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Climbing the Trees of My Childhood to Get to Here—Then, Now, and Beyond in

My Figured Embodied Worlds

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**Climbing the Trees of My Childhood to Get to Here—Then, Now, and Beyond in My
Figured Embodied Worlds**

Today is a lovely winter day in Atlanta. The temperature is a mild 50 degrees, the sun is shining, and the skies are clear. I meant to go to yoga to clear my head of work responsibilities, but when I got there, the class had started, and I was not allowed to get in. I took this to mean that I was meant to go for a walk. The neighborhood park where I walk is surrounded by tall pine evergreen trees. They make a great backdrop as I walk the circumference of the park. At the front entrance where I park my car, there are barren leafless trees that are ripe for drawing, but alas, I fear, I cannot draw and I am fearful! I can take a picture (Figure 1: The Park), and I can make pictures with my words as I hope they do for you in this editorial.



Figure 1. The park.

As I traveled the circumference along with the other walkers, I felt all my cares slip away as I enjoyed the moment of the sun caressing my face and I feel the stretch of my limbs. I was smiling because I was happy. I was happier, too, thinking of a picture I had taken early last year of the winding, steep dirt path adjacent to the park. This path cuts through the pine trees and weaves its way upwards. At the top beyond the canopy of trees is a children's playground with

swings and basketball and tennis courts, but you would only know this if you have travelled up the path. From the lower level, you can only see the tops of the dense trees surrounding the park. If I happen to be at the park when the nearby elementary school is out, I would see the kids racing down the path. That is why it is so well worn, as I am sure that they do it every day.



Figure 2. The path where kids run down from school to home.

When I look up the well-worn, steep path and imagine the kids fearlessly rushing down, I think of my own childhood days in the Bahamas. Being carefree and not having a worry in the world, reading my books and fearlessly climbing the numerous trees that pervaded our backyard. Do teachers ever draw on the figured worlds of children's environment to teach? These are the places where identities are made where we "become." Places that touch the heart, mind, body and soul because that is where you come from and what you are made of?

Our yard was plentiful with sapodilla trees, a luscious brown tropical fruit. Each tree yielded a different tasting fruit. The tree that had the richest and sweetest taste was the one nearest to the house and whose branches rested on the roof. My brothers or my cousins and I would climb it effortlessly and then handpick the fruits and settle on the roof to eat them. We sat in the valley of the roof and could rest our backs on one side as we sat with our legs scrunched up, gorging on the rich plentiful sapodillas.

Then I had a favorite sapodilla or "dilly" tree for reading my books. There was a tall dilly tree some 25 feet from our house but a little bit nearer to the neighbor's. I was in an oasis when I climbed it because no one could see or hear me. I climbed to the very top where the branches formed a nestling space that could hold me comfortably while I read and swayed gently in the breeze. This time I was not eating the fruit but engrossed in voraciously consuming the words and worlds of my Nancy Drew, Hardy Boys, Bobbsey Twins, and Famous Five thick-paged well-worn Southern Public Library books. I was surrounded by a canopy of treetops—I could see the rooves of my home and the neighbors' homes, and most of all, I could see the clear blue skies. I did not feel the heat of the summer's sun because I felt the cool tropical breeze way up high as I swayed gently in the crook of the tree holding my precious library book. I was fearless up there in the treetop reading my book.

As I walked and reminisced on the things that made my childhood rich, I dwelled too on the other things that lightened my steps and made me happy. Living on an island, one experience that was revisited constantly was going to the beach and the other for me was a major cultural event, going to junkanoo. The anticipation of going to the beach and junkanoo I still recollect with great nostalgia. My mother only had to say that she was taking us to the beach for my brothers and cousins and me to get moving on completing our chores. We had only to know that we would be getting up early on Boxing Day morning, the day after Christmas, to be filled with the anticipation of going to watch junkanoo. In the poem below, entitled “Anticipation,” I reflect on the feeling of going to Long Wharf Beach on West Bay Street and going to junkanoo on Bay Street in Nassau, Bahamas.

Anticipation

The anticipation stays with me today
Walking towards the sea
North on Nassau Street all the way to the sea
It was only about twenty minutes really
But it felt like eternity
Carrying our bags
Wearing our swimsuits under our day clothes
Our flip flops flapping on the road
Passing the houses
The Convent
Quarry Mission School corner
Where Auntie Riah lived

Passing the graveyard
We scarcely looked
On the ridge at Meeting Street
Getting nearer now you could smell the sea
Then you could see the sea
Sparkling blue and beckoning us
There in the distance
Behind the coconut trees
Eagerly now, hastening our footsteps moving faster
Anticipation building
Almost there you could feel the sea
Crunching your feet on the sand
There, you could taste the sea spray
At last
Like going to Junkanoo
From Hutcheson Street
On Meadow Street to Baillou Hill Rd
Over to Market Street
Nearer, nearer you could hear in the distance
The cowbells
The goatskin drums
The whistles
Nearer, nearer, nearer

Louder, louder
Hastening our footsteps
Under the arches of St. Gregory
You could hear the pulsating sounds
Echoing under the arches
Near, nearer to Bay Street
Then you could feel the pulsating drums
Resounding in your chest
Hear the cowbells
Clanging in your ears
See the colorful costumes
See the dancers
Feel the heat of the firelit drums
Smell the paste of the costumes
And move your feet to the rhythmic beat
And jump in the sea to feel the ocean
Cooling your limbs
Freedom to dance
Freedom to swim and splash
All you want
Nobody minds
That's an-ti-ci-pa-tion!
The taste

And feel
And smells
The sights
And sounds
Of things
To come!

Climbing trees with my cousins, going to the beach and junkanoo and the solitude of reading my books. These are the childhood experiences that built me, but no one ever drew upon them to teach me—not while I was in primary or secondary school. I just cannot recall that happening, at least not explicitly. We embody our environments; our experiences, especially our childhood experiences. What does this mean? According to Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998), this would mean how I, as learner and participant “made sense of things around me a “socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation” (p. 52). My world taught me the sense of seeing the details in places and things as I walked, the sense of hearing things acutely as I sat quietly and of allowing myself to feel as I sat quietly or savoring the many juices of the different dillies as I ate. Our emotions and concepts of being are embodied within us and become the metaphors and figurative language that we draw upon to identify ourselves. Schwimmer, Poirier, and Calmmer (2004) describe the different figured worlds in our lives as “ontologies.” They state:

...the ontologies—the figured worlds in which practice is shaped—constitute the largest or most fundamental frame out of which culture is shaped...But no ontology is simply a system of knowledge; it is equally, as the term implies, an

account of a way of being in the world and a definition through practice (and not only through cognition) of what the world is and how it is constituted, p. 4).

How do we help our learners to figure out their own worlds and the challenges of life and the place of “nature, ideas of the self, of the body, of gender and of the mind-body relationships” (Schwimmer, Poirier & Calmmer, 2004, p.5)? The authors believe that these ontologies are “linked in profound ways to ideas of health, healing, religion, identity, food, aesthetics, symbolism and architecture” (p.5) and in understanding our “intercultural relations” (p. 5-6). I profoundly believe this, too, and I believe that we can do a better job tapping into and building on these figured worlds of our ontologies in our teaching, research, and service. The embeddedness of our childhood experiences are the atoms that built us or serve as the foundations upon which we are built. They can never fully be eradicated. In a 2019-edited book, Aghasaleh challenges educators, particularly science educators, to do more to disrupt the human /nature dualism that is prevalent in our schools and in society. The chapter authors from around the world provide a rich tapestry of multicultural, multilingual/bidialectal indigenous stories, fables and folktales to show how children respond to classroom activities that draw on their natural worlds. Figure 3 shows the book cover of Aghasaleh’s *Children and Mother Nature. Storytelling for a Glocalised Environmental Pedagogy* (2019).

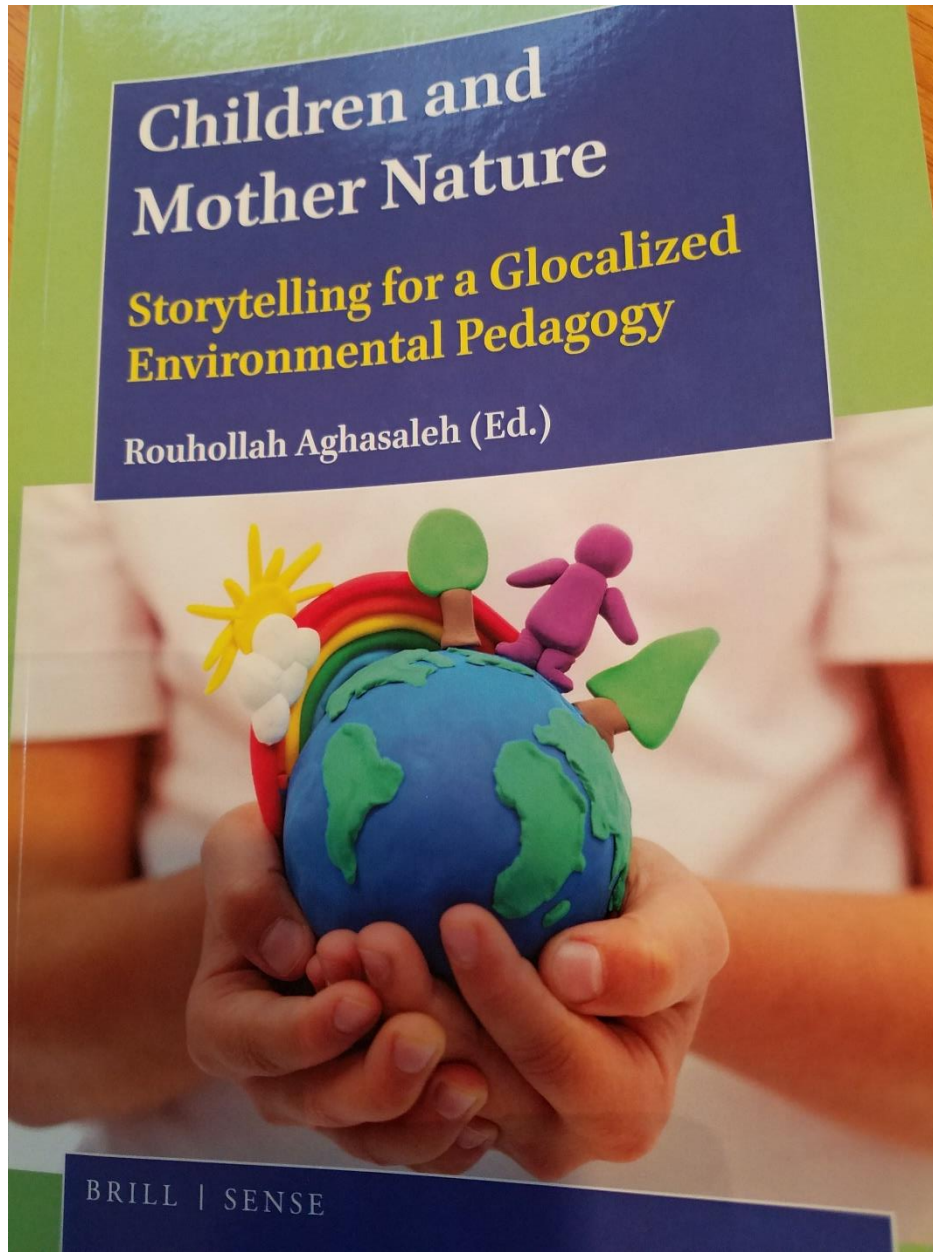


Figure 3. Children and Mother Nature: Storytelling for a Glocalized Environmental Pedagogy (Aghasaleh, 2019).

In Figure 4, I have a picture of my nephews playing on the beach in Nassau, reminiscent of my own childhood world.



Figure 4. Playing on Goodman's Bay Beach, Nassau, Bahamas.

Our theme for this edition is *The Call of Nature and the Nurturing of Our Humanity in Literature and the Arts and the Natural World*. Unfortunately, *Ubiquity - Praxis* did not receive any submissions for this call, and while I feel quite disappointed, I hope our readers and writers would use this editorial to stimulate some action in this vein in our teaching, research, and service. My trip to Arizona in 2018 for a conference put me in a most magnificent and spiritually enlivening place. I travelled outside of Albuquerque to the mesa in Acoma. The spectacular landscape truly inspired me and I took hundreds of pictures, two of which I show here as Figures 5 and 6.



Figure 5. The Mesa, Pueblo of Acoma, New Mexico.



Figure 6. Haak'u Museum, Pueblo of Acoma, New Mexico.

At the Haak'u Museum, I purchased several books, including two award-winning Caldecott books. These books demonstrated for me how storytellers and artists draw on their environments to create stories and artistic works. The Caldecott honor book, *When Clay Sings* by Byrd Baylor and beautifully illustrated by Tom Bahti (1972, Aladdin Paperbacks) (Figure 7) is about clay making by indigenous people. The poetic structure of the narrative draws on the beauty of the environment to tell the story. I share a small portion here.

There are
Desert hillsides
Where
Ancient
Indian pottery
Still lies
Half buried
In the sand
And
Lizards
Blink at
Other dusty lizards
That were painted on those pots
A thousand years ago (pg. 1)

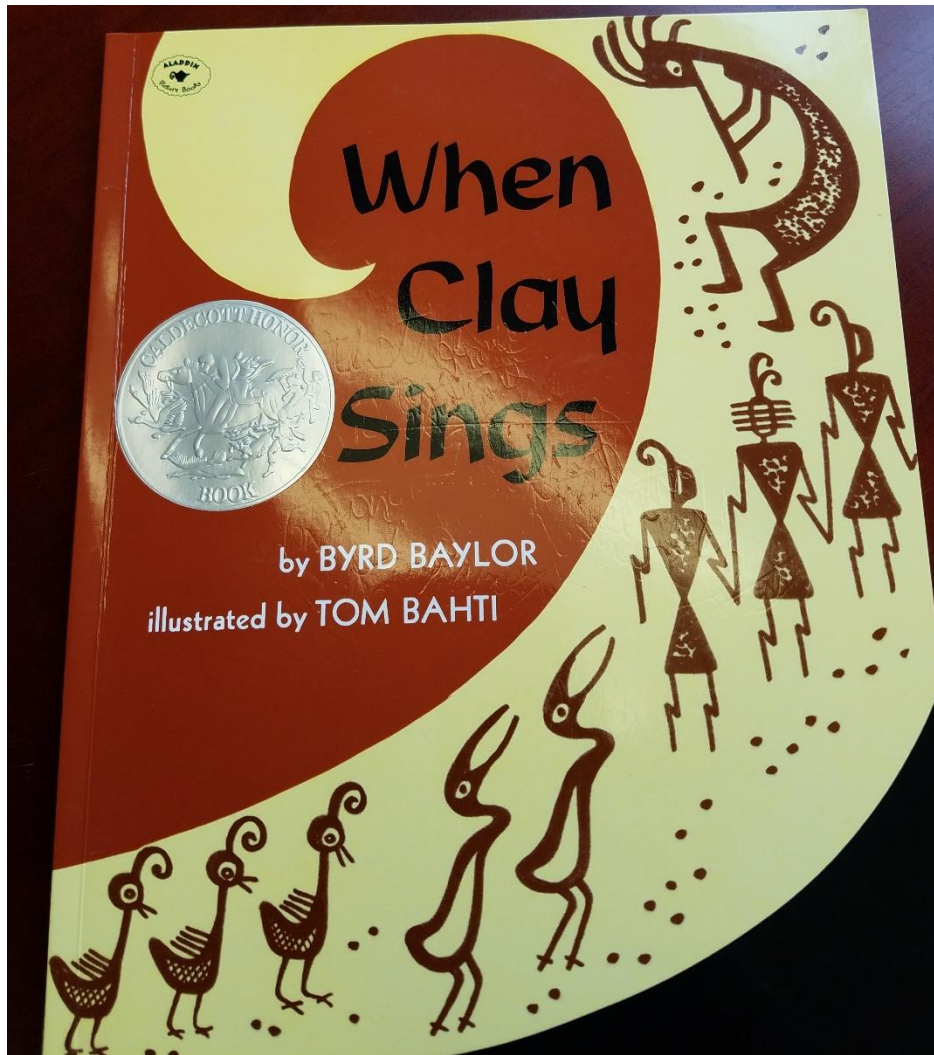


Figure 7. *When Clay Sings* (Baylor & Bahti, 1972).

The second book was a Caldecott medal book, *Arrow to the Sun: A Pueblo Indian Tale* by Gerald McDermott (1974, Puffin, New York). McDermott is an author-artist of folklore and mythology. The story is about a young boy who came into the world of men and goes on a journey to find his father by overcoming numerous obstacles in his path. The characters represent the work of people in this environment, the Corn Planter, the Pot Maker, and the Arrow Maker all artistically and compellingly presented. Please see Figure 8 for the book cover.



Figure 8. *Arrow to the Sun: A Pueblo Indian Tale* (McDermott, 1974).

On this same trip, I met author Susan Lamb and photographer, Tom Bean of the book, *The Natural World of Saint Francis of Assisi: Landscapes, Plants and Animals that Saint Francis Knew and Loved* (2009, Tau Publishing). Saint Francis is known as the patron saint of the environment and animals, and Lamb and Bean's celebration of him in this tribute is a resounding way to end this editorial (see Figure 9).

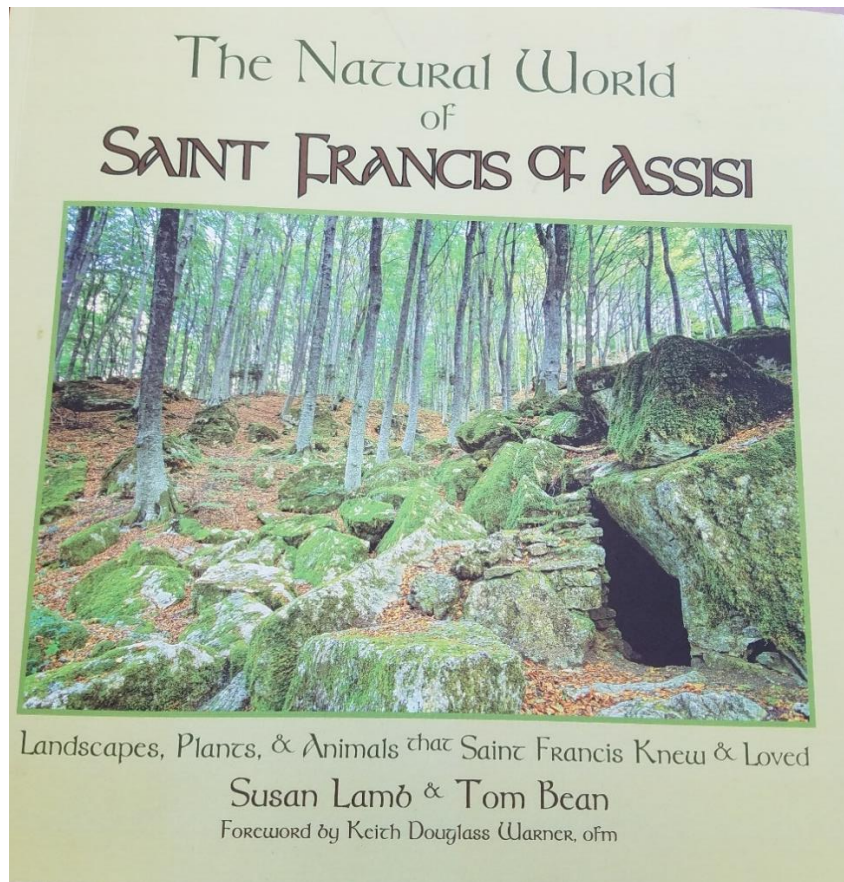


Figure 9. *The Natural World of Saint Francis of Assisi* (Lamb & Bean, 2009).

“Francis insisted on walking rather than riding. The Italian words for footpath, *sentiero*, (original) evokes the verb *sentire* (original) which can mean to feel, sense, hear or taste” (Lamb and Bean, 2009, p. 9). If we can slow down, take a walk, and use all our senses to savor life, we might discover deep inside of us, our figured embodied worlds where our souls reside. Where would your walk take you? How can we touch the body, mind and soul through our teaching, research and service? Figure 10 encourages us to take a walk up or down the steps in the park to see where they may lead us.



Figure 10. Up or down the steps?

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