

Growing Our Sense of Place and Kinship with the Land

by Rukia Monique Rogers

“Being naturalized to place means to live as if this is the land that feeds you, as if these are the streams from which you drink, that build your body and fill your spirit. To become naturalized is to know that your ancestors lie in this ground. Here you will give your gifts and meet your responsibilities. To become naturalized is to live as if your children’s future matters, to take care of the land as if our lives and the lives of all our relatives depend on it. Because they do.”

—Robin Wall Kimmerer,
“Braiding Sweetgrass”

Over the past few months, our Highlander School community in Atlanta has been in a place of evolution, rethinking our relationship with the natural world and the land upon which we live. We find ourselves asking, “Who am I, who are we in relationship to this earth?” This current thinking and our ongoing work, is fueled by our careful attention to children’s connection with this earth, and is further propelled by the urgent call to help defend the Weelaunee forest, also known as South River forest in Atlanta.

The land we are on is the ancestral home of the Muscogee people, and upon their forced removal, it was cared for by enslaved Africans. To heal from this atrocity, we must acknowledge the history this land holds and the physical and cultural genocide that took place and its legacy. We cannot do this work without centering the futurity, voices, and knowledge of African and Indigenous Americans and the voice of earth herself.

The Weelaunee forest is located less than five miles from our school and these grounds are currently under threat of destruction and deforestation. These lands carry significant Indigenous and enslaved African stories. The land is currently at risk of

becoming a police militarization base known as “Cop City”; another significant portion of the land could be bulldozed for the construction of Blackhall movie production studios. Community members have organized and collaborated with Muscogee people to stop the harmful deconstruction of the forest. This has been part of the ongoing reconnection of Muscogee people to their ancestral land. Our community’s participation in a Muscogee Stomp last fall was a call to action.

Mekko Chebbon, a leader amongst the Muscogee community in Oklahoma, said, “Georgia’s school system speaks of the Muscogee people as though we are from the past. We want folks to know that we are still here fighting for this earth, land, and water.”

Honoring the Muscogee and Weelaunee Forest

Mekko Chebbon’s message resonated with our hearts and minds, as we recognized our interrelated roles in creating harmony and balance with this earth. We consider nature from an African and Indigenous viewpoint that believes that this land, this earth, every tree, and every being holds a spiritual essence and has rights.



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Rukia Monique Rogers has worked with young children and their families for over 25 years, including work as a preschool and toddler teacher, a studio teacher, and a curriculum coordinator. In 2013, she founded

The Highlander School in Atlanta’s greater community, with a rich history to draw on. She is inspired by the educators of Reggio Emilia, by Bettina Love, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and many others who see education as a fundamental right, as well as a catalyst for social change. Rogers is an anti-bias and anti-racist educator committed to cultivating a community full of love.

Young children offer a unique perspective and kinship with the natural world that has not been subdued by capitalism's tendency to commoditize the gifts of this earth. For example, we witnessed the children's empathy for trees when planting them on our playscape. We asked, "What do the trees need to feel welcomed here at The Highlander School? What do the trees need to feel love here?"

Hunter: Hugs.

Ellison: Hugs on the tree.

Jace: Medicine.

Cooper: And water.

Ellison: And sun.

Eve: ... we could give the trees lots of love and we could come out every day to check to see if it's here or not.

Margot: Water.

Ellison: Love... good stuff.

Eve: We could make a sign that says there are trees, there are fruit trees, there are a lot of stuff you could eat.

Margot: I can give them my lovie... we can make a small toy for the tree..



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Muscogee Stomp Dance is a ceremonial dance by the Muscogee Nation that involves shakers attached to the legs.

we give them hugs and kisses, they will be happy.

We knew that the children held a deep love and appreciation for the trees in their immediate space and we were confident that this affection would extend to the Weelaunee Forest, if given the opportunity. With this assumption, our parent-led social justice committee helped to organize visits to the forest—recognizing the importance of this forest, yearning for their children to be connected and, as a parent stated, to have the “belief that they can take action on issues that matter.”

We spent our time as a community exploring the Weelaunee forest, embracing her and knowing her. Children moved slowly through the space experiencing the sensuality of the forest with their bodies. They stopped often, leaning into the earth in dialogue. The land told stories and it was the child that slowed us down to listen

and to hear the stories of the water puddles, the baby oak tree, the pinecones, the caterpillars, the sticks, and pine needles.

Guiding Questions

As educators, we returned to questions and inquiries in our declaration of intent. We wondered:

- What does it mean to be in relationship with the land we inhabit?
- How do children view the rights of the natural world?
- How do children show us and communicate with us their deep yearning to be in relationship with others and the world around them?
- What can we learn from children about how they connect, perceive, and relate to the natural world?

We continued to walk through the forest and invited families to have conversations with children about their encounters. Inside the school, we wanted to create a context for the



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The children slowed us down to listen and to hear the stories of the water puddles.

Parent Reflection from Weelaunee Forest

As we walked through the forest, Lassiter wanted to stop and look at every last tiny detail. It forced me, a lifelong “indoors kid,” to slow down and closely examine the plants and creatures I would otherwise have passed by. I think our kids can sometimes force us into mindfulness that way. I commented that the trees seemed young, and one of the forest defenders explained that the land was cleared for plantations by enslaved people, and has only “recently” grown back. So many of the trees were only about 60 years old. I was struck by how long and painstaking a process it is to grow a forest. And how easily it can be undone.

Coming from a capitalistic, colonizing culture, it is easy for me to feel disconnected from the natural world. Like all of us, I try to buy less, walk more, use less plastic, compost, and so on. But thinking about “the rights of the natural world” reframes conversations about climate change in an interesting way. Who told us we had the right to take things from the earth? When did we decide the earth belonged to the people with enough power to take it?

I always assumed climate change was a separate and distinct issue from that of racial justice. But learning about the multilayered history of the Weelaunee forest (first taken from the Muscogee People, then cleared and farmed by enslaved people, and now set aside for a massive police training center), it is becoming clear how interconnected they are. And it makes me wonder what other important details I am missing as I pass by.

—Mom of Lassiter, age 3

children to continue their conversations and share with other children who may have not gone to the forest what they noticed, explored, and learned. We used the parlor inside our building entry to create a digital landscape. We played videos from our walks, printed images of the children in the forest, and incorporated into our environment natural materials that were gifts collected from the forest. We wanted to create a space and the time for children to revisit and reconnect with the Weelaunee forest, as well as to honor. The children immediately began to share stories with each other.

Telling the Story of the Muscogee People

After multiple visits to the Weelaunee Forest, we decided that it was time to offer the children some of the land’s history, the immediate plans to cut down the trees, and the return of the Muscogee people to protect it. We created a short story that spoke to the forced removal of the Muscogee people from their home and their return back home. Hunter continuously interrupted

and asked, “Why?” “Why did the white people do that?” “Why do they want to cut down the trees?”

The question why at times was challenging to answer, but upon reflection, Hunter shed light on the necessity of challenging narratives and the need to demand reasons for people’s actions. When we shared that the Muscogee children were returning to their homelands in efforts to protect the Weelaunee forest, Hunter exclaimed, “Is this for real? They are really coming!”

The children cheered with excitement but soon this enthusiasm turned to dismay as we shared the plans to cut down the trees. In response, Jace placed his hand over his heart, turning to friends in disbelief.

Cora asked, with a sense of urgency: Do the people know? We need to tell all the people in the town! We need to tell the people!

Estefhaney (teacher): What would we tell the people?

Ellison: Stop it!



Much time was spent pondering the tree’s perspective.

Cora: Don't cut down the trees!

Rukia (teacher): How will we tell the people?

Cora: We'll shout it!

Maverick: We can write it down.

Jace: I know we can write it on each tree.

Sign Making: The Tree's Perspective

We began to support the children's ideas both to create signs and to tell the people. Much time was spent pondering the tree's perspective. What do you believe the trees want to communicate? What would they want the signs to say?

Cora: He is trying to say don't cut the tree down, because we don't want the trees to get pushed down. We want to save them. We got to save the trees!

Ellison: They can't talk. Maybe if we had magical dust glitter and then the glitter can make them talk? Maybe that can work.

Cora: Don't knock down the rest of the trees.

With their understanding and perspective, the children began to create signs on behalf of, speaking to and for the trees. Their language was fierce, strong in ways that they do not usually express themselves. This ongoing process has truly been a reciprocal learning process for us all. It is powerful to witness and feel the children's passion and sense of agency to act on behalf of their community, and in solidarity with other children, families, activists, the Indigenous people, and educators. Children embody such sensitivity to this earth and a belief in the right of trees to exist, to hugs, to love, to happiness, to the sun, to water, to a love, to medicine, and the good stuff! Our adult world has a good deal to learn from children about the expansiveness of empathy.

In the days to follow, the conversations continued and the children's emotions grew. They continuously talked about the trees and the Muscogee people returning. The stories about the Weelaunee forest and the Muscogee people began to flow in their play and

interactions. The children were also invited to make gifts for the guest speakers of the Muscogee summit that was organized by the community.

In this spirit of sharing with others what was occurring in the Weelaunee forest, our children invited children from other preschool programs to join them in the forest. As this work progressed, the invitation to join resulted in children across five preschools in the area rallying for a child-led protest throughout the East Atlanta village.

Closing Reflections

The words of two leaders sum up the essence of this fully-engaged experience for me.

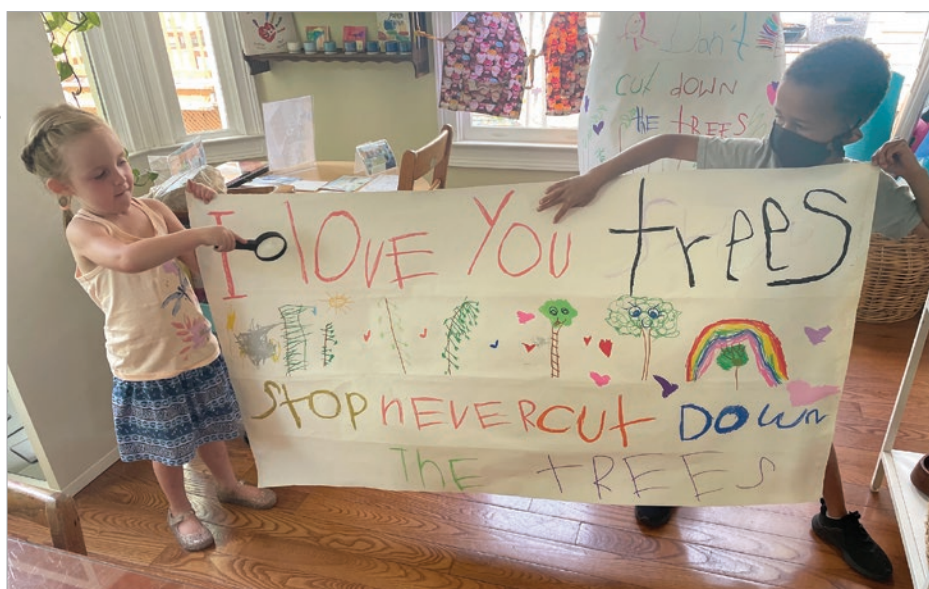
Dr. Laura Harjo, a Muscogee scholar, was brought to tears hearing of the children's conversations, saying, "This was the children forming kinship relationships with me and my ancestors."

And Loris Malaguzzi reminds us, "We can never think of the child in the abstract. When we think about a child, when we pull out a child to look at, that child is already tightly connected and linked to a certain reality of the world—she has relationships and experiences. We cannot separate this child from a particular reality. She brings these experiences, feelings, and relationships into school with her."

As we come to the end of my story, what reflections do you have?

References

Robin Wall Kimmerer. 2015. Braiding Sweetgrass



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