and lasting difference between humans and other animals – they could never be equals, in his view. Nevertheless, in both the Bible and *Paradise Lost*, no animal is considered a match for the first man, highlighting once more the uniqueness of humans among the rest of the animal kingdom.

The thread of logic upholding anthropic supremacy continued with Darwin in the late nineteenth century. Darwin acknowledged human beings' similarity to all species in our capacity

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[160] Robert H. Charles, "The Books of Adam and Eve," in *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English: With Introductions and Critical and Explanatory Notes to the Several Books*, vol. 2 (Clarendon Press, 1913), 134, *Vita Adae et Evae*, iv. 1-3.

[161] John Milton and Dennis Richard Danielson, *Paradise Lost*, Parallel prose edition (Regent College Pub, 2008), 8:380-397.

[162] Genesis 2:20 (KJV).

for evolution yet could not help but maintain a ranked view of Nature informed by the society he was part of: "Man in the rudest state in which he now exists is the most dominant animal that has ever appeared on this earth."[163]

The Duality of Nature

Through the lens of Genesis, Nature is also dual; both a passive gift and one rife with danger and best kept at arm's length. Father Lindsay summarized this sentiment during our conversation: "[…] we [need to] have not a romantic idea of nature but a realistic [one…]. I wouldn't want to be living [… outside in nature] but it's just beautiful to look at."[164] Within Genesis, in particular Genesis 1, several verses connote Nature's passivity, especially in the face of God. Genesis 1:2, for example, reads: "And the earth was without form, and void…" hinting that without God's action, the Earth was completely inert and inactive – it *was* nothing and *had* nothing.

The primary agent in the first chapter of the Bible's first book is God. He is the one that brings light, the firmament (heaven), land/water, plants, celestial bodies, animals, and humans into being. As Dube notes, God is the maker, the doer, the ultimate agent in the Genesis myth.[165] All the components of the world are creat*ed*, without will or initiative of their own. However, there are three exceptions to this, according to Dube, who writes about Genesis from a deliberately eco-friendly lens. She points out that in Genesis 1, verses 11, 20, and 24, God

[163] Charles Darwin et al., *The Descent of Man: An Annotated Edition of Darwin's Classic Work* (Princeton University Press, 2025), 48. It is worth noting that Darwin's *Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, first published in 1871, was shockingly racist, comparing non-white communities to non-human animals. Darwin's use of "science" to support racist and anthropocentric views, along with *Descent's* success since it was published, has left a disturbing residue that continues to pervade mainstream Western thought.

[164] Father Lindsay Harrison, "Storytelling Session," April 10, 2025.

[165] Musa W. Dube, "'And God Saw That It Was Very Good': An Earth-Friendly Theatrical Reading of Genesis 1," *Black Theology* 13, no. 3 (2015): 230–46, https://doi.org/10.1179/1476994815Z.00000000060, 238-239.

commands the earth and the waters to bring forth further creations, in what she argues is a shift to God co-creating with Nature, rather than on his own.[166] While I appreciate Dube's intention to encourage a more Nature-friendly reading of Genesis, I disagree with the suggestion that God was bestowing or even allowing co-creative power. The verses in which Nature is given agency are relatively rare, at least in the origin story, and Christian theology has a general tendency to see Nature as a mediator through which God expresses his power. Additionally, God is the creator of both the waters and the Earth, so their actions are more of a reflection of his will than of their own agency.

Earth and its creatures – with their lack of agency – are easily handed over to Adam for safekeeping in Genesis 1:28: "And God blessed them [humans], and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth." According to Cohen, the verse shows that humans share animals' ability to reproduce, but our dominion over them highlights our uniqueness among terrestrials.[167] According to thinkers like White, Christianity's anthropocentrism hinges partly on the idea of "dominion over."[168] As I have mentioned previously, this Bible verse is contentious.

White's argument – originally put forth in 1967 – has been eagerly echoed, but his well-intentioned proponents conflate the idea of dominion with unchecked power over, with permission to exploit and abuse. Historically and theologically, "dominion" was meant to denote guardianship – not in an egalitarian relationship but rather one where humanity is meant to be the

[166] Dube 2015, 238-239.

[167] Cohen 1989, 312.

[168] Lynn Jr. White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1203–7, JSTOR, 1205.

"adult" in the room, given that Nature has no agency. Both Father Lindsay and informed exegetical literature support a more generous, considerate interpretation of humanity's role towards Nature. Based on an analysis of biblical laws and the Bible outside of the creation story, for example, Friedman and Dolansky argue that "[h]umans' power over animals is not regarded as absolute, and it does not include cruelty."[169] Thus, contextually, there may be a hierarchy that places humans above animals, but there is an expectation of respect towards other-than-human animals. God's blessing and gift of dominion are not a *carte blanche* for cruelty or unchecked exploitation.

Though unquestionably a gift, Nature is not harmless – despite its passive role in the Christian universe presented by Genesis, improper engagement can have dire consequences: "… Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But […] in the day that thou eatest [… of the tree of knowledge] thou shalt surely die."[170] This verse makes clear that the Land is abundant, easily providing all the nourishment Adam and Eve could ever want, but also dangerous if not engaged according to God's rules.

Despite the Land, animals, and plants playing a significant role in this creation narrative, they are not given agency. Eden (the Land) is the setting where things happen but is not actively involved. The garden's trees and fruit are either fertile gifts or the offenders and passive bringers of misery. Animals are not quite companions – not quite good enough – but rather passive receivers of man's care, which Genesis 2:20 alludes to: "And Adam gave names to […] every beast […], but for Adam there was not found an help meet for him."[171] Adam and Eve use fig leaves to cover themselves when they realize they're naked in the seventh verse of Genesis 3, but

[169] Friedman and Dolansky 2011, 173.
[170] Genesis 1:16-17 (KJV).
[171] Genesis 2:20 (KJV).

there is no relationship or reciprocity here; the fig trees merely exist, and humans are well within their right to use them without much fuss.

The serpent alone acts as an exception to Nature's general lack of agency; he, too, is exceptional, described as "more subtil than any beast […]."[172] He is unique among the non-human animals, possessing a subtlety – an intelligence – that brings him closer to humans' nature than that of other animals. The short character description distances the serpent from the rest of Nature and from the rest of his non-human animal compatriots, showing that possessing agency by necessity removes one from Nature's umbrella.

Moreover, there is no mention in the text of someone telling or compelling him to approach Eve and tempt her to eat from the forbidden tree. The snake acts seemingly of his own accord, with devastating consequences. His involvement in the Fall suggests that Nature is not a *good* agent; rather, it alludes to Nature needing to be kept in check. God punishes the reptile by stripping him of his limbs and cursing his species for eternity, directly revoking a large measure of the serpent's agency. He is no longer free to do as he wishes, but is bound to crawling on the ground, vulnerable to the new enmity between him and humans.

Interestingly, the serpent's role as an agent is not often attributed to the snake himself (to Nature), but rather to the Devil. Father Lindsay told me that, "[…] the serpent represents temptation […] something that you don't see coming [… that] can also be poisonous [… Genesis] represents the Devil as a serpent."[173] The association of the serpent in Genesis with Satan appears consistently in exegetical sources, beginning with Justin Martyr, second-century

[172] Genesis 3:1 (KJV).

[173] Father Lindsay Harrison, "Storytelling Session," April 10, 2025.

Christian apologist.[174] As Father Lindsay admitted, that interpretation of the tempter is not within the creation story itself, but only appears later in the Bible.[175] Seeing the serpent as an agent of the devil, or as Satan himself, is consistent with the idea of Nature either lacking agency, if it is only used as a vessel for the devil, or being an agent that requires careful control. In either case, humanity is implicitly tasked with eschewing the devil/serpent, so as to prevent further disaster.

Nature's Fate as Bound to Humans

Notwithstanding Nature's passivity relative to humanity's responsibility over it, or perhaps because of that responsibility, humanity's fate is tied to that of Nature according to Christian cosmogony. After Adam and Eve eat of the tree of knowledge, the serpent, Adam and Eve, and the Land itself are cursed *together*.[176] God first curses the serpent, taking especial care to "put enmity between [the serpent] and the woman, and between [its] seed and her seed,"[177] thereby shattering the relationship between humans and other animals, the serpent in particular, in perpetuity. As punishment for Adam's disobedience, God goes on to similarly rupture the previously peaceful relationship between man and the Land in Genesis 3:17: "And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, […] cursed is the ground for thy sake…" Although the Land was a passive participant in humans' disobedience, it is used as a vessel for punishment, suffering the same fate as humans. Thus, according to Genesis, Nature's and humans' fates are intertwined – if humans suffer, so does the

[174] Shawna Dolansky, "How the Serpent in the Garden Became Satan: Adam, Eve and the Serpent in the Garden of Eden," *Biblical Archaeology Society*, n.d., accessed May 20, 2026, https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-topics/bible-interpretation/how-the-serpent-in-the-garden-became-satan/; Reverend Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Christian Library: The Writings of Justin Martyr and Athenagoras*, vol. 2, trans. Reverend Marcus Dods et al. (T&T Clark, 1867), https://hdl.handle.net/2027/yale.39002005777652, 31.

[175] Father Lindsay Harrison, "Storytelling Session," April 10, 2025; Kugel 1998, *xiv*.

[176] Genesis 3:14-17 (KJV).

[177] Genesis 3:15 (KJV).

Land.[178] Here, we see the chain of consequences Friedman and Dolansky hint at: that humans' morality, which includes abiding by biblical laws and obeying God, has an impact on our environs.[179] Horrell, too, posits that human and Nature are interconnected and shape each other; one party's actions can affect the other(s).[180] The serpent moved Eve to eat from the tree of knowledge; she, in turn, moved Adam; and together, their actions led to their punishment, as well as that of the serpent and the "ground" (the Land).[181]

We are bound to Nature throughout our lifetimes, as well: "[…] for dust thou [Adam] art, and unto dust shalt thou return."[182] In Christian cosmology, the first humans are made of dust, of earth, therefore forging an unbreakable relationship between us and the Land. This is reflective of the ancients' dependence on the Land for sustenance and shelter but is often a piece more contemporary analysts ignore. Religious experts like Father Lindsay, however, are well aware of the ties that bind us. He noted that "God form[ed] us from the dust of the earth […] so there's something that's of the earth [in us…] like everything else from creation, the animals, everything else, we're a part of that…"[183] Being formed from earth ties us to the Earth.

Our material bodies – that we are *made* of Nature – are profoundly important to Christian beliefs. As stated by Christian funeral officiants, we move from "earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust."[184] The relationship extends after our deaths and into eternity, for according to

[178] Friedman and Dolansky 2011, 154-157.

[179] Friedman and Dolansky 2011, 174-175.

[180] Horrell 2015, 41.

[181] Horrell 2015, 41.

[182] Genesis 3:19 (KJV).

[183] Father Lindsay Harrison, "Storytelling Session," April 10, 2025.

[184] Church of England, "At the Burial of the Dead: The Order for the Burial of the Dead," in *The Book of Common Prayer* (Cambridge University Press, 2026), https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/book-common-prayer/burial-dead.

Christian theology, our souls and bodies will be reunified at the end of time.[185] Our bodies – our existence in the material realm, physical Nature – are thus an inescapable component of our selves.

Throughout its history, the creation myth in Genesis has been used to argue that humans are somehow privileged and separate from other animals, plants, and the Land itself. Despite our classification of ourselves as firmly within the animal kingdom,[186] the attitudes of learned (primarily) men and the (mostly) men who read them relied often on a decontextualized and surface-level interpretation of key passages in Genesis that hinted at humans being at the top of a hierarchy. Among these are Genesis 1:26's mention of humankind being made "in [God's] image" and God granting Adam and Eve "dominion over" the rest of creation in 1:28. Depending on a storyteller's goal, then, the Bible story could and has been used to cement the views of humans as exceptional.

Read with nuance, an understanding of context, and curiosity, Genesis does not *only* assert that we are not like the rest of Nature. We may be given a spiritual dimension that, in Christian theology, makes us unique, but we were also tasked with stewarding the planet as God's representatives on Earth. This means we are responsible for caring for animals, plants, and the Land. As Father Lindsay mentioned, Adam's naming of all the creatures conveys a level of close relationship and affection[187] – one does not usually name anything without a measure of attachment to the subject being named. As Friedman and Dolansky remind us, "Morality and nature are not separate categories in biblical terms."[188]

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[185] Father Lindsay Harrison, "Storytelling Session," April 10, 2025.

[186] Lisbet Koerner, *Linnaeus: Nature and Nation* (Harvard University Press, 2022), https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674039698, 87.

[187] Father Lindsay Harrison, "Storytelling Session," April 10, 2025.

[188] Friedman and Dolansky 2011, 161.

In the Christian worldview, Nature does not comprise of persons with agency. The earthly hierarchy is skewed in humanity's favour as a result. But other-than-human Nature is, like humanity, part of God's creation and, therefore, worthy of care, consideration, and respect.

On Human Nature

Genesis sets humans apart from the rest of creation because we were made as both spiritual and physical beings. This is a key aspect of Christian views of human nature: our liminality. Adam and Eve's disobedience, however, disrupted the previously harmonious relationship between the two aspects of our nature. The Fall resulted in a lost ideal, though the extent to which our nature is corrupted depends on who you ask.

Father Lindsay and I discussed the physicality of humanity, given humans' possession of both an earth-made body and a spirit bestowed by God. He encouraged me to remember that "the body is part of who we are. [God] made us physical beings [too]."[189] Bodies are a part of being God's creation, and therefore beautiful, but they are also inherently not fully in unity with our spiritual aspects. The result is a dual nature – both ordered and disordered, both perfect and incredibly fallible, both of God and not of him. As beings made in God's image, per Genesis 1:26, humans are meant to be God's representatives on Earth. Furthermore, Father Lindsay argued, we have the intellect and rational minds to understand God's order and have received his blessing to be fruitful and, therefore, become co-creators as our reproduction generates new human life.[190] According to this storyteller, our bodies can betray us through temptation, thus

[189] Father Lindsay Harrison, "Storytelling Session," April 10, 2025.
[190] Father Lindsay Harrison, "Storytelling Session," April 10, 2025.

acting as obstacles to proximity to God; by being physical, like Nature, we, too, possess a dual nature.[191]

Father Lindsay exemplifies mainstream contemporary Christian beliefs about human nature, with a signature ambivalence towards what we are at our cores. This line of thinking is influenced greatly by theologians long gone. A special mention must be made of Augustine, who argued so forcefully that Adam and Eve's sin had cosmic and permanent consequences that we are still feeling the repercussions.[192] He proposed that the first humans' actions resulted in the perversion of all creation, marring humans' reason and will, and making us fundamentally disordered.[193]

The pejorative perceptions of sex – which is how we become co-creators, according to Father Lindsay's line of thinking – were popular in early Christianity. As the religion solidified into a more coherent whole in the first few centuries of the Common Era, Genesis was taken to mean that God gave us free will when he made us in his image, so proving one's faith required choosing to reject "the world" by rejecting our bodies' drives through methods like celibacy and asceticism.[194] Simultaneously, Christianity purported that human nature carried an inherent morality and value, based on Genesis 1:26: "[…] every human being is essentially equal to any other 'before God,' […] for all humankind was created in the image of the one God."[195] Father Lindsay reminded me, too, that human nature was not all bad, that our impact is not purely negative despite often being framed that way.[196] Despite anthropogenic climate change, he noted,

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[191] Father Lindsay Harrison, "Storytelling Session," April 10, 2025.

[192] Louth et al. 2001, xlix.

[193] St Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods, with Thomas Merton, Modern Library Classics (Random House Publishing Group, 2010), Book 14.11, 14.13; Damonte 2017, 30.

[194] Lucy Grig, *Making Martyrs in Late Antiquity* (Duckworth, 2004), 65.

[195] Pagels 1988, 51.

[196] Father Lindsay Harrison, "Storytelling Session," April 10, 2025.

our technology and intelligence have allowed us to do great things as well, including extending our and other animals' lifespans.[197]

On the Relationship Between Humans and Other Beings

We have Augustine to credit for a major theme that emerged from this study: in mainstream Christian thought, we can only achieve harmony between ourselves and the rest of creation through divine intervention because our nature was fundamentally transformed for the worse by the Fall.

Genesis' recounting of our being made in God's image and living in the abundant Eden shows the goodness of our origins. From the text, I gather that we were meant to live in harmony with each other and the rest of creation, but the first couple's disobedience at the serpent's behest flipped that on its head. Father Lindsay spoke about this, saying that the Fall disordered relationships at all levels: the relationship between God and humans, the relationship between humans and Nature, and the relationship we have amongst ourselves.[198] He spoke of the current state of disorder several times throughout our conversation, alerting me to the fact that this was a key point, not to be overlooked. It is, of course, an offshoot of the Augustine's idea of original sin, which posited that Adam and Eve's disobedience corrupted human nature forever, making us indelibly wicked – or at least until we seek salvation from Jesus.[199] This pessimism about what we are and what is possible for our species has left an ideological mark on our conception of human nature.[200] Father Lindsay illustrated this, alluding to our distorted experience of an

[197] Father Lindsay Harrison, "Storytelling Session," April 10, 2025.
[198] Father Lindsay Harrison, "Storytelling Session," April 10, 2025.
[199] Augustine trans. Marcus Dods 2010, Book 14; Cohen 1989, 270; Paden 1988, 86; Pagels 1988, *xix*, 131.
[200] Pagels 1988, *xxvi*.

inherently good creation; we do not experience the relationship between us and Nature as solely positive because of Adam and Eve.[201]

Despite this disorder, the expectation remains on us to steward the rest of creation. Though, as explored above, this implies a hierarchy, it also implies that humans have a responsibility to Nature. Father Lindsay described how seriously we should take this charge: "[God] put us in [his creation] to be like his priests and kings, basically his representatives, and that we're to use it for our own good, but also to remember that he is the ultimate owner of it, and therefore don't abuse it. […] how we treat others, how we treat creation, all this shows our respect and love for God as well."[202] Ergo, to honour God properly, we must respect his creation – Nature is an expression of his being and should be treated as such.

Chapter Conclusion

Careful analysis of the Genesis myth shows that Christian understandings of Nature are nuanced. Though Nature is understood as a gift, being part of God's creation, it is not generally given agency – it is passive and enacted upon. In the places Nature does have agency, it is deemed as dangerous, as shown by the serpent's involvement in the Fall. Nature, then, is seen as dual; it is both a gift and a potential danger and must consequently be treated with care.

Genesis also portrays humanity as dual, although in different ways. Our species is the only one to have both earthly (physical) and heavenly (spiritual) dimensions, making us unique in having both agency and moral value. As a result, humanity has a privileged place among all of God's creation and was given dominion over it as God's representatives on the material plane.

[201] Father Lindsay Harrison, "Storytelling Session," April 10, 2025.
[202] Father Lindsay Harrison, "Storytelling Session," April 10, 2025.

The privilege of dominion over Nature and our role as God's representatives means that, according to Christian theology, we are expected to treat Nature with the respect it is owed, as part of God's loving creation and as an extension of God himself. Other-than-human Nature's lack of personhood does not mean we are at liberty to disrespect or exploit it, which is something that many analyses of the attitudes espoused by Christian Genesis have overlooked.

Though Christian cosmology portrays humans and Nature as separate and proposes a hierarchical relationship between the two, Genesis also shows that Nature's fate is bound to ours, and ours to it. Humanity was made from dust and to dust we will return; our physical beings inescapably carry a piece of Nature, tethering us to it. The tether goes both ways – after the Fall, the Earth itself was punished alongside the first humans. Despite the separation between humans and Nature, we are inextricably linked to each other.

What the link between our species and Nature looks like is portrayed quite differently in the Omàmiwininiwag creation narrative, as is Nature's personhood. The next chapter discusses the ways Omàmiwininiwag ideas of Nature are, instead, founded in kinship rather than hierarchy.

Chapter Two: The Otter

Chapter Introduction

This chapter presents and analyses the Omàmiwininiwag creation story, examining its history and revitalized cultural understandings to fully capture its messages about Nature. As I did with Genesis, I include here both a written and an oral version to allow for careful analysis.

I open the chapter with a written version of the story. Though this retelling is not by Omàmiwininiwag authors, the story of Sky Woman is ubiquitous and well-known among northeastern Indigenous Peoples. It is followed by an Omàmiwininiwag oral account of the beginning of the universal order as we know it. Afterwards, I trace the story's – and its people's – history, including the ways colonization disrupted the myth's intergenerational transmission, and how it was interpreted over time. I then examine the story, its history, and reception history to uncover Omàmiwininiwag ways of understanding Nature, focusing on portrayals of other-than-human Nature, human Nature, and the relationship between humans and other-than-human Nature.

The Story

The two versions of the Omàmiwininiwag creation story presented here are pieces of a larger cosmogony. Many northeastern Indigenous cultures include the myth of Sky Woman, often referred to as an "Earth Diver myth." There are longer versions of this myth that account for the creation of specific Peoples.[203] Here, however, I recount only the pieces I had encountered specifically in Omàmiwininiwag contexts.

[203] For an extended version, see Donna Rosenberg, *World Mythology: An Anthology of the Great Myths and Epics*, 3rd ed (NTC Pub. Group, 1999), 627-633.

What I share here is the result of centuries of intergenerational resilience and oral tradition, as well as the legal and policy changes spurred by ongoing Indigenous resistance that have allowed Omàmiwininiwag to more openly share and celebrate their culture. They are not meant to be definitive or authoritative, but rather to situate my reader in the cosmogonic account of the Algonquin Anishinaabeg firmly enough to be able to accurately engage with its themes and messages.

A Written Version: Sky Woman

> "A long, long time ago, there was Sky World. Below Sky World was only water. A woman lived up in the Sky World with her family. She was pregnant, and she had a craving for some fruit from a big tree in the Sky World. She went to the tree and saw that it had a hole at the bottom. She could see some of the tree roots through the hole. She leaned over to look closer and saw what looked like shimmering silver way down below. She leaned over even father to try to see more. She wanted to see what was down there. She squinted and leaned over a bit more. Then… she fell over! She fell through the hole! She fell through the air!
>
> Down below, some geese were resting on the water. A goose looked up and saw a strange thing falling from the sky. Quickly the goose alerted the others. Together they knew they had to take flight and help. A few geese flew up towards the strange thing. They were surprised to discover that it was a woman who was falling from the sky. They gently caught her and brought her down safely.
>
> The first thing Sky Woman did was look up. She could see the hole she had fallen through. It was far too high for the geese to take her back. She knew then that this world would become her new home. She looked around and all she could see was water in every direction. The geese were working hard to keep her safe. What was she going to do?
>
> Along came a large turtle. She came up from her swim and heard all the chatter going on. She swam over to the geese to see what was happening. She saw them working hard to keep Sky Woman safe. She offered her back as a resting place. The geese were happy and set Sky Woman down gently on the turtle's back. Sky Woman thanked them all for their help.
>
> Many other animals came to see what was going on. What were they to do with this Sky Woman? She could not swim like the animals or float on the water like the birds. She could not breathe underwater like the water creatures! Together the animals talked. They needed to bring up some of the earth that was at the bottom of the water.
>
> The water was so deep! Many animals tried but could not make it all the way to the bottom to reach the earth. Finally, muskrat tried. He was able to swim all the way to the bottom and make it back up with some earth in his paws. He placed the earth on the turtle's back.

> Then Sky Woman worked her magic. She danced in a counterclockwise direction and the bit of earth kept growing. It grew larger over the entire back of the turtle. Then it grew so large that it was farther than the eye could see in every direction! To this day, that is why North America is known as Turtle Island."[204]

An Oral Version: The Otter

As a result of the Omàmiwininiwag cosmogonic myth being predominantly an oral tale, it was important that I sit down with a spiritual expert – an Elder – to hear it, so I may thoroughly analyze its themes and messages. My professional network referred me to Joan Tenasco from Kitigan Zibi First Nation, who is a Language Keeper at the community's Cultural Centre. She agreed to speak with me about her people's creation story and what it tells us about Nature. We spoke several times, deepening our relationship at each turn.

Joan shared a story with me and gave me a written copy of it. She asked me not to publish it, so I present here a similar version of the story she gifted me with.

> "It is said when the Great Spirit created the earth, he called a meeting with all the spirits. The Great Spirit discussed his intention to put human beings on the earth and they would play an important role in his creation. He asked the spirits how they wanted to help the people. Each spirit came forward and counselled with the Great Spirit on the ways they could and would help the people.
>
> Among these was the guardian spirit of the Otter. He went before the Great Spirit and said, 'Because of my character and nature, I will help the people to work together in your creation. When they want to live in harmony with themselves and your creation, I will educate and instruct the people in teachings to protect their family and group. When they need me I will show the people the direction to unity. I will serve this purpose.' The Great Spirit approved of the Otter's request and chose the Otter to be the guardian of unity for the Anishinàbeg."[205]

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[204] Michelle Corneau, *Creation Story - Sky Woman*, Strong Stories - Kanyen'kehá:ka Series (Strong Nations Publishing, 2016). This version of the story is from the Omàmiwininiwag's neighbours and (historical) enemies, the Kanien'kehá:ka. The Omàmiwininiwag have a long history of cross-cultural exposure and intermarriage. Long before the Europeans arrived, the Omàmiwininiwag had established trade relationships with other Peoples, and particularly with their neighbours, such as the Innu and the Wendat, exchanging not only goods, but also people. Their culture was fluid enough to accommodate for newcomers and outside cultural influences and, presumably, this also includes spirituality and mythologies.

[205] Joan Tenasco, *"The Otter," Creation oral history*, 2016, Web audio, 3:15, https://www.historymuseum.ca/teachers-zone/think-like-a-historian-working-with-primary-source-

The Story's (and Its People's) Origins

It is considered a wise practice in Indigenous communities to begin any introduction with where one comes from and where one lives. It may be helpful to begin with an explanation of who the Omàmiwininiwag are and where they come from. Readers who are from or live in Canada's National Capital Region (NCR) and its environs, known alternately as Ottawa-Gatineau, are likely already familiar with the Omàmiwininiwag, if only by name. A more common name for the Omàmiwininiwag is the Algonquin Anishinaabeg.

After the Truth and Reconciliation Commission issued its reports about the cultural genocide committed against Indigenous Peoples in Canada in 2015, two years before the country's sesquicentennial, it became standard practice for people and organizations in Canada to acknowledge whose land they (mostly illegally) occupy.[206] Hence, people in the NCR begin meetings, seminars, and introductions by acknowledging that they are on the *unceded* traditional territory of the Omàmiwininiwag. This traditional territory straddles the border between Ontario and Quebec, as far south as Brockville, extending west towards North Bay, north towards Val-Paradis, and east into l'Assomption, but not as far south-east as Montreal.

The Omàmiwininiwag creation story emerged somewhere on this stretch of land centuries, and probably millennia, ago – as with Genesis, it is difficult to pinpoint an exact timeline. This is especially the case because Anishinaabemowin, the Omàmiwininiwag's

evidence/audio/the-otter-creation-oral-history/. Note from the orator: "These are the words that were given by a knowledge keeper who has since passed on." The story was written down by Rene Tenasco Ashkàbewis. Council member, 1993, Kitigàn Zìbì Anishinàbeg.

[206] Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, "Canada's Residential Schools: The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. Volume 1 Part 1: The History, Origins to 1939," in *The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, McGill-Queen's Native and Northern Series 80 (McGill-Queen´s University Press, 2015).

language, does not measure time the same way Western languages do.[207] Despite encoding historical events into written texts such as wampum belts and petroglyphs, Omàmiwininiwag did not keep alphabetic written records.[208] Consequently, the Otter's story has survived the passage of time as a predominantly oral tale. As such, it could not survive without its people, and so a history of the Otter by necessity includes a history of the Omàmiwininiwag.

Much of what most settlers and newcomers know about Omàmiwininiwag history comes primarily from European settlers and their descendants, of which I am one. Though the pen of history is slowly being ceded to the people of this land, the transition is neither fast nor seamless. The majority of the following account comes from settler-led archaeological and historical evidence. Indigenous accounts of the past millennia survive, as my conversations with Joan attest to, and are beginning to emerge outside of Indigenous communities in a more fulsome way. I have leveraged this resurgence whenever possible.

BC: Before Colonization

People began to migrate into what is now Ontario and Quebec in approximately 9000 BCE.[209] According to the extant evidence, these ancient migrants, the Clovis or Fluted Point people, are likely not the Omàmiwininiwag's direct ancestors.[210] However, the frigid climate of the time likely prohibited earlier human inhabitation of what we now call North America (Turtle Island). In any case, the timelines of Indigenous Peoples' existence on this land spans millennia.

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[207] Sâkihitowin Awâsis, "'Anishinaabe Time': Temporalities and Impact Assessment in Pipeline Reviews," *Journal of Political Ecology* 27, no. 1 (2020), https://doi.org/10.2458/v27i1.23236, 832.

[208] Kristin Burnett and Geoff Read, eds., *Aboriginal History: A Reader*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2016), 11; Alan Ojiig Corbiere, "'Their Own Forms of Which They Take the Most Notice': Diplomatic Metaphors and Symbolism on Wampum Belts," in *Anishinaabewin Niiwin: Four Rising Winds*, ed. Alan Ojiig Corbiere et al. (Ojibwe Cultural Foundation, 2014), 47-48; Lynn Gehl, *Anishinaabeg Stories: Featuring Petroglyphs, Petrographs, and Wampum Belts* (Ningwakwe Learning Press, 2012).

[209] Peter Hessel, *The Algonkin Nation* (Brittle Printing Ltd., 1993), 6.

[210] Hessel 1993, 6-7.

The Omàmiwininiwag's probable ancestors, the Shield Archaic people, emerged from further west around 6000 BCE and were descendants of the more ancient Plano people.[211] The scientific record does not definitively say when, exactly, the people who came to be known as the Omàmiwininiwag arrived in the area where the Europeans found them, but scholars like Hessel estimate they arrived here one thousand years ago.[212]

We do know that the Omàmiwininiwag and their predecessors were traders, using the Kichi Sibi ("Great River," also known as the Ottawa River) for commerce.[213] They were also hunters, moving through their territory seasonally to follow their quarry.[214] The people that the Europeans encountered, then, had established a solid economic system predicated on ecological awareness. The food, materials, and trade goods the Omàmiwininiwag needed for survival came from the Land, which meant that they needed to understand and abide by its rhythms and those of its inhabitants. Falling out of step meant increased potential for disaster, including famine. As nomadic hunters, the Omàmiwininiwag were particularly tied to their territory – not in terms of establishing permanent settlements, but rather in a relational way, where the people observed the changes in flora and fauna around them and adapted accordingly. The Otter's story reflects the worldviews of people whose lives were profoundly shaped by the Land and beings around them.

We know little else until Europeans, whose written languages we have inherited, began recording their own history on Omàmiwininiwag land. The Basque were the first Europeans to begin trade relations with Indigenous Peoples in this part of the world, arriving circa 1502.[215] At this point, there were no lasting Basque settlements – they came, they traded, and they took their

[211] Hessel 1993, 6-7.
[212] Hessel 1993, 9.
[213] McGregor 2004, 18.
[214] McGregor 2004, 18.
[215] McGregor 2004, 34.

goods home. As a result, it is unlikely that the Omàmiwininiwag creation myth was shared. If it was, I could find no evidence to substantiate even its oral transmission. In any case, the first relationships between the Indigenous Peoples and Europeans were economic. The Otter and its people continued their lives, disturbed only by the odd Haudenosaunee war raid.[216] However, change became inevitable after the sixteenth century, when socio-political events an ocean away spilled over onto Turtle Island.

Trouble Abroad

Western European countries launched their vessels towards discovery originally as an economic response to losing free access to the Silk Routes to southeast Asia and China.[217] It became paramount to European nations to find alternative means to reach the East, lest their economies suffer the lasting consequences.

In 1492, Genoese explorer Cristoforo Colombo landed in Guanahani, found himself face-to-face with the Indigenous Taíno, and looted their gold to take back to his royal Spanish bosses. The race to riches accelerated. The Spanish were able to secure military and economic power using the stolen gold, becoming the preeminent superpower in the continent.[218]

Other Western European countries could not let themselves lag too far behind, lest they fall to Spain's growing arsenal. They funded voyages of their own, determined to stake their claim on the "New World" and its riches. Hence, French King Francis I sent explorer Jacques Cartier to discover these new territories in 1534, with the hope of finding gold and spices. Though Cartier did not bring these riches back, he did bring reports that hinted at their

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[216] Emma Anderson, *The Betrayal of Faith: The Tragic Journey of a Colonial Native Convert*, Harvard Historical Studies 160 (Harvard University Press, 2007), 47.

[217] Jon Thares Davidann and Marc Jason Gilbert, *Cross-Cultural Encounters in Modern World History, 1453-Present*, Second edition (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 39.

[218] McGregor 2004, 44.

availability further inland.[219] As Spain claimed lands further south, Francis I was eager to stake France's own claim on the New World, knowing that whoever established the trade routes (and relationships) inevitably controlled them.[220] Cartier did so along the St. Lawrence River, where he had travelled. In the process, he encountered Indigenous people – the Haudenosaunee, the Omàmiwininiwag's neighbours and enemies. They began to trade, signalling the beginning of cultural and economic exchange, and enriching French fur traders.

As the religious wars in Europe calmed in the late sixteenth century, the new King Henri IV turned his sights to establishing lasting colonies on Turtle Island, having seen the benefits of transatlantic commerce.[221] French explorer Samuel de Champlain was sent to New France to support these efforts, with the goal of establishing settlement and exploring the lands and waters further west than the existing French trading post, Tadoussac.[222] When Champlain arrived on Turtle Island in 1603, he encountered the Innu and began to ally himself and his compatriots with the Indigenous people, in hopes that they would help with navigation and continue trading. The Innu readily agreed, likely understanding the spoken treaty as a reciprocal agreement that ensured the French's military allyship in their battles against the Haudenosaunee.[223]

While Champlain's approach to Indigenous people was notable (for his time) in its openness to mutually beneficial allyship and even intermarriage – in contrast to his British and

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[219] Olive Patricia Dickason et al., *Indigenous Peoples within Canada: A Concise History*, 5th ed. (Oxford University Press, 2022), 84-85.

[220] McGregor 2004, 39.

[221] Conrad E. Heidenreich et al., eds., *Samuel de Champlain before 1604: Des Sauvages and other documents related to the period*, The publications of the Champlain Society, LXXI (Champlain Society ; McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), 47.

[222] Anderson 2007, 66-67; Heidenreich and Ritch 2010, 57.

[223] Heidenreich and Ritch 2010, 65. It is worthwhile also to note that the Innu were allied with the Omàmiwininiwag and the Etchemins against the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. Military allyship with one of these groups in the early seventeenth century meant fighting their common enemy.

Dutch contemporaries, who remained unsure that Indigenous people were even human – [224] he was still well capable of lying and double-crossing his allies when it suited Gallic interests.[225]

For the most part, though, it was well worth it for the French to stay on friendly terms with the Omàmiwininiwag and their neighbours – not only were they the source of valuable furs, but they also knew the territory and could help the Europeans navigate the area and its harsh seasons. Champlain's success – and survival – hinged on his people's ability to cooperate with the people of this land. Thus, with the support and acceptance of Indigenous allies, Champlain found that the land and its people were amenable to settlement. His work allowed for the continuation of the cultural and economic exchange between the French and Indigenous people.

CE: Colonial Era

Religion played a central role in this cultural exchange. Although the relationships between Europeans and Indigenous Peoples were based primarily on economic and commercial factors, European religious interests were a strong driving force that shaped the relationships. Not only did they bring much-coveted guns and metal cookware with them, but the arrival of Récollet missionaries in New France in 1615 brought the Bible to Turtle Island.[226] And thus, the missionaries brought the stories that coloured their worldview.

During early contact with the Europeans in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Omàmiwininiwag were wary and curious of these new people. The newcomers presented interesting commercial and diplomatic opportunities, offering not only trade, but also allyship

[224] Heidenreich and Ritch 2010, xix, 131.

[225] Bruce G. Trigger, *The Children of Aataentsic: A History of the Huron People to 1660* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988), https://doi.org/10.1515/9780773561496, 274.

[226] Anderson 2007, 66.

against the Omàmiwininiwag's enemies, the Haudenosaunee.[227] Indigenous communities approached with caution and openness, politely learning about the Europeans' beliefs and traditions.[228]

They were not, however, especially interested in partaking themselves – they were satisfied with their established lifeways and thought the Christians strange.[229] Basic logistical requirements of Récollet Christianity, including having to permanently settle in the villages that housed religious rituals, were not appealing. The Omàmiwininiwag were nomadic hunter-gatherers because their territory demanded movement for survival.[230] Newly established trade relationships with the French underscored the importance of nomadic hunting and trapping – the beaver pelts would not materialize themselves.

By 1624, then, the French realized that their Christianizing dreams would not come true through the Récollets' effort. They needed reinforcements, so they called on the Jesuits, who had succeeded in missionizing in Asia.[231] The first Jesuits arrived in June of 1625, armed with a new strategy: rather than coaxing the Indigenous populations in the area to journey to and settle in New France, the missionaries would meet them on their hunting territory.[232] We know from the *Jesuit Relations* that these efforts were only moderately successful – Indigenous people were often stymied by the Christian beliefs the Jesuits and explorers were constantly promoting, but stayed respectful and listened to them regardless. [233] The Europeans were hardly so kind; in

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[227] McGregor 2004, 48.

[228] Anderson 2007, 72.

[229] Pearson 2014, 63.

[230] McGregor 2004, 73, 75.

[231] McGregor 2004, 54, 74.

[232] McGregor 2004, 74. Anderson demonstrates how far the Jesuits were willing to go; Jesuit Superior Paul Le Jeune accompanied an Innu family on a six-month winter hunt in 1633 as a concerted effort to convert them (2007, 165, 270n13).

[233] Heidenreich and Ritch, 275-283.

many instances, the authors of the *Jesuit Relations* and other written records were outright dismissive of the Indigenous traditions and stories they were privy to.[234] Eden had arrived on Turtle Island, but not even a small minority of Omàmiwininiwag were eager to renounce their traditional beliefs, at least not at first.[235]

Eventually, the Omàmiwininiwag faced too many external pressures to maintain distance from French settlements. Between waves of war with the Kanien'kehá꞉ka in the 1620s and 1630s – especially once the European fur trade had been established – and the disease transmitted by ever-closer quarters with the French,[236] the Omàmiwininiwag began to grapple with their spirituality. Following traditional protocols was not enough to address these spiritual imbalances. The Jesuits took advantage of this crisis of faith, baptizing Indigenous people when they felt weakest.[237] However, Indigenous Christianity remained tenuous at best, with Indigenous converts often leaving French mission villages when it became clear that the Europeans' religion could not prevent the tragedies they were facing, either. Sky Woman and the Otter maintained their stronghold, even amid what could be viewed as an apocalypse.

The Otter and his people continued to face hardship in centuries that followed, though they resisted the entire way. The precedent the French had set in the seventeenth century – of allyship when it was convenient, of arm's length cultural immersion in the world of Indigenous people, of privileging economic gain above almost all else – meant that Europeans and, eventually, North Americans, had a playbook of how to obtain the most from the land's Original

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[234] Heidenreich and Ritch, 275. In this translation of Champlain's *Des Sauvages*, Champlain recorded a conversation with an Innu *grand Sagamo*. The Innu Chief shared his beliefs with Champlain, who promptly "pointed out his error to him according to [the Christian] faith […]."

[235] Pearson 2014, 57, 63, 66.

[236] Reuben Gold Thwaites, *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France 1610- 1791*, 73 vols. (The Burrows Brothers Company, 1899), vol. 8, 41-155.

[237] Anderson 2007, 154.

People while giving the least. As more Europeans moved to Turtle Island and Indigenous populations continued to be decimated by war, the scales tipped further in the Europeans' – and then the Americans' and Canadians' – favour. The Euro-Americans' ethnocentrism devolved into outright racism, fanned by the flames of science like Darwin's *Origin of the Species* and pseudoscience like phrenology in the nineteenth century.

By Confederation in 1867, Indigenous groups were displaced from their traditional territories and ever more stripped of their cultures.[238] Christian Eden did not win outright, but European disease, famine, and poverty had weakened Indigenous Nations enough to make them susceptible to oppression by paperwork. To add insult to injury, the 1876 Indian Act consolidated previous legislation related to Indigenous land, religion, resources, education, and (essentially) life into one that created a difficult choice for Indigenous people. They could either identify as Indigenous – in very narrow, prescriptive ways that bore no resemblance to the oft-matriarchal, kinship identities guided by generations of their own people – or have the rights afforded to Canadians. Being Indigenous in the eyes of the government ("status") came with strings that tightly controlled one's activities, comings, and goings, but renouncing one's status for the privileges given to Canadians did not automatically equate respect from the white Canadian population.[239] Though amended multiple times, the Indian Act is still in effect, albeit in a less virulent form.

During the latter half of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, legislation and prevailing attitudes towards Indigenous people in Canada resulted in what is now considered

[238] Dickason et al. 2022, 261-263.
[239] Dickason et al. 2022, 263.

epistemicide – the purposeful eradication of epistemologies.[240] Not only were Nations like the Omàmiwininiwag forced to settle in ever-shrinking parcels of land when they had historically hunted across large swathes of territory, but they were forced (and policed) into sending their children to residential and day schools to be educated – or rather, assimilated. I will not recount the plethora of physical, psychological, and sexual harms caused by the residential school system, which was in place from 1831 to 1996.[241]

It is worth noting that Indigenous groups across this continent have resisted being separated from their families, their beliefs, and their Lands since the Europeans settled on Turtle Island. Thanks to Indigenous Peoples' resilience, fortitude, and tenacity, Indigenous languages, oral histories, and traditions have survived residential schools and other assimilation (eradication) attempts Canada made, including the Sixties Scoop of the 1960s and the current foster care system.[242] Stories like that of the Otter and the sociocultural messages they convey have been passed down as a way for the Omàmiwininiwag to remain connected to their kith and kin.[243] It is probable that the stories themselves have shape-shifted through the years –the fluidity of oral storytelling remains pertinent – but their messages have persisted.

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[240] Tarisa Little, "'A Continuation of Residential Schools': Integration as a Strategy of Epistemicide, 1960–2005," *The American Indian Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (2023): 223–50, https://doi.org/10.1353/aiq.2023.a917904, 224, 227-231.

[241] Dickason et al. 2022, 333, 336.

[242] The Sixties Scoop was the forced placement of Indigenous children into the care of primarily non-Indigenous families in the name of child welfare. This is often considered an extension of the residential school system, which assumed that Indigenous people were unfit to care for and rear their own children. Though the mechanisms are different now, Indigenous children are grossly overrepresented in the foster care system. Comprising 7.7% of the Canadian population in 2021, Indigenous children nonetheless accounted for 53.8% of the children in foster care (Statistics Canada 2022, 18).

[243] I learned about the history of the word "kith" from Lyanda Lynn Haupt, *Rooted: Life at the Crossroads of Science, Nature, and Spirit*, with Helen Nicholson (Little, Brown Spark, 2021), 26. Haupt notes: "Where kin are relations of *kind*, kith is a relationship based on *knowledge* of place […] Kith is intimacy with a place, its landmarks, its fragrance […]." This idea of place-based relationality is very much in line with Indigenous ways of understanding.

The Story's Reception, Critique, and Elaboration

What the Omàmiwininiwag thought about the Otter and his story in centuries past is largely lost to the passage of time. Traditionally, the myth would have been told orally in an unbroken line of cultural transmission. Because of colonization, and the racist belief of the "disappearing" Indigenous person, Euro-Americans became preoccupied with "capturing" the stories, lest they be lost to history.[244] As a result, the most prominent extant sources on the Omàmiwininiwag creation myth's reception – like those that tell of its people – are European.

Consequently, the sources are recent in relation to the myth's probable age and coloured by outsiders' preoccupations. French and English settlers were deeply interested in Christianizing the Indigenous population and believed their religion to be superior – the very zenith of civilization.[245] Because colonial European Christians saw the Bible as literal-historical and thereby unassailable, sacred Indigenous narratives were first dismissed as demonic or ridiculous, and later categorized as "folklore" and "mythology," which connote either quaint cultural stories or falsehoods.[246] The overall ignorance, and often prejudice, towards non-Western and non-Christian ideas and beliefs seeps into the secondary source material. More recent sources handle the sacred more carefully, and I employed this approach in my reading.

A Eurocentric Take

In Europeans' eyes, the Otter and his kin were mere beasts, unworthy of being called sacred – or worse, they were demons.[247] The holy men and their fellow countrymen came to

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[244] Dickason et al. 2023, 238; King 2003, 33.

[245] Trigger 1988, 377-379.

[246] For an example of the separation of Indigenous spiritual beliefs from "serious" (credible? Valid?) religion, one need only look at the number of anthropological texts containing the word "folklore" in relation to Indigenous Peoples. For example: Horace P. Beck's 1947 *Algonquin Folklore from Maniwaki*.

[247] Anderson 2007, 31, 176.

Turtle Island believing that they needed to civilize Indigenous Peoples and were not dissuaded by Indigenous narratives. Even if they valued some Omàmiwininiwag cultural practices, the Europeans staunchly held onto the idea that only Christianity was a valid or desirable religion and that people could only reasonably reject it out of ignorance.[248] The messages the Otter's story meant to convey, then, did not register in the early modern European imagination.

The conflicting attitudes held by non-Indigenous people – racism mixed with an aesthetic appreciation – meant that those myths were described reverentially *and* paternalistically, a less-kind version of how someone may describe their child's imaginary games.

An Indigenous Take

It is possible that what we know now of Omàmiwininiwag myths is coloured by the people's conversion to Christianity, and that elements of Christian belief and narratives seeped into Indigenous stories over centuries, resulting in a syncretic stew of story. Certainly, in an environment of mandatory Christianity, it would be easier for Sky Woman and the Otter to endure if camouflaged in Christian motifs.

However, because the story survived and was passed on from one generation to the next, it was important to Omàmiwininiwag ways of knowing and being. Sky Woman and the Otter were worth passing down because they, like most creation stories, conveyed the cultural values that were crucial to the physical and spiritual survival of a people. The Omàmiwininiwag cosmogonic myth, then, was one part of maintaining cultural continuity.

The Omàmiwininiwag creation myth's reception is less about the story's plot – less about the details – and more about understanding *why* it is told, to whom, in what contexts, and to what

[248] Emma Anderson, *The Death and Afterlife of the North American Martyrs* (Harvard University Press, 2013), https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674726161, 19-20.

ends. The reasons and methods behind the narrative's retelling reveal storytellers' deeper motivations and beliefs. The ways Elders and scholars tell the creation stories predominantly emphasize kinship with other-than-human beings, the importance of stewarding the land, and respect for all of life. Traditional teachings, long transmitted in secret, continue to loom large for Indigenous Nations like the Omàmiwininiwag.

The Story and Nature

This section discusses the messages about Nature transmitted by the Omàmiwininiwag cosmogonic myth, with a particular emphasis on the themes the story itself presents and those unearthed by my discussions with Joan. As with the chapter on Genesis, my analysis is somewhat artificially broken into subsections: what the story says about other-than-human Nature, what it says about human Nature, and what it reveals about the relationship between humans and other-than-humans.

On Other-Than-Human Nature

The Omàmiwininiwag orientation to other-than-human Nature is unwieldy, requiring a holistic and interconnected lens, but can, for the sake of simplicity, be grouped into several prevailing ideas: that Nature has agency and personhood, that all beings have spirit, and that we humans are inescapably dependent on Nature.

The story of Sky Woman, as well as the story of the Otter, show that other-than-human beings have agency over their roles and relationships with humans according to Omàmiwininiwag beliefs. In the Sky Woman's tale, the other-than-human animals help Sky Woman of their own volition. The geese hold her up in the air, the turtle holds her up on the water, and multiple animals dive underwater to get earth, endangering themselves in the process.

The animals decide how they will contribute to Sky Woman's safety and talk amongst themselves to find solutions; not only are they willing, but they are *able*.

Similarly, in the oral version of the Otter that Joan shared with me, the Otter spirit chooses his role as a guardian that instructs humans on how to live in harmony with themselves and the rest of Nature, demonstrating his ability to make decisions about his own fate. This ability – this personhood – is universal, applying to all plants, animals, and the Land. These other-than-human spirits possess agency over their relationships with humans, just as the Otter shows.

Another myth that Joan shared with me illustrated the personhood of all beings further. In this other myth, the animals gathered in council upon realizing the Europeans were about to arrive. Understanding the havoc the newcomers would wreak, they decided to retreat further into the forest, committing to only return when the people needed them.[249] The additional story shows that other-than-human animals can make decisions independently of our species. Though they are willing to help us, their "younger brothers,"[250] they would not necessarily do so if it placed their own survival in peril. Nature, then, is not unconditionally beholden to humanity, but, as a sibling, makes an active choice to support us.

Because Nature is a plurality of persons, Indigenous communities like that of the Omàmiwininiwag expect that we interact with our other-than-human relations as such,[251] requiring a deep and authentic appreciation and respect. Nature's personhood also means that

[249] Joan Tenasco, "Storytelling Session," September 18, 2025.
[250] Kimmerer 2013, 9.
[251] Stonechild 2020, 35.

accessing help, food, and medicine from our animal, vegetal, and mineral kin requires permission.

Hunting, for example, has strict protocols that must be followed to ensure success. Pearson outlines the significance of hunting rituals in seventeenth century northeastern Indigenous societies,[252] a significance which has not been dulled over the last few centuries. According to Joan, hunting in a good way requires asking "the spirit of that animal to come to you […] and offer[ing] a thanks before you kill it."[253] Across our three conversations, she repeated that respect – shown through these kinds of requests prior to hunting, as well as laying tobacco down – for other-than-human beings was paramount.[254]

The necessity of showing respect for Nature is a result of the possession of a spirit being seen as a universal trait, rather than a uniquely human one.[255] Stephen McGregor, an Omàmiwinini author, wrote that "[…] the fundamental principle of Anishinàbeg spiritual beliefs [is] that the spirit of the creator existed in all things, living and non-living."[256] As Joan told me, "Everything has a spirit. Everything has a reason for being there. […] Even the water has spirit."[257] This is such a basic understanding for Anishinaabeg that it is coded into the very language; Anishinaabemowin has word segments to distinguish between living and not living, rather than differentiating between genders.[258]

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[252] Pearson 2014, 68.

[253] Joan Tenasco, "Storytelling Session," December 2, 2025. See also McGregor 2004, 7.

[254] Joan Tenasco, "Storytelling Session," (Kitigan Zibi, Quebec), June 11, 2025; Joan Tenasco, "Storytelling Session," September 18, 2025; Joan Tenasco, "Storytelling Session," December 2, 2025.

[255] Joan Tenasco, "Storytelling Session," September 18, 2025.

[256] McGregor 2004, 7.

[257] Joan Tenasco, "Storytelling Session," September 18, 2025.

[258] Elder Shirley Tolley, personal communication at Meaningful Data and Indigenous Praxis, University of Ottawa, April 7, 2026.

During my second conversation with Joan, we discussed the implications of this belief; namely, that Nature also has emotions and an afterlife, which can be evident if one pays attention, especially with animals who are expressive in ways our species can better understand.[259] Ceremony is another way to communicate with other species, particularly non-human animals, as it facilitates conversation between spirits. Dreams are another site where humans can commune with Nature, especially with animals, who are active participants in dreams and visions as "persons and messengers from Kitcie Manitou [Great Spirit] …"[260]

In spite of the close ties between other-than-human spirits and humanity, both Sky Woman and the Otter's narratives make it clear that Nature was not made for humans. Rather, other-than-humans have responsibilities to each other and to us, as we have to them. The relationship is not hierarchical, but reciprocal. In many Indigenous spiritual systems, including that of the Omàmiwininiwag, humans are the most recent additions to the terrestrial family and, as such, are both the most dependent on other beings (such as the Otter) and have the most to learn.[261]

Joan emphasized human dependency on other-than-human Nature, calling our fellow animals role models, since they are our elders and have consistently embodied how to live in harmony with the rest of our kin.[262] She repeatedly mentioned our need for animals, vegetation, and minerals as medicine and the basics for survival.[263] The literature on northeastern Indigenous spiritual traditions corroborates this – Morrison notes that, "These persons of the other-than-

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[259] Joan Tenasco, "Storytelling Session," September 18, 2025.

[260] Roger Spielmann, "'Makwa Nibawaanaa': Analysis of an Algonquin Bear-Dream Account," in *The Algonquins*, ed. Daniel Clément (Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1996), 195.

[261] Kimmerer 2013, 9.

[262] Joan Tenasco, "Storytelling Session," September 18, 2025.

[263] Joan Tenasco, "Storytelling Session," September 18, 2025.

human class, as the Algonkians conceived them, offered human beings models of social cooperation, symbolizing as they did the ethics of political behavior."[264]

On Human Nature

The messages conveyed by the Omàmiwininiwag stories are less about human *nature* and more about right relationship and our role in the universe. Sky Woman and the Otter establish that there is no particular or uniquely human nature – all living beings are persons, all living beings have Spirit, and all living beings have a role in the extensive web of kin. One aspect of this role requires active participation in our relationship to the Land and all its inhabitants. Indigenous ecologist Jennifer Grenz and Indigenous scientist Robin Wall Kimmerer explicitly encourage their students and readers to develop active relationships with Nature, rather than attempting to conserve or preserve some false notion of perfection or purity.[265] Humans are meant to be the "bringers of balance" and "shapers of the land and waters," but in a dynamic, contextually informed way, embodying a deep understanding of a place's past, present, and future.[266] Nature is ever-changing; therefore, promoting balance means shifting alongside all our surroundings, rather than striving for a static snapshot, repeated over time. Building a strong relationship with Nature, then, helps us understand where the shifts are so we might shift, too.

Gauging an appropriate response to ever-changing Nature, though, takes presence and intention. In one of our conversations, Joan reminded me that following a good path requires a level of presence with and mindfulness of the current context, rather than a fixation on a real or imagined past. When we spoke about our role as human beings, she told me that,

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[264] Morrison 2002, 62.

[265] Grenz 2024, 136; Kimmerer 2013, 6.

[266] Grenz 2024, 130.

> "[…] you're being directed into a job [now…]. You're being directed there, but you might not be there yet […]. All of this is a path for you, but if you were angry because of what happened [in the past], you would be all over the place. You would not be listening to your […] own self […] because your own self will tell you […] when you did something not too good."[267]

I understood her to mean that, to be able to discern the correct course of action and to fulfill our roles and responsibilities well, we must be able to access our inner knowing. And doing so requires a level of presence with what *is*, and not what was.

This reflects that Omàmiwininiwag ways of understanding the universe are less focused on enumerating the characteristics that comprise human nature and more focused on the actions and behaviours that help us fulfil our roles and responsibilities as humans. Without actively relating to Nature – both inside and outside ourselves – we will not be able to discern subtle signals of imbalance or disharmony, much less repair even small relational fractures.[268]

Much of what I learned about Omàmiwininiwag ways of knowing, being, and understanding centered around the importance of behaviour to a thriving relationship with other-than-humans. Listening, praying, and allowing beings to fulfil their own roles were crucial to the "good path,"[269] which I took to mean a way of living that honoured other beings and outwardly demonstrated spiritual respect. There is no one right way to walk the good path, but there are general guidelines humans can follow to do so. Again, the goal seems not to be for people to follow a specific, explicit set of rules, but rather to learn the proper protocols, cultivate an inner knowledge of Nature, and employ the protocols in a way that embodies that knowledge. Rather like the difference between rote memorization and proper learning, the type of engagement with

[267] Joan Tenasco, "Storytelling Session," September 18, 2025.
[268] Joan Tenasco, "Storytelling Session," December 2, 2025.
[269] Joan Tenasco, "Storytelling Session," September 18, 2025.

Nature that Indigenous cultures promote necessitates a level of immersion and individual customization; though there are behavioural norms and guiding principles, there is no one-size-fits all, no magic answer key.

Though Sky Woman and the Otter's stories tell us less about human nature and more about human action, an important lesson it transmits is that "[…] we need other people! We need other Nations because we are supposed to learn how to form […] good relationships."[270] As the younger brothers of all creation, the newest members in the terrestrial family, we are on Earth to learn,[271] and the Otter and other kin are meant to help us do so. The most abiding lesson about human nature that I took away from the Omàmiwininiwag origin myth is that it is dependent on all other Nature. We are inextricable from our surroundings.

On the Relationship Between Humans and Other Beings

I have mentioned above that relationship is at the crux of Omàmiwininiwag spiritual beliefs, especially in relation to Nature. Since relationships are *the* driver of Omàmiwininiwag ways of being and understanding, it is crucial to remember that this worldview is predicated on mutability and a deep dependence on context. Rather than attempting to return to a romanticized past, Indigenous Peoples instead attempt to achieve a shifting balance with Nature through a continuous practice of relational values.

I discussed earlier that Omàmiwininiwag regard our species' well-being as tied to that of the Land and our other-than-human kin. The COVID-19 pandemic, in Joan's view, is a prime example of this central understanding, "[…] the earth was telling us it's damaged, it's sick."[272]

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[270] Joan Tenasco, "Storytelling Session," September 18, 2025.

[271] Kimmerer 2013, 9; Stonechild 2020, 1.

[272] Joan Tenasco, "Storytelling Session," September 18, 2025.

Even if we are not paying attention, we are tied to Nature in body and spirit. To avoid negative repercussions and cultivate harmony with Nature, humans must nurture and practice relationship on an ongoing basis. As Joan pointed out, there is no relationality in staying stuck in the past – relationships can only ever be kept in the present.[273]

Joan also told me that humans once communicated with other animals in a common language; in Omàmiwininiwag contexts, the common tongue was Anishinaabemowin.[274] That humans shared a language with other-than-humans conveys the profundity of the relationship between us and our fellow terrestrials. Even now, she told me, we share other forms of communication with our other-than-human kin that are perhaps less obvious and more somatic, including intuition and heart-based listening.[275]

Sharing language with Nature – whether oral or somatic – implies a shared kinship, a sense of community, and an abiding relationship based in equality and commonality. It effectively puts humans on an equal footing with the rest of Nature, underscoring the understanding that other-than-humans are persons and that they possess the same – if not greater – value.

Chapter Conclusion

The most instrumental components of Omàmiwininiwag attitudes towards Nature as portrayed in their creation story are the belief in the inherent personhood of all beings, including the Land itself, and the centrality of good relations.

[273] Joan Tenasco, "Storytelling Session," September 18, 2025.
[274] Joan Tenasco, "Storytelling Session," September 18, 2025.
[275] Joan Tenasco, "Storytelling Session," December 2, 2025.

This orientation towards Nature is based on need and reciprocity. Since Nature and all the beings under its umbrella are seen as persons, they are each imbued with agency, unique responsibilities, the power to either help or hinder, and spirit. All are seen as kin, a large extended family.

Humans, as a species, are not believed to be particularly special in Algonquin tradition; in fact, we are the little brothers of creation, the ones with the least experience and the most to learn. For us to survive and even thrive, we are expected to respect our elder non-human siblings and their spirits by maintaining good relationships with them. The behaviour required to maintain positive relationships with them resemble the behaviours we would employ amongst ourselves: open and regular communication, respecting boundaries, and being considerate of others' needs. Failing to behave appropriately has dire consequences for human well-being – other-than-human persons can refuse to cooperate with our requests for their bodies or medicines, resulting in starvation or illness.

Like Christian Genesis, Sky Woman and the Otter encourage people to be mindful of other-than-human beings and the Land, given our indelible connection thereto. Predictably, the two religious traditions diverge greatly on *how* they arrive at this conclusion. While Adam and Eve's story encourages us to steward – to oversee, to care for – the Land and its inhabitants because all are part of God's creation, which is inherently good, the Omàmiwininiwag base their respect for Nature not on a creator god's goodness, but rather on the inherent personhood of all beings. Unlike the Christian creation story, however, there is no desire to go back to an idyllic past.[276] Rather, Omàmiwininiwag perspectives are coloured by a desire for harmony, accepting that the inevitable flux of life will shift what this requires over time. This acceptance of the

[276] Grenz 2024, 19-20.

changing nature of reality – of Nature – is remarkably lucid and potentially quite useful in facing the very real challenges climate change presents.

Conclusion

By examining the Nature character in these myths, I have found that there is no tidy way of understanding a society's attitudes towards its natural environment. The Christian and Omàmiwininiwag accounts of creation are fundamentally different in the most literal sense – their fundaments are distinct. Despite this, they both reflect a level of pragmatism towards humanity's surroundings, encouraging pro-social and eco-friendly behaviour in fulfillment of responsibilities to the divine, ourselves, and future generations. Both stories, when closely examined, convey several similar messages: that we are part of Nature in some way, and that our environment and the other-than-humans around us reflect both our suffering and thriving – we are tied together. In both myths, humans are tasked with caring for the Land and the creatures on it.

How each narrative categorizes Nature, though, differs. As this thesis has shown, the Christian text and its exegetes have focused on a hierarchical relationship between humans and Nature that privileges our species. Omàmiwininiwag beliefs, instead, place us as the younger sibling who has much to learn from our Earthly family. Furthermore, the story in the first three chapters of Genesis is often burdened with decontextualized assumptions and conflated with other Western constructs, including scientific supremacy and the privileging of the rational and intellectual over all else. This rhetorical move has pulled the focus from the pragmatic behaviours that Genesis' original authors seem to have been imparting and towards an entitlement to and contempt towards the other-than-human that has landed our species in a sticky (read: terrifying) situation. The emphasis on human dominion and exceptionality, interpreted too often as unchecked ownership, has distracted Christian-based societies, like Canada's, from the responsibility for stewardship and care that Genesis points to. As a cornerstone of Christian

theology, Genesis 1-3 is only part of a much larger, grander Christian narrative. Without Adam and Eve's Fall being a huge rupture in the fabric of the universe, without spotlighting the gravity of their mistake, Jesus' sacrifice begins to lose its lustre. Consequently, the messages conveyed by the Christian cosmogonic myth can easily fall into the background.

Despite the mutations one might expect of traditionally oral societies, the Omàmiwininiwag's memory of humans' responsibility for ongoing relationship remained steady. They choose instead to emphasize the importance of harmony, care, and relationship in storytelling and – crucially – lived practice. Other animals support our well-being; the Otter, in particular, has the role of teaching and reminding us of our place on Earth and the necessity of maintaining good relations with all our terrestrial kin. Our role is to listen and act accordingly. In Omàmiwininiwag tradition, Sky Woman and the Otter are central, yes, but they also represent only a fragment of the creation narrative, just one reminder of the ties that bind us physically and spiritually to the rest of the world. Here, the origin story is less of a first act in the theatre of spiritual belief, and more a lesson in humanity's role and place in the universal order.

The Otter – in story and in spirit – reminds us about what we are on Earth to do: to learn and to relate. This active, continuous process requires respecting others (human and other-than-human) by allowing them to fulfil their roles and by carrying out our own responsibilities in return. Sky Woman's saviours are also role models, embodying the inter-species collaboration that enables our survival. As a good younger sibling, we are expected to pay attention, learn, and remember how to live in harmony.

A Parting Thought, or What Now?

It is not remotely random that I picked myths for my thesis project; it was always this for me. But we are not only bound by our pasts. Our decisions shape us, too. As I grew into early

adulthood, I also grew to understand that the stories that matter to us, the ones we choose to believe and keep in our minds and hearts, tell us a lot about who we are and how we (choose to) see the world. The messages we choose to keep from those stories are paramount – as I have shown, narratives that can be weaponized against groups can also be used to encourage pro-social behaviour. This thesis, with its challenges, hardships, and triumphs, is personally significant because of my past, yes, but also because it taught me that we can *choose* the stories we tell and to what ends.

My thesis demonstrates that the Global North – the majority, the hegemony, which is Christian in the West – has lost sign of a pragmatic kernel of truth from Genesis that was not lost among the Omàmiwininiwag: our destiny is tied to Nature's, which means that we possess a level of responsibility to care for and about it. Rather than shrinking away from this responsibility in the name of penance, guilt, or fear of failure, we can choose instead to lean in as active participants in the relationships we are part of (whether or not we want to be). Connecting to other-than-human Nature in a meaningful way means cultivating self-awareness and the ability to tune into the subtlety of intuition, which in part requires being attuned to the louder shapers of our knowing and being, like the stories we hold. Becoming attuned to our stories asks of us to stay open to unearthing and examining them, lest we fall prey to unfounded assumptions. The work of self-examination is ongoing, as the research should be. I am not the first to study cosmogonic myths and their bearing on contemporary society, nor do I anticipate I will be the last, especially as our climatic prognosis worsens. This thesis has only begun to scratch the surface; further research into the narrative and rhetorical mechanisms that contribute to Nature-related issues is necessary.

Like other living beings, I am profoundly and consistently affected by the world around me. Between the time I enrolled in graduate school and finished my degree, both my mother and a close friend of mine died, I was laid off from a comfortable job, repeated wildfires and heatwaves scorched their way across the globe, financial interests sparked and stoked several ongoing genocides, and thousands of people were violently displaced from their homes and lands. These events – and so many more – fuelled my desire to complete this project, to make this one intellectual contribution to a better world. Opting out of engaging with the complexity of living and choosing to wallow in despair does not feel like a long-term option.

Instead, I invite my reader to sit with me in continuing to take a closer, harder, and kinder look at the myths we (think we) know, unravelling our surface-level assumptions to weave a richer narrative fabric. I hope that we use this fabric, along with any future research, to its full potential: to build a more survivable, pragmatic, humane, and just world – together.

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