

The Black Snake: Powerful Imagery in *We Are Water Protectors*

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Abstract

We Are Water Protectors presents a complicated example of the role horror can play in children's literature. This article looks at terrifying, yet powerful imagery in this book, with its implications for both children's literature as a form of activism and a critical discussion of the topics brought up by Lindstrom and Goade. I argue that horror functions as a mediator capable of bringing topics such as ecocriticism, activism, climate emotions, and colonialism to fruitful discussions in both elementary and university literature classes.

Keywords

Indigenous Resistance, Pipelines, Climate Emotions, Water

[*We Are Water Protectors*](#) is an activist picturebook that employs disquieting imagery and discourse about environmental injustices. Extractivism, biodiversity loss, pollution, and water degradation play central roles and are depicted as horrors of reality—in ways entirely appropriate for young readers. In fact, Janet Evans claims, “[m]any adults feel that challenging and controversial picturebooks are not suitable for children to read, however, it is they, as adults, who have problems coping with these challenging texts and not the children” (Evans, 2015, p. 5). Evans goes on to note that many childrens’ “everyday lives are often filled with far greater personal worries and challenges than those they may find in books” (p. 6), so representing these “worries

and challenges” is important. Although it is complicated for adults to know what levels of fear children can manage, the authors of *We Are Water Protectors* do not shy away from challenging and horrifying topics. Environmental devastation plagues the modern world, and for the Indigenous peoples represented in this book, protecting nature is central to their belief system. The environmental threats described in *We Are Water Protectors* can become a focus of discussion around how to introduce young children to scary elements of reality.

Indigenous children regularly face systemic oppression and intergenerational traumas. To feel recognised or supported in their daily struggles, representing these issues is critical. As Sandra Beckett argues

[a]ssumptions about children’s limited ability to deal with certain topics have often restricted their literary experiences and deprived them of fictional opportunities to explore dark, disturbing, and painful subjects that nonetheless touch them personally and constitute part of their life experience. This is particularly true in the case of the picturebook genre. (Beckett, 2015, p. 66)

Even as children deal with upsets and struggles, they deserve a chance to see those issues represented in fiction where they can learn how to deal with them. The picturebook discussed here creates this type of positive representation, in which the horror of environmental destruction is counterbalanced with community resistance, solidarity and a deep sense of belonging.

Written by Anishinaabe/Métis author Carole Lindstrom, and illustrated by Tlingit and Haida artist Michaela Goade, , *We Are Water Protectors* takes on this task by representing a dark threat to Indigenous lifeways. The topic of is the protest against the Dakota Access Pipeline being built on sacred land of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe and the damage this causes the Indigenous communities involved. The book functions as an introduction to environmental issues associated with the pipelines, and the climate emotions connected with them. For Indigenous Peoples, these emotions are mostly aligned with climate injustice, yet the book also proposes a hopeful tone in its call for activism. Discussing this book in elementary classes can be highly informative for the young children who are its intended audience. The book offers a window into

Indigenous life and the Indigenous-led resistance to climate injustice. However, this book is also appropriate teaching material for university students, including the ways horror imagery can be employed in stories for the youngest audiences to bringing across the message around climate emotions. The questions and ideas proposed throughout this article can hopefully serve as inspirations for teachers for discussions centred around this book.

The horror element is the pipeline itself, represented as a terrifying snake: black as oil and breathing out toxic fumes (Figure 1).



Figure 6 (Lindstrom, 2020, p.14)

While only depicted on a few pages, the snake haunts the pages. It might not always be visibly present, but the trail of destruction it leaves behind is clearly illustrated.

At one point, for example, Lindstrom describes an Ojibwe prophecy about the earth that has two paths. One is the natural path that will lead the earth to be at peace and the people to live in unity, while the other is characterised by technological acceleration at the cost of environmental disaster. When it comes to the latter path, “[m]any Native Nations believe this path is symbolized by the oil pipelines, the ‘black snakes’ that crisscross our lands, bringing destruction and harm” (Lindstrom, 2020, p. 35).



Figure 7 (Lindstrom, 2020, pp. 9-10)

Another aspect of the snake’s horror is an oil leak. It is shown to corrupt the waters with poison, bones showing off an unnatural cause of death, almost even as if infected by radiation (Figure 2). Anne Spice asserts the significance of “the interconnected networks of human and other-than-human beings that sustain Indigenous life in mutual relation,” while also highlighting how that “network stands in stark contrast to the critical infrastructures of government and industry – infrastructures that are meant to destroy Indigenous life to make way for capitalist expansion” (Spice, 2022, p. 43). This image seems to signify the noxious nature of capitalism, a perpetuation of settler colonialism, that destroys nature to increase wealth. As Spice underscores, this is true horror to the Indigenous way of life. Even this single image can

spark discussion around the role of horror in this book, as well as how horror might be subjective; is the spill more terrifying for an Indigenous audience than a Western one? Learning to relativise, seeing how different cultures might have a different stance on environmental issues can be beneficial to their growth.

The environmental destruction shown above has caused uproar among Indigenous communities. The Dakota Access Pipeline is one of the best-known examples related to this. Lindstrom describes that in “April 2016, the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe stood up against the titans of industry to protect their region’s water and sacred burial grounds from one of these oil pipelines – the Dakota Access Pipeline” (Lindstrom, 2020, p. 35). The chairman of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, David Archambault II, called the pipeline “a black poisonous snake... made from nothing but greed” (Archambault, as cited in MacPherson, 2016).

Although the idea of the black snake existed in the mythology and traditions of various Indigenous Nations before Archambault’s famous quote, *We Are Water Protectors* popularised the term, especially in Western media. More importantly, it connected the idea of the black snake that has lived in Indigenous prophecy for centuries to the Dakota Access Pipeline and all other pipelines crisscrossing Native lands today. The black snake, called *Zuzeca Sapa*, “became the emblem of the movement’ that demonstrated against pipelines” (Coleman, 2020, p. 105). It is this movement that signifies the importance of community in the fight against the black snake shown in this book.

Community is used in the book as a counterbalance to the horrors of the black snake, as well as an assertion of Native resiliency and resistance: “Take courage! I must keep the black snake away / From my village’s water. I must rally my people together” (Lindstrom, 2020, p. 16). These two lines from *We Are Water Protectors* best describe the powers of the protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline and other pipelines: the powers of community.

In one image, the black snake is represented as a monster invader (Figure 3). The snake is monstrosously large, almost blocking out the sun while menacingly looking down at the protagonist. Still, the young girl faces the snake holding the hands of her community members. They stand up to the black snake together, as one. The reader is placed behind the girl, having her back, and facing the black snake together. This creates a sense of connectedness to the Indigenous Peoples standing up to fight against *Zuzeca Sapa*. It is a strong representation of the powers of togetherness. We might ask students how they feel about the view they gain as viewer in this image. Do they feel connected?



Figure 8 (Lindstrom, 2020, p. 20)

In an interview with Pritchard, Lindstrom says that her goal for this book is “a call to action” for children to “become Water Protectors and effect the well-being of the planet” (Pritchard, 2020). By calling for people to come together to fight climate injustice, she connects the land to community. Weaver writes that one thing most Indigenous literature has in common “relates to this sense of community and commitment to it” and goes on to term this “communitism” (Weaver, 1997, p. 43). Communitism, Weaver explains, “is formed from a combination of the words

'community' and 'activism' or 'activist'" (Weaver, 1997, p. 43). The effects of colonialism affect all Indigenous Peoples, and they share common values for community and environment. In this sense, *We Are Water Protectors* is a good example of communitism: a rally for the collective to speak as one and protest that which threatens their way of life.

Analysing the use of horror elements in *We Are Water Protectors* reveals the wider arguments Lindstrom and Goade make. The black snake that stands for the Dakota Access Pipeline presents itself as something that needs to be defeated. It asks for a form of activism and a togetherness in conquering that which tarnishes the land. Through this ecocritical call for communitism, the horrors of colonialism are brought up and confronted, alongside intergenerational trauma and settler colonialism. While the imagery of the black snake overwhelms these pages, it is those horrors of reality—pollution, extractionism, and pipelines—that hold the most power. Besides informing child readers about their culture and community, this book brings about terrifying information while prioritising the agency and empowerment of the child. The use of terrifying imagery is intrinsic to this picturebook and is the mediator of how this information is conveyed to a child, in an age-appropriate manner. When dealing with this text in class, allowing the horror elements to take the front stage may help bring topics such as activism, collective memory, and colonialism to the fore. These themes are essential to the understanding of this text, but also reveal information about Indigenous cultures and their fight against ecocrimes as a wider topic. Discussion questions can be formed around these topics to use this book as an entrance into climate emotions as it will function for many Indigenous children reading this when they are young.

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