

“Above the Water”: Immersion and Flotation in Become Ocean and “Skywoman Falling”

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Abstract

This article deploys the concepts of “immersion” and “flotation” in order to examine the representations of human-water relationships in *Become Ocean*, an orchestral composition by John Luther Adams, and “Skywoman Falling,” the inaugural essay in Robin Wall Kimmerer’s collection *Braiding Sweetgrass*. I propose that both works imagine the sea as a space of reconciliation between the human and the natural. But while “Skywoman Falling” presents an aquatic creation story, *Become Ocean* takes the form of an apocalyptic warning about “polar ice” and “sea level[s],” raising questions about how the changing climate inflects artistic production. Taken together, the works gesture toward a sort of crude human-nature — or human-ocean — cycle in which humans continually approach and distance themselves from the natural world.

Keywords: John Luther Adams, Robin Wall Kimmerer, ocean, immersion, flotation

The title of John Luther Adams’ Pulitzer-winning composition *Become Ocean* brims with ambiguity. Does “become” express a command? Hint at a possibility? Voice a prophetic warning? Whatever the answer, Adams’ piece suggests some kind of immersion, a fusion of human and sea. Conversely, Robin Wall Kimmerer’s “*Skywoman Falling*” insists on an image of animal-assisted flotation. These works’ distinct representations of human-water interactions raise questions about the extent to which humans can be considered a part of the “natural” environment. Whereas Adams envisions this melding of human and nature as a process of literal immersion — or, perhaps, submersion — Kimmerer imagines a world in which humans’ intimate relationship with nature exists in opposition to liquid ecosystems.

A note included by Adams in the score for *Become Ocean* asserts that “life on this earth first emerged from the sea. As the polar ice melts and sea level rises, we humans find ourselves facing the prospect that once again we may quite literally become ocean.” This short text seems to support an interpretation of Adams’ piece as a warning about the planet’s changing climate. Nonetheless, Adams’ insistence on the emergence of life “from the sea” suggests a kind of circularity and thus frames “[becoming] ocean” as a return to some original, uncorrupted state of nature. Moreover, by omitting any explicit reference to the human impact on polar ice and sea

levels, Adams fashions an idealized view of climate change as an agentless process, part of a cycle that will in a sense reverse natural history by restoring all life to its pure, “pre-evolutionary” form. This “agentlessness” is reinforced by the score’s tempo marking, which Adams pairs with the word “inexorable”; invisible to audience members, this adjective imbues the score with a sense of catastrophic inevitability. On the one hand, the apocalyptic overtones of the score’s textual elements appear to contradict the utopian sensibility implicit in Adams’ conception of nature as cycle. On the other hand, perhaps it is the catastrophic consequences of climate change — in this case, the collective “drowning” of the human race — that make possible a return to some ideal, pre-human (or post-human) state of nature.

Of course, *Become Ocean* is a piece of music, not a literary text. Adams divides the orchestra into three “sub-ensembles” that interact in unpredictable ways over the course of a single performance. This decentralized, quasi-aleatoric structure, in addition to mirroring the “agentlessness” posited by the program note, cleverly mimics the apparent randomness of the ocean. Like the sea, whose chaotic swellings and churnings obey a complex set of physical laws, Adams’ piece develops intricate, overlapping patterns — patterns that might be said to follow a set of musical laws — under the guise of arbitrariness. The composition begins with barely audible “waves” of pitch that ascend and descend in the piano, harp, and marimba. These repeating motives swell up and down on the page itself; they take on the physical appearance of waves.

But they also sound like waves: The audience is exposed to — even immersed in — a sea of pitches that echo through the concert hall, building into a roiling body of sound. Thus, sound, fluid and undulating, becomes water. In that sense, Adams’ piece might serve not only to explore the relationship between humans and the ocean, but also to realize the command expressed in the title — to turn musicians and audiences alike into “ocean” by immersing them in a liquid soundworld. This interpretation of *Become Ocean* raises complex questions about the extent to which “becoming ocean” constitutes a choice. After all, musicians choose to perform this piece, just as members of the audience choose to listen to it — to immerse themselves, perhaps, in its sound. On the other hand, if “becoming ocean” refers to the catastrophic impacts of rising sea levels, as suggested by Adams’ own program note, the line between personal agency — immersing oneself — and external force — being immersed — begins to blur. Humans exist both as instigators of climate change and as sufferers of its consequences, both as the immersers and as the immersed. Adams’ musical examination of human-water interactions in *Become Ocean*, then, rests on an ambiguity, on a tension between waves engulfing people and people submerging themselves in waves.

This notion of a musical “wave” not only illuminates the micro-structures — beats, measures, phrases — undergirding *Become Ocean*, but also gets at the organization of the entire work. Indeed, Adams’s composition might be characterized as an extremely long crescendo and decrescendo.

Across hundreds of measures, the orchestration slowly thickens, resulting in a build-up of sound, then thins, dwindling at last to nothing. Of course, each of the three sub-ensembles follows its own autonomous dynamic markings — rendering possible simultaneous crescendos and decrescendos. Still, these many swells line up at three climaxes, the second of which, marked fortississimo, is the strongest. The piece can thus be roughly described as a single swell (peaking at the second climax) that comprises thousands of smaller swells. And, indeed, it is a perfectly symmetrical swell: As critic Alex Ross notes, *Become Ocean* is palindromic (“Water Music”). That is, every pitch and dynamic is “reflected” over the measure of the second climax, and the piece ends as it began, with septuplets in the lower range of the piano. This mirrored quality reflects the wave-like nature of the composition, but it also instantiates, at least musically, the natural cycle that Adams hints at in his program note. The piece doubles back on itself and returns to the quietness that echoed through the concert hall before the central climax — a climax intended, perhaps, to represent the final “immersion” of humankind.

Imagining *Become Ocean* as a musical wave — or as a wave of waves — concretizes audience members’ nebulous positionality by problematizing their “immersion” in the piece. On the one hand, listeners must be at least partially external to the “musical ocean” in order to perceive the “musical wave” as an object with height, as a swell. On the other hand, the muddled quality of sound that Adams develops by layering harmonies and rhythms on top of a stubborn drone —

comprising the basses’ stacked perfect fifths and the “very large” bass drum’s never-ending roll — is eerily reminiscent of the way water sounds from underwater: a low, distant burbling, like wheels on a gravel road. The wave-like quality of the piece, then, seems to correspond to two simultaneous and perhaps contradictory visions of human-ocean interaction, the first of which requires humans to remain separate from water and the second of which requires them to lose themselves in it, to immerse themselves — or to be immersed. One might reconcile these two positionalities by arguing that Adams sees the relationship between people and the ocean as a changeable one. After all, the composition’s title alone makes clear that Adams conceives of this relationship as a process and not as a state — more specifically, as a process of immersion, a process by which humans — by choice or by force, or even by listening — can become ocean. Insofar as “ocean” can be said to stand in for “nature,” a kind of ecological synecdoche, Adams’ piece proposes a reunion of man and nature through physical, or musical, immersion.

“Skywoman Falling” eschews this image of immersion, opting instead to depict animal-assisted flotation. In Kimmerer’s retelling of an indigenous creation story — or, indeed, “arrival” story — a “wave of goose music ... break[s] her [Skywoman’s] fall” (3); these geese then “hold” Skywoman “above the water” (3). The careful phrasing of this account conceals, perhaps intentionally, a profound ambiguity: Skywoman might be on the water, held above its surface by floating geese — a sort of living raft — or she might be literally suspended in the air

above the water, floating on flying geese — a sort of living magic carpet. Kimmerer’s description of the geese “[rising] together,” “flying beneath” Skywoman, and catching her on their “wings” (3) seems to lend credence to the latter interpretation. Conversely, her mention of the geese carrying Skywoman “downward” (3) might support the former. The text provides no certainty. In either case, Kimmerer suggests that Skywoman — and, perhaps, the human being — is incompatible with water. The geese somehow know, with only a nod (3), that this falling “dust mote” must be caught and supported. Whether that support occurs “above the water” in a literal sense — in the air — or in an idiomatic sense — not entirely underwater — is inconsequential; what matters is that the animals instinctively prevent Skywoman from being fully immersed in the sea, that they understand (4) her need for land. Thus, Kimmerer’s nature — which foregrounds fauna excluded from, or left implicit in, the liquid world of *Become Ocean* — renders impossible the very process of immersion that Adams characterizes as a return to nature.

Nonetheless, Kimmerer’s word choices complicate any simple separation of human from ocean. The phrase “wave of goose music” (3, emphasis mine), in addition to articulating the link between waves and music explored indirectly by Adams, might suggest that the geese are literally bringing the ocean to Skywoman, rather than shielding her from it. Or perhaps the geese, as waterbirds, are themselves extensions of the ocean. An association between goose and wave engenders a tension between water and itself: How can the geese hold Skywoman

“above the water” (3) if the geese in some sense sing the water — even are the water? One way of resolving this apparent tension is by distinguishing the physical ocean from the literary or musical ocean. Indeed, the “water” to which Kimmerer refers in the phrase “above the water” is physical, material; the “wave” that catches Skywoman is a metaphorical wave deployed as a literary device to express something about the essence of the geese’s calls — music “is” a wave — or of the geese themselves — geese “are” waves. In the context of this distinction between the physical and the metaphorical, it would be reasonable to conclude that humans can be incompatible with the physical ocean while simultaneously interacting with the metaphorical ocean.

Kimmerer’s description of the formation of land, like her characterization of the geese, seems to blur the line between Skywoman and the ocean. Turtle Island is fashioned from “mud” retrieved from “the bottom of the water” (4); creating land, in this vivid state of nature, actually requires the immersion of multiple animals. But this immersion diverges sharply from that imagined by Adams, for Skywoman herself does not dive. Rather, it is Loon, Otter, Beaver, Sturgeon, and Muskrat — none of them human — who go in search of mud (4). Furthermore, Kimmerer does not depict the ocean as something to become so much as she represents it as a sort of dark liminal space, a space to be temporarily navigated with one’s breath held. (It is telling that “Skywoman Falling” includes only one animal — Sturgeon — that can live underwater without needing to surface for air.) Even the dead

Muskkrat defies the framework of “becoming” ocean, for he ultimately floats to the surface with a “stream of bubbles” (4). Thus, Kimmerer’s linguistic choices disrupt, but do not undermine, the fundamental divide between the one humanoid figure in this creation story and the physical ocean that churns beneath her.

At the very least, Kimmerer imagines Skywoman’s relationship with animals in opposition to water. That is, it is the very impossibility of Skywoman’s immersion that necessitates her interaction with the fauna of her new planet. It remains to be seen, however, whether this human-animal connection generates a harmonious ecology, a happy blend of human and nature. After all, it does not necessarily follow from the animals’ collaboration with Skywoman that they view her as a part of their natural world. One could even read the phrase “above the water” (3) as an indication of Skywoman’s “superiority”; perhaps Skywoman cannot immerse herself in the water because she is, or sees herself as, “above” (too good for) it. Kimmerer’s use of the word “guest” (4) might corroborate this account of a gap between the protagonist and the “natural” entities that surround her by labeling Skywoman as a visitor who does not belong — and is not expected to stay. But “guest” does not have to denote transience or otherness; it can convey a sense of newness or arrival. Indeed, Kimmerer does not mean to portray the relationship between Skywoman and the earth as unidirectional or instrumental; this creation story, she suggests, teaches children that a “responsibility ... flows between humans and the earth” (5, emphasis mine). The

bidirectionality of this narrative is conducive to a vision of Skywoman as an integrated — albeit new — part of the natural world. That the book begins with a simile comparing Skywoman to a “maple seed” (3), a small part of a self-sustaining natural cycle, only strengthens this conclusion. Like Skywoman, these seeds are “outsiders” to the earth who subsequently put down roots and grow to be a part of it.

Become Ocean and “Skywoman Falling” share a fascination with humans and liquid ecosystems. They are also united by their efforts to conceive of a world — be it musical or literary, centered on immersion or flotation — in which humans constitute a subset of nature and not an exception to it. However, the works differ sharply in how they imagine humans’ relationship with the natural world to which they belong. To the extent that Adams’ composition serves to translate into music the ravages of climate change, Become Ocean conceptualizes the commingling of the human and the natural in apocalyptic terms. Ross aptly describes the piece as “the loveliest apocalypse in musical history” (“Water Music”). “Skywoman Falling,” on the other hand, situates this “melding” in the utopian — or at least pre-apocalyptic — world of the creation story. There are hints of the ominous: the dark water, the dead muskrat. But there persists an undercurrent of freshness and possibility; “and so it began” (3), Kimmerer writes, perhaps referring both to the new world of Skywoman and to the new world of her book, which includes this first essay as its own kind of “creation story.”

In a sense, then, Adams and Kimmerer approach the question of humans and water from opposite ends of human history. Kimmerer writes about the ocean at the beginning of human existence, suggesting that human life began with a fusion of the human and the natural predicated on holding the ocean at bay. Adams writes from a darker future and asserts that human life, long alienated from nature, might end with a return to a state in which all is nature, in which the ocean, rising and roiling, swallows all. Thus, considering these two works together allows for a cyclical view of the relationship between humans and nature. We arrive, we join nature (Kimmerer), we develop, we distance ourselves from the earth, we begin to destroy it. The dying earth envelops us, immerses us, turns us into nonhuman matter (Adams). And, once again, all is nature.

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