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from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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IN REVIEW

INDIGENOUS WISDOM: RE-STORY-ATION TO RESIST, RESURGE, AND INSPIRE

By Florencia Pech-Cárdenas

I was fortunate to attend an in-person conversation between two Indigenous scholar-authors, Diane Wilson and Robin Wall Kimmerer, at the University of Minnesota's Northrop Auditorium on May 17th, 2022 (Kimmerer and Wilson 2022). In this column, I share part of my reflections and stories as an Indigenous scientist inspired by Robin and Diane's conversation, specifically Robin's emphasis on the importance

of healing our relationships with the land and nonhuman relatives, and the need for "Re-story-ation" of the land. As I understand it, re-story-ation means to return our stories to the land and to remember how to hear the stories the land tells. I respond to the call for re-story-ation by reflecting on my relationships with land where I reside currently, and where I am building connections and relationships to my ancestral lands. As



*Robin Wall Kimmerer and Diane Wilson in conversation.
Photo: Rebecca Slater, by Rebecca Studios.*

Indigenous peoples, most of our stories have been fractured and interrupted by colonial and neo-colonial processes, so re-story-ation is a way to resist, resurge, and inspire others. Our stories are our lived experiences and the knowledge that has been passed to us (consciously or unconsciously) by our ancestors, the land, and nonhuman relatives. Re-story-ation is a gift to restore our souls, our stories, and our lives.

Robin Wall Kimmerer is an Indigenous botanist and a distinguished Teaching Professor at the State University of New York, where she writes and teaches about what she has learned from plants. Robin uses both Western and Indigenous lenses—and languages—to interpret and express what she experiences, day to day, related to plants, life, and more. Bringing together Indigenous knowledge and Western science is

not an easy task given that these two types of knowledge systems sometimes have opposing or conflicting characteristics. Nevertheless, Kimmerer does this in a way that most audiences can understand and appreciate. As a teaching assistant for a class where Robin's book, *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013), was a requested reading, I cannot express how happy students were that the instructor included this book as part of the teaching material for the class. The learning they gained was beyond purely academic or scientific knowledge. In the book, Robin tells us about the teaching of plants in her personal and professional life from scientific and Indigenous perspectives. Two of my favorite chapters in this book are "Skywoman Falling," and "The Three Sisters." I love these two chapters because I can draw connections with my own life experiences and cultural background.



Diane Wilson and Robin Wall Kimmerer. Photo: Rebecca Slater, by Rebecca Studios.

Relationships with the land

I am Maya Yucateca from the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico. I came to the University of Minnesota to study for a Ph.D. in 2016 and, at times, I have felt lost. On first impression, tropical Yucatan and temperate Minnesota do not have much in common. Or that is what I thought in my first years in Minnesota, which also were my first in life as a mother in a different country, surrounded by different languages and cultures. However, little by little, I have found some commonality and connections between Minnesota and Yucatan.

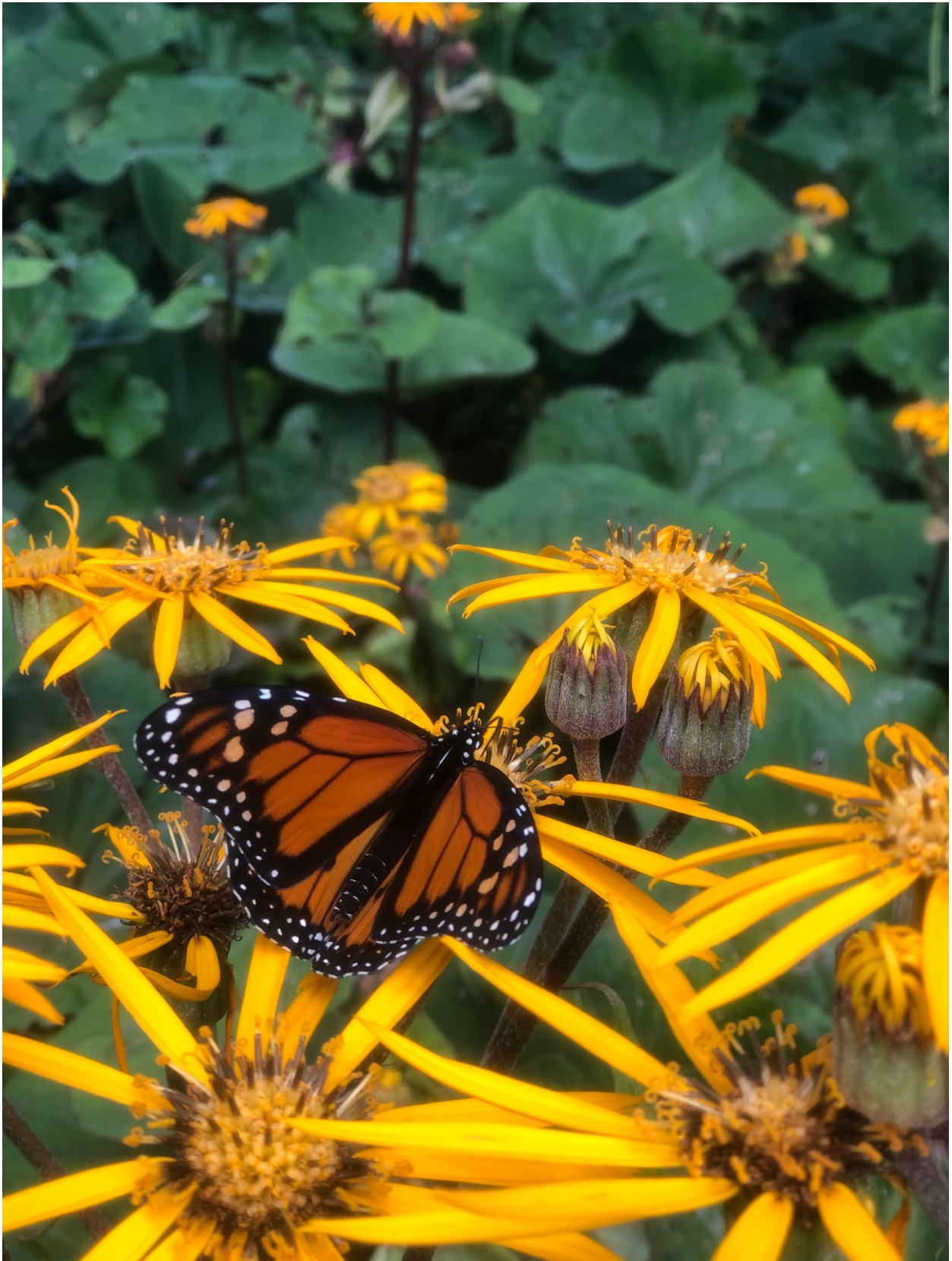
First of all, Minnesota and Yucatan are both Indigenous lands. While Minnesota is the ancestral and current homelands of Dakota and Anishinaabe people, Yucatan is the ancestral and current land of thousands of Maya people. Transnational Indigenous scholar Jessica Hernandez (2022), in her recent book, *Fresh Banana Leaves: Healing Indigenous Landscapes through Indigenous Science*, talks about being welcome and unwelcome guests as Indigenous peoples in other Indigenous lands. Jessica talks about how as displaced Indigenous peoples we must not just acknowledge the land we are in, instead we also need to build respectful and reciprocal relationships with the local Indigenous communities and with the land. Although this can be challenging sometimes, we must do as much as possible from our side to fulfill these responsibilities, so we do not behave as unwelcome guests in other Indigenous peoples' homelands. Jessica received this teaching from her grandmother, and it is something that we hear in our communities and homes. When we go to other people's homes, whether family, friends, or relatives, we do not behave as we want or without consideration.

Rather, we behave with respect and try to build honest and responsible relationships.

Second, by paying attention to the teachings of nonhuman relatives around me, I have also found that Yucatan and Minnesota have nonhuman relatives in common. For instance, I was surprised to see northern cardinals on the Twin Cities campus of the University of Minnesota, because in Yucatan you only can see cardinals if you live in rural areas or in the forests, while here you see cardinals all over the place. Each time I see a cardinal I think of Yucatan, and I feel connected to home. Seeing cardinals on cold winter mornings while walking through the St. Paul campus, with their red plumage bright against the white snow, brings some tropical sunshine to my heart and makes me realize that, although I am far, I still have connections through my nonhuman relatives to my tropical Maya homelands.

Monarchs are another way I feel connected to my homelands. Monarchs are important for ecological, cultural, and social reasons in Mexico. I was so delighted to see how people in Minnesota also care so much about these little friends. Each time I see them, I will remember my time in Minnesota studying for my Ph.D. and how these amazing insects help me feel connected to my home country. However, monarch butterflies are now an endangered species.

I write about these beings because, just as Robin talks about connections and relationships to the earth and all living beings, or nonhuman relatives, we need to listen to them so we can restore our souls, our stories, and our lives.



Monarch butterflies, now an endangered species, are important for ecological, cultural, and social reasons in Mexico and are also celebrated in Minnesota.

Image courtesy of Florencia Pech-Cárdenas.

Deconstructing our colonized minds

To learn we need to unlearn, to construct we must deconstruct, and to connect we need to disconnect. This happened to me. I needed to deconstruct all the non-Indigenous beliefs I had in my head so I could learn to see and appreciate the gifts my parents and ancestors gave me. For instance, they helped me see land as a healer and teacher and not from an extractive Western perspective. That work also allowed me to recognize the gifts that nature gives me here in Minnesota and in Yucatan. I am here because of my parents and grandparents' traumas and sacrifices, so I try

to understand and appreciate the decisions they made, thinking of us, the future generations.

During the pandemic, I turned to my mother and father's example of taking care of plants. I filled my tiny apartment with indoor plants everywhere. Every summer, my husband, son, and I complete an application to receive a garden plot for the summer in our student-housing co-op. Last summer was not the exception and we were so fortunate that we got one. Planting squash, corn, and beans in my garden also helped



*Chaya, also known as Cnidoscolus chayamansa, is commonly referred to as Maya spinach.
Image courtesy of Florencia Pech-Cárdenas.*



Corn, beans, and squash are staple crops for Maya people, and can be a fond remembrance of home. Image courtesy of Florencia Pech-Cárdenas.

me to go through tough moments in my life. They also helped me to reconnect with my culture and home country. I became more conscious of cooking foods we eat at home such as beans with squash and *epazote*, *sikil p'aak*, and other Yucatecan dishes my mother is passing on to me. I call my mom each time I have cravings for Yucatecan food, and lately I have begun to share these dishes with people I care about. To pass the gifts my mom gives me by sharing her knowledge, I need to share my dishes with others as well. My family and I continue to learn about the land, plants, animals, and more each gardening season.

Some of my relatives have been displaced from our homelands. I went to visit my grandma and aunts in California in the summer of 2021, and I was so impressed that they even had plants that are very important to us in Yucatan, such as *chaya*. Chaya is the common name of this plant, also known as *Cnidoscolus chayamansa* by botanists. Recently, some people have started to refer to chaya as the Maya spinach, given the plant's high concentrations of iron and other nutrients. However, for a long time this plant was stigmatized and considered a poor person's food. I remember people referring to *chaya* this way during my childhood when my mom cooked it with ground pumpkin seeds and sour orange juice, with corn tortillas as a side.

Jessica Hernandez (2022) asserts in her book that we, as Indigenous people, bring our Indigeneity with us, compelling us to build new connections with the places we live beyond our homelands. That Indigeneity comes in the form of plants, clothes, knowledge, stories, food, kinship, ancestry, language, last names, and more. I could not pass up the opportunity to bring a cutting of a *chaya* plant back to Minnesota with me. Of course, my *chaya* plant is mostly indoors in Minnesota. So far, it is doing well and I have put it outside so the summer sun and heat can help my plant survive its next winter indoors.

As Kimmerer (2013) emphasizes in her chapter "Skywoman Falling" in *Braiding*

Sweetgrass, motherhood was and still is a very important process and respected role in Indigenous societies. However, we learned in a colonized culture that motherhood does not have the same esteem. I saw motherhood as a very bad thing when I was a child. I am the second of seven children, and the first female, so I grew up being the mother of my siblings. I love my family, and I am grateful I had many siblings because I have so many experiences to talk about. I saw motherhood as something oppressive and that, in becoming a mother, your life ends. Colonization brought a lot of traumas to my family, which have been passed down through intergenerational trauma. Nevertheless, my family's history and experiences have also created opportunities for us, the new generations, to be able to navigate two worlds. This does not make it less traumatic and painful, and I do not have the intention of romanticizing this process.

Indigenous people have found several strategies to adapt, to resist, and to find ways to heal. Healing is an important part of a transformation and change. Without healing, all of the traumatic experiences haven't been metabolized to build strength and resilience, but are instead internalized, leading to harmful behaviors. I have seen this in my own family.

My four grandparents spoke Maya and my dad also learned to speak Maya because he was raised by his grandmother. My paternal grandmother migrated in the 1970s and left six children in the pueblo of Temax. My mother did not learn Maya because her parents used it as a language for adults. This time was one of *mestización*, an attempt to assimilate Indigenous people into Mexican society. My grandparents had to migrate to the city in search of better opportunities. I am not sure what "better opportunities" means, though, because we had an overwhelming number of struggles in the city as well. In the pueblo, there was no work or employment and the *milpa* (*kool*/Maya agricultural system) did not provide enough to sustain the economic needs of the family under the new economic system



*Robin Wall Kimmerer reading a passage from 'Braiding Sweetgrass' with Diane Wilson.
Photo: Rebecca Slater, by Rebecca Studios.*

of development and modernization. The *kool*, milpa's name in Maya, is an agricultural system that consists of the management of the forest landscape to ensure forest regeneration, biodiversity, and food production. Kool's main crops are several varieties of corn, squash, and beans, and more than a dozen of other edible and medicinal plants. This system has been in the peninsula for over three millennia and it is a vital component of the Maya self-subsistence autonomy (Wammack-Weber and Duarte Duarte 2012).

Both of my *abuelos*, or grandfathers, were *campesinos* (*kolnáalo'ob*/Maya farmers), so they did not gain income or money. Instead, they

produced food, managed the forest landscapes, kept bees, and carried ancestral knowledge of the physical and metaphysical environments.

Unfortunately, most of my *tíos* (uncles) and *tías* (aunts) moved out from the community and they could not apply all of this knowledge in the city. Like my parents, most of them left the town, and migrated to the city. My dad was sent to formal education. His parents did not want him to be a *campesino* because that was seen, wrongly, as something with no future. Instead, they felt he needed to become a *profesionista* (a person who earns a bachelor's degree in the formal education system).

Re-story-ation: from listening to gifting our stories

Robin Wall Kimmerer's conversation with author Diane Wilson was full of meaning, wisdom, and reflection, but the subject that most touched me was the call for "Re-story-ation." Sharing our stories, as Indigenous peoples, has been a very important way to keep our cultures alive.

After hearing Robin and Diane's conversation, I found myself reflecting on how storytelling is an important part of Indigenous cultures and a way to create, pass, and transform knowledge production. When we share a story, we share our experiences, our beliefs, our dreams, our spirituality, our fears, and our views about the world. Sharing stories also helps us build relationships among human and nonhuman relatives. Stories are for learning, cautioning, loving, and also inspiring. Jessica Hernandez opens her book with these words: "For our Indigenous pueblos, by our Indigenous pueblos. May we continue to write and tell our stories, instead of our stories being written and told for us." As Jessica states in her book, many of Indigenous peoples' stories have been written and told by others, using non-Indigenous frameworks to interpret Indigenous people's knowledge.

Nevertheless, it is not just about Indigenous people telling, writing, and sharing their own stories, it is also about non-Indigenous peoples listening carefully and working to understand the holistic meaning of those stories. Taking care of those words will allow us to truly understand and collaborate with each other. Indigenous peoples have been telling and recording stories for centuries, but they have not been listened to with care, or considered important enough to understand the full meaning of this knowledge. It seems as if the world is finally starting to open their ears to listen.

When I was child, I remember my dad used to tell us stories about his experiences with the spirits of the nonhuman world, such as the forest, animals, and more. I did not understand fully at my young age, but now when I recall those stories, I find meaning and learning. My mom did the same, telling us stories about her life growing up; there she was teaching us family history, life experiences, and traditional knowledge about food, plants, and animals. Today, as a mother, I share these stories with my son, and try to teach these stories and my own new stories as my parents and grandparents did. Motherhood is a gift, and



The Maya tropical rainforest is well cared for. Image courtesy of Florencia Pech-Cárdenas.

I have the responsibility to give gifts back to my son. I am giving him the stories I received from my parents.

Gifts were another huge part of the conversation between Robin and Diane. Unfortunately, in western culture, gifts have become material, either to show how much material wealth you have or given as a compromise, rather than an act of gratitude. Indigenous gifts, on the other hand, are not materialistic, and don't have to be tangible. In Indigenous cultures, actions, sentiments, behaviors and even thoughts are considered gifts. When I moved to Minnesota, I was not aware of all the gifts and stories I was receiving from my nonhuman ancestors and relatives. Emotionally

and spiritually, I was in a hard place. I was, and still am, undergoing a transformation. However, by paying attention to this place—the beautiful color of cardinals, the flying monarchs, the bees, the blooming flowers—I was given the gift of remembering my ancestral land in the Yucatan Peninsula. They were welcome gifts from the Dakota lands that I had not realized. Now it is my turn to give my stories to my son, to my family, and to you all. Sometimes we receive gifts that we must pass along to others, rather than keep them to ourselves.

I remember my mom was always giving to our neighbors, friends, and family. Even when we did not have that much, she always tried to give and



A small planting of corn. Image courtesy of Florencia Pech-Cárdenas.

share with others. I asked her once when I was a youth, why she has to do that, and she told me because we must. I did not understand at that time, but now her words have meaning. I plant my garden and I take care of the land, then the land gives me gifts, and it is my responsibility to share those gifts with my neighbors, family, and friends. Gifting is an act of gratitude and reminds us that we are in a relationship with other beings, human and nonhuman.

This last season, I planted corn. My plants grew very well in the first month, but in the second month they were eaten by rabbits. I was so disappointed, but then I remembered a story that a Maya colleague from Guatemala was sharing in a virtual talk about Indigenous agriculture. In her talk, she mentioned that her grandfather always

planted in his milpa three seeds of corn: one for the land, one for the bird, and one for the *tuza* (a small rodent that eats seeds, roots, and young plants), because we have to take care of our non-human relatives as well. If the land wants to give us corn in return, then it is a gift, but if the land wants to give gifts to the bird and the *tuza*, then we are reminded that it is not up to us to seek out gifts. We are not engaged in a superior-inferior hierarchy with our world, but we are invited into a holistic understanding of the land and all nonhuman relatives and spirits. As I reflected on my experience, I saw that “my” corn was a gift from the land to the rabbit. The land reminds us who we are and, to learn from the land, we must listen, respect, and share our stories.

Note from the Editor

In 2020 and 2022 Open Rivers published reviews of Robin Wall Kimmerer’s Braiding Sweetgrass and Diane Wilson’s The Seed Keeper.

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