

Recognizing the Ocean's Identity

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Research Question

If you and the ocean could speak the same language, what would you say to each other?

Preparations and Planning

Prior to the “lockdown” mandated federally and provincially in the context of COVID-19, the research question was to be presented to the public in the form of three arts-based, in-person workshops, one in each of the three counties of Prince Edward Island (also known by Mi’kmaq as *Epekwitk*, meaning “lying in the water”). The three venues were:

- 1) The Summerside Rotary Library (provincially funded public library in Summerside, Prince County);
- 2) The Community Room at the Sobey’s on University Avenue in Charlottetown (Queen’s County);
- 3) Cavendish Wellness Centre (a multi-purpose community centre with fitness and other facilities in Montague, King’s County).

My original plan for the workshop was to have participants engage with the research question, as well as to participate in a guided meditation and art-making session that considered oysters and humans’ relationship to/with them. With workshops needing to be shifted to virtual or online delivery, I abandoned the idea of a livestream “event” and instead created an activity that would enable people to respond whenever they had the time or inclination by using a “mini-comic” as a possible prompt for engaging with the research question.

The comic presented empty dialogue bubbles that participants could fill in as they saw fit. I chose the comics-style imagery because I thought it might appeal to both children and adults. Parents could sit down with their child(ren) and work on a response together, or kids could complete it alone. That said, I also know that comics can have a wide age appeal and that they have broad sociocultural significance in the context of literary studies, the visual arts, and art-making.

Process and Methodology

In keeping with the idea of making the experience as accessible/open as possible, I offered participants the choice to either fill in the speech bubbles on my provided comic or create their own comic, drawing, story, poem, etc. As a third option, I also created a short list of questions to potentially engage a greater range of participants.

The image on the first page of my comic prompt is of a non-gender-specific child holding a conch shell up to their ear, from which flows a blue wave representing the ocean. A speech or dialogue bubble extends from the child's head containing only the word "Hello?" This image is based on the notion that we can "hear" the ocean by holding this type of shell to our ear. A Google search suggested that this is a widely recognized visual symbol signifying the potential for a conversation between a human being and the ocean.

There was a total of 14 individual responses in various media/modes (the addition of dialogue to the comic; an artwork or piece of writing inspired by the question; answers to the original questionnaire; or a conversation).

Several general themes emerged from the responses:

- identity, ontology, the nature of being, the oneness of being, diversity
- interdependence, symbiosis, mutuality, responsibility, reciprocity
- sadness/sorrow (including solastalgia), concern, regret, apology
- wonder, curiosity, fascination, amazement, gratitude, devotion, love
- change, cycles, lifecycles, sickness, pollution, waste, destruction, death
- the future, future generations (human but also more-than-human)
- climate change/the Anthropocene (in particular, ocean temperature and acidification)

Participants also asked many specific questions of the ocean, including: What is your name? What/who are you really? Why are you so salty? How can we give back to the oceans? How are you? ("I just wanted to 'sea' how you are doing...")

In my view, the nature of the research question implicitly prompts responses based on, or manifesting as, dialogue, as well as on notions of reciprocity. The majority of responses suggest that participants view the ocean as an entity with some kind of identity, albeit one that may be rather amorphous or undefined. Furthermore, in recognizing the ocean's identity and the gift-giving facets of their being, the majority of responses indicate that humans owe them our respect and admiration. As well, a couple of respondents noted that humans often have derived their identities from proximity to or engagement with the ocean. Prince Edward "Islanders," for example, would not be "Islanders" if not for the fact of being surrounded by water.

Note that I am using pronouns "they," "them," and "their" when referring to "the ocean" in order to communicate several points: that the ocean has no gender; that there are several oceans around the globe; that "the ocean" may, perhaps paradoxically, be best understood as both singular and plural. Furthermore, I support not using the pronoun "it," following from Robin Wall Kimmerer's (2013) work, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. As she explains, "it" tends to objectify its referent, and Kimmerer, as a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, asks whether white people/people of European descent should stop using

“it” in relation to other living beings, as doing so leads more easily to being disrespectful, wasteful, etc.

Many of my ways of thinking about and knowing the natural world, including the ocean, have been amplified or enhanced by reading, hearing, or otherwise learning about the worldviews of Indigenous peoples. As I understand it, land-based education is a huge part of Indigenous resurgence across Turtle Island (now more commonly known as North America). Is it possible to also incorporate a kind of “ocean-based” learning? The underlying notion is that a major paradigm shift needs to happen with regard to humans’ place in the “natural” world, our role as stewards, and how to have a more mutually beneficial and reciprocal relationship with the ocean.

References

Kimmerer, R.W. (2013). *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed Editions: Minneapolis, Minnesota.