

Homo Economicus and Forgetful Curriculum:
Remembering Other Ways to Be a Human Being

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Abstract:

The central focus of this chapter concerns the contested space that becomes apparent when we consider the intimate linkages between curriculum thought and particular notions of human being-ness. These linkages are examined by means of a review of the main mythologies that have guided formal schooling and curriculum thought since the Enlightenment as well as through a consideration of recent Alberta Education curriculum policy initiatives that promote market-informed notions of citizenship largely predicated on the value of entrepreneurship. These ideologies, both historic and current, are tied together in their promotion of the development of a particular version of human being—*homo economicus*—who lives according to a faith in and worship of the market. In following this line of inquiry, the specific space under contestation concerns the assumptions made by educators and curricularists regarding the forms of knowledge and knowing considered most valuable in creating the kinds of citizens they have in mind. I argue that such curricular initiatives promote ways of being that are unsustainable and forgetful of deep human ties to sacred ecology. I share one story as an example of curriculum sensibilities that could help us remember other ways to be more fully human.

Introduction

How can human beings best live well in the world today? This question evokes a contested space wherein age-old contentions arise regarding the purpose and meaning of human life and living. For the purposes of this chapter, the contested space under consideration resides within the human being and the specific contestation has to do with the assumptions made by educators and curricularists regarding the forms of knowledge and knowing considered most valuable in creating the kinds of citizens they have in mind. Thus, in the process of making such decisions, the development of a particular kind of human being is being promoted. A significant space of contestation in the field of curriculum studies, then, is located within the human being, and this space is characterized by epistemological, ontological, cosmological, and axiological assertions regarding the meaning and purpose of life and living. Such contestations can be divisive because pondering the purpose of creation and existence is a fundamental part of human experience and thus heavily influenced by the various philosophies, ideologies, and faiths that people hold as true. This is what makes considerations of human being-ness a contested space.

In the context of this book chapter, I contest curricular conceptions of human being-ness derived from “Market Logic” (Smith 2014, 58-61) and the divisive competitiveness that metastasizes from it. I share a deep-seated concern for the ways in which a North American settler dream imaginary¹ has slowly morphed into a curriculum mythology and ideology that promotes the market as a concept through which all forms of human living can and should be understood. Through story, I suggest a large-scale ‘letting go’ of myopically anthropocentric understandings of life and living and

¹ Here I am referring to the socio-cultural mythology of newcomers to North America that is guided by the ‘dream’ of easily accessible resources and unfettered economic growth that will make them rich, successful, and thus happy. This ‘dream’ originated during the high colonial era and has largely been maintained to the present (albeit in altered forms) as a guiding vision of the good life.

instead promote an educational project committed to acknowledging and honouring the complex connectivities that human beings have to the abundant *more-than-human* entities that live amongst us (Sheridan and Longboat 2006). In this spirit and with these intentions, I address this work to *real human beings*² and the extensive *more-than-human* relational networks that we are all enmeshed in and dependent upon for our survival. As real human beings, then, we proceed with acknowledgement of the sacred ecology that lives inside us. First and foremost, we acknowledge that the sun is literally *the* giver of life. We acknowledge that our bodies are comprised of sunlight-inspired energy that inhabits the air, water, minerals, plants, and animals that we consume. We acknowledge too that despite any current and future technological advances in how we live our lives, we will remain fully dependent on this sacred ecology to keep us alive. Whoever we are and wherever we may live, there is no way around this simple truth.

As I see it, the origins of current human struggles to balance the desire for economic development with ecological sustainability derives from a deep forgetting of those simple truths. What has taken its place in public consciousness and curriculum priorities is the embracement of a dream predicated on unfettered economic growth and material prosperity. This dream-way³ manifests itself as a naturalized, universalized, and common sense⁴ logic that has come to have tremendous influence over public education curriculum initiatives in mostly subtle ways. The particular example of focus for this chapter will be the *Inspiring Education* initiative that Alberta Education has been promoting since 2009.⁵ *Inspiring Education* is the consultative document that provides guidance on the unique demands of 21st Century learning to those working on the related project of *Curriculum Redesign* under the auspices of Alberta Education. This project involves a detailed revision of

provincial programs of study, assessments, teaching and learning resources, as well as processes for developing curriculum, to ensure they continue to be relevant and engaging to students... There will be greater focus on students developing competencies, which will

² In many of the different Indigenous languages of North America, including the Cree and Blackfoot languages which I am most familiar with, the people consistently refer to themselves as the ‘real people’ or the ‘true human beings.’ While this could easily be interpreted as a sign that such people have a high opinion of themselves, I have been taught to understand this naming as declarative of the people’s intentions to live humbly and in accordance with the laws of creation. In the languages and the cultural sensibilities connected to them, this is how *real* human beings are meant to live. For more on this see Gatschet (1899) and Praet (2013).

³ This reference to the ‘way’ is a purposeful nod to the concept of the path, route, or road as it is expressed within the teaching tenets of many different wisdom traditions. Probably the most famous of these is the *Tao* as expressed in Chinese culture and East Asian philosophy and religion. I use the phrase here to emphasize the point that market capitalism has morphed into a Way in its own right.

⁴ In the context of this chapter, the terms *common sense* and *commonsensical* refer to normative and hegemonically dominant attitudes and opinions on political, economic, cultural and social issues espoused by majority members of a society. Following Kumashiro (2004), I consider such attitudes and opinions *common sense* because they are usually framed by proponents as acultural and apolitical positions that any normal, reasonable, and right-minded person would also consider true. Kumashiro asserts that common sense manifests in the field of education as a blockage to imagining alternative possibilities. In a context governed by common sense logics, alternative approaches are dismissed on the grounds that they are inappropriate, inconsequential, or irrelevant, and thus incommensurable with the purposes of schooling (xxiii).

⁵ Alberta Education is the government ministry responsible for the supervision and administration of K-12 education in the Province of Alberta, Canada. For more details on the *Inspiring Education* initiative, visit: <https://inspiring.education.alberta.ca/>

enable our province to realize the vision of an educated Albertan as an engaged thinker and ethical citizen with an entrepreneurial spirit.⁶

What I intend to do in this chapter is undertake a brief meditation on the significance of the mythological and ideological language used in this statement and related Alberta Education literature to show how they are implicated in some of the deepest difficulties we as human beings face today. For me, the difficulty of this contested space lies in understanding that these curriculum initiatives are predicated on the promotion of a particular kind of human being—*homo economicus*—who is primarily motivated by economic self-interest and the material gains that come with it. As an educator, I consider these initiatives as rooted in particular neoliberal ideologies and mythologies that are often hidden in curriculum policy documents as incontrovertible statements of common sense. As such, I see such policy statements as active in the contested space of human being-ness as purveyors of violence in that they serve to close down possibilities that children may have to imagine other ways to live their lives. Since, as human societies, we are now regularly experiencing the consequences of climate change and lifestyles dedicated to consumerism, it seems urgent to begin to guide students towards deeper and more imaginative understandings of life and living guided by wisdom understandings of sacred ecology. As one example of such sacred ecology insights and their connections to living like *real human beings*, I share a Blackfoot story on the origins of the Beaver Bundle.

Understanding Curriculum as Fundamentally Ideological and Mythological

The assertion that curriculum is ideological is not a new insight. For several decades now, prominent curriculum scholars have shown that formal education is a normative exercise that is geared towards the achievement of specific societal goals that align with the culture of those groups that hold social, political, and economic power in a society. (for example refer to Freire 1970; Pratte 1977; Barton et al. 1980; Giroux 1989; Eisner 1992; Bowers 1993; Apple 2004). Curriculum documents, and the educational priorities they emphasize, are thoroughly imbued with the cultural assumptions and prejudices that the majority of the members of a society have come to consider normal and necessary for young people to know and understand. In teleological terms, then, curricula can be understood as preparing children for a future that has been imagined on their behalf by adults. Thus, curriculum is basically an exercise in citizenship and the success of this exercise is generally assessed according to how well the children have taken on the characteristics that the adults hoped they would. In curricular terms, the kinds of citizens that adults have in mind derive from orthodox epistemic assumptions that are often characterized as common sense.

Thus, a key point when working to understand curriculum as ideological is to attend to the truth that curriculum ideologies derive from normative worldviews (Eisner 1992, 302). As such, they can manifest as powerful “religiouslike” (303) orthodoxies that proclaim strong positions on important educational matters, but commonly operate with subtlety through conveyance of common sense logics contained in conventionalized language forms and structures (ibid). These connections between culture, ideology, and curriculum are not necessarily surprising or problematic. They become so when the official curriculum ideologies become so pervasive and unquestioned that its followers are left unable to recognize them as cultural and ideological, and thus also left unable to imagine alternative possibilities (ibid). In such scenarios, the particular cultures and ideologies at work in curriculum priorities become dehistoricized, naturalized, and normalized expressions of epistemic orthodoxy. This dynamic makes it difficult for people to discern the ways curriculum priorities are expressions of cultural and ideological assumptions because they are typically framed in

⁶ http://education.alberta.ca/media/8295554/curriculum_redesign_update_february2014.pdf

commonsensical terms. As epistemic orthodoxies, then, I contend that such curriculum ideologies eventually morph into mythologies.

By referring to mythologies, I am not arguing that curriculum ideologies are falsehoods. On the contrary, myths are actually insightful truths about peoples and cultures. The truths are the idealized versions of worldview that are simplified and made coherent when particular events, characters, and ideas are selected which seem to embody important cultural values that all good citizens should know. Following the ideas of Barthes (1972) in his provocative book *Mythologies*, we can say that “[m]yth takes a purely cultural and historical object...and transforms it into a sign of universal value...it turns culture into nature. It is this duplicity of myth, a construct which represents itself as universal and natural, which characterizes its ideological function” (Allen 2003, 36-37). The point here is that official versions of worldview and ideology, which begin as cultural and contextual interpretations of events and ideas, morph into mythologies—that is, expressions of the existing epistemic orthodoxy of the dominant groups in a society. In this schema, then, mythologies are understood as invisibilized expressions of ideology that, despite their seeming obscurity, actually form the foundational roots of worldviews that guide the thoughts and actions of the people of a particular culture. The key point here is that people do not think *about* their mythologies; they think *with* them. They form the guiding common sense normative frameworks with which the world is encountered, interpreted, and understood.

Since espousing a society’s myths is a primary function of its institutions—and since schools are a primary conduit for this—curriculum documents can thus be considered mythological. So, then, what are the mythologies most strongly at play in curricula today? As is well understood, formal education, as we know and experience it today, has its roots in nineteenth century industrialism and was conceptualized amidst the tremendous changes to everyday life that were instigated by the economic shift to factories and assembly lines under the general purview of market capitalism. Public education was created in response to an economic need for more qualified workers to be properly prepared for work in the emerging marketplace and to take full advantage of growing commercial opportunities.⁷ Schools became places to prepare young people for this world of work and the success of these preparations has been considered directly tied to the overall economic interests of the nation.

In light of these roots in economic functionalism, it should not be surprising that formal education today is still largely guided by curriculum mythologies predicated on the assumption that liberal market ideology is the key to human freedom and happiness. Here are some of the key mythologies and guiding cultural assumptions of education and curriculum today⁸:

Individualism

The promotion of the autonomous individual, separated from community, as the most advanced form of human being was the major impetus of the Age of Enlightenment in Europe and remains a fundamental tenet of modern liberal thought. In the classic liberal ideal, an individual citizen unbound by the shackles of tradition and free to act in self-interest will bring progressive benefits to the society as a whole. This worldview privileges the autonomous individual as the source of rational thought, innovation, and economic prosperity. Thus, the promotion of the free, autonomous, and

⁷ For an interesting example of this dynamic in the American context, see Kincheloe’s (2000) explanation of Fordist production procedures with special emphasis on standardization, compartmentalization of tasks, and static assembly lines. These Fordist innovations were conceptualized so as to modernize and optimize industrial production and have had tremendous influence on industry around the world. In astonishing parallel, these industrial innovations have also had deep influence over the assumptions guiding teaching, teacher education, and curriculum.

⁸ I rely heavily on Bowers (1993; 2007) in making these points.

possessive individual is viewed as a necessary precondition for societal success and so intimately intertwined with curriculum thought.

Progress

Linked to the mythological dream-way of unfettered economic growth and material prosperity stemming from worship of market capitalism, this notion of Progress has grown out of the colonial experience and the pursuit of ever-expanding opportunities to realize that dream. Progress, in this case, operates simultaneously as a rejection of tradition and also as a celebration of the West as an autonomous entity that has grown progressively from this well-known chronological genealogy: Ancient Greece to Rome to Christian Europe to the Renaissance to the Enlightenment to the Industrial Revolution to the growth of political democracy (Wolf 1982, 5). The West, as the entity that has grown from this imaginary, is characterized by fervent faith in secular, rational, technical, and scientific approaches to life and living and is understood as embodying values which are considered acultural, and so universally good. As such, the West exemplifies a “moral success story” that tells of an always growing and expanding civilization built by people who have discovered the Way to live well and have been trained to believe that their Way should be emulated by all progressive right-thinking and freedom-loving peoples (ibid). Curricular worship of this linear notion of Progress is ongoing and the desire to maintain it as a guiding principle often manifests in curriculum documents as a call for innovation and forward thinking.

Anthropocentrism

Anthropocentrism—the commanding conviction that human beings are the central and most significant life forms in the world—stems from the Enlightenment era and the preoccupation with separating people from the varied organisms, entities, and ecosystems that comprise the world. Following the teachings of this myth, humans are trained to see themselves as rational beings who are pitted against the rest of *nature* and must do what is necessary to control and shape the so-called natural world to best suit their own needs and interests. Over many years, this deeply-held cultural assumption of human superiority and lordship over all things in the world has been informed by a complex confluence of religious dogma, market capitalist principles, and Darwinian-inspired theories of evolution. In light of such cultural prominence, then, it is not surprising that anthropocentrism has become entrenched in curriculum documents. Over many generations, children in schools have been trained in largely unnoticed ways to believe that their interests and desires always supersede those of the entities that give them life.⁹

The Promotion of *Homo Economicus* as a Curricular Goal

“The things we give ourselves to we become part of and they can own us.” (Lightning 1992, 224)

The mythologies above describe what we have given ourselves to in the field of education and in a certain sense they have come to *own* us and any attempts to imagine other possibilities for curriculum. The key point here is that root mythologies act like mythical creation stories and become organizing principles that guide, but also simultaneously circumscribe and constrain, well-

⁹ It is important to add here that human superiority over nature has been extended to include a similar assumption of superiority over peoples who follow more holistic ecological teachings. Peoples who consider themselves more civilized in their approaches to life and living have used their supposed superiority as justification for the exploitation and marginalization of peoples they consider closer to nature and thus uncivilized (Bell and Russell 2000, 193).

intended attempts to redesign curricula. Such mythologies act on us in deeply psychic ways that often go unnoticed.

An example of the deep influence that these mythologies have on curriculum thought is manifested in the character of *homo economicus*¹⁰—a unique form of the human species that is understood to possess a natural propensity to be “rational, individualistic, utilitarian, calculative and instrumental” in economic matters (Houston 2010, 842). In exercising these skills, *homo economicus* is understood as primarily motivated by a self-interested desire for wealth and the accumulation of material goods as a primary measure of success. It is understood that the success pursued by *homo economicus* can really only be achieved via an adherence to the tenets and principles of market capitalism (Williams 1999). For proponents of these tenets and principles, market capitalism guides human beings to conduct themselves in ways that bring benefits and economic prosperity to the society as a whole. In this context, the ontological question of what it means to be a human being is directly connected to the market and the benefits that accrue from it. Faith in and worship of the market is considered the primary purpose of humankind and *homo economicus* constitutes the most natural and most developed form of human being in evolutionary terms. Questions regarding the meaning and purpose of human being-ness are answered with direct reference to this market rationality.

So, to what extent do schools today follow a mythological societal superstructure guided by an individualized and anthropocentric notion of Progress that finds expression in the promotion of *homo economicus* as the human model for young people to aspire to be? An interesting example to aide in the exploration of the contested space wherein these market-based insights are considered most useful in producing particular kinds of human beings is the *Curriculum Redesign* and *Inspiring Education* projects recently initiated by Alberta Education and thus endorsed by the Government of Alberta. For the most part, the *Curriculum Redesign* initiative is guided by a self-proclaimed state-of-the-art educational approach founded on the concept of ‘Competencies for 21st Century Learning.’ In this approach, the conceptual framework undergirding the idea of ‘21st century learning’ seems to be largely framed in economic terms and in relation to a clear faith in the power of technology and innovation to spur economic growth:

Our education system must both provide an inclusive environment where each student belongs, and equip them with the attitudes, skills, knowledge, and competencies they need to be successful in tomorrow’s economy...The continued development of a highly skilled, knowledgeable, innovative and productive workforce is critical to ensuring that Alberta sustains its competitive advantage in a global economy, allowing the province to attract investment, and high value-added industries. (Alberta Education 2010, 3)

This economics-first educational ‘Action Plan’ is further guided by this vision: “All students are inspired to achieve success and fulfillment as engaged thinkers and ethical citizens with an *entrepreneurial spirit*” (Alberta Education 2010, 6, emphasis mine). While this vision does seem to be student- and competency-focused, there is also a direct link given to an “entrepreneurial spirit” since this wording implies that to be an “engaged thinker” and “ethical citizen” of value requires a market-oriented spirit and outlook. According to this vision statement, an “entrepreneurial spirit” would be exemplified by a student:

¹⁰ See Persky (1995) for more on the origins of this concept. Following insights from Caruso (2012), I intend for this concept to be understood in anthropological and sociological terms rather than in purely economic terms.

who creates opportunities and achieves goals through hard work, perseverance and discipline; who strives for excellence and *earns success*; who explores ideas and challenges the status quo; who is competitive, adaptable and resilient; and who has the confidence to take risks and make bold decisions in the face of adversity. (Alberta Education 2011, 6; emphasis mine)

This expressed vision of Alberta Education that guides the work of both *Inspiring Education* and *Curriculum Redesign* has been controversial and divisive. Parents, concerned citizens, and political groups have raised questions and gathered petitions stating opposition to discovery learning curriculum approaches in mathematics, as well as the involvement of oil and gas corporations in the curriculum redesign process (Salz 2014). In March 2014, Alberta Education Minister Jeff Johnson issued a ‘Curriculum Redesign Letter’ in which he sought to clarify the overall goals of this initiative. It is worthwhile to quote from the letter at length:

I feel parents deserve to hear directly from me about my ministry's efforts to ensure the provincial curriculum enables Alberta's students to successfully compete in a dynamic, highly competitive world...The modern economy demands creativity and problem solving, the application of critical thinking and an ability to collaborate and communicate. These skills lie at the heart of Alberta's curriculum redesign process. Top performing education jurisdictions, like Alberta, have increased their focus on these 21st century skills. We can't ignore that without strong abilities in these areas, our kids will be left behind...At the end of the day we must ask ourselves, are we preparing our children for their future or for our past?¹¹

The subtle subtext of these policy declarations is that 21st Century notions of how best to *be* a human being are largely derived from neoliberal understandings of innovation, progress entrepreneurship, competition, success, and well-being in the interests of building an economy. Youth are clearly positioned as future generators of economic wealth and their contributing value as citizens is directly dependent on how well they replicate this prescribed value and build it into their emerging identities. Such faith in *muscular* entrepreneurship is a prominent part of the socio-political mythology of Alberta (see for e.g. Harrison 2005; Lisac 2004). As earlier stated, I understand this ideological thrust—concealed as common sense (Keil 2002)—to be a form of ontological violence that has direct impacts on the well-being of youth today.

While there is nothing inherently wrong with attentiveness to such issues—economic issues are obviously a central concern of all human societies—questions arise when youth are trained to believe that their emerging identities as human beings are directly connected to neoliberal market logics and consumerism as a necessary lifestyle choice. In the context of Alberta today, a frontier territory with substantial wealth generated from oil and gas resource exploitation, this ideology teaches that a person who is not participating in or benefiting from this prosperity is clearly doing something wrong and needs to be straightened out (Masuda et al. 2008; Altamirano-Jimenez 2004; Pratt 2009; Donald and Krahn 2014).

Curriculum and ‘The Great Forgetting’

Such a mythological faith and worship of the market as the single concept most central to successful human living today is enmeshed within ‘The Great Forgetting’ as described by Daniel

¹¹ This letter was retrieved on August 14, 2014 from:
<http://www.education.alberta.ca/departement/ipr/curriculum/ministercrlatter.aspx>

Quinn (1996) in his book *The Story of B*. The "Great Forgetting" is the concept the teacher/lecturer (named B in the book) uses to describe the social and cultural dynamic we are currently living through in which people have been carefully trained to disregard wisdom insights and stories from earlier eras. As I interpret this point in relation to my own concerns, what has been forgotten is that people lived well prior to the present era. By the time history began to be written down, and the Enlightenment process was well underway, it was assumed that human beings really only began to live as they were meant to during this time. The central message, then, is that before the current era *nothing of significance happened* (245). B argues that our knowledge and worldview today would be greatly altered had the foundational thinkers of our schooling cultures acknowledged that there was history beyond the beginning of their version of civilization.

In the book, B expresses the belief that circumstances have rendered the cultural mythology of Progress untenable and unsustainable as a dream-way. B claims that the "Great Forgetting blinds us to the fact that we are a biological species in a community of biological species and are not exempt or exemptible from the forces that shape all life on this planet" (Quinn 1996, 307). B introduces the Great Remembering as the most urgent challenge facing human beings today. He declares that what was forgotten through the Great Forgetting must be remembered in order for us to recognize "that what cannot work for any species will not work for us either" (ibid). One of the consequences of fervent faith and worship of consumerism and market capitalism is a gradual forgetting of the entities that give us life and the stories that remind us of how we are all comprised of sunlight-inspired energy.

A series of interconnected questions emerge from consideration of these insights: To what extent are schools and curriculum documents today facilitating the perpetuation of this Great Forgetting? How responsible is it to insist on the ongoing production of young versions of *homo economicus* when there is every reason to believe that within a generation people will no longer be able to 'be' that way? Which mythologies promote other forms of human being-ness beyond *homo economicus*? How can we begin to remember what the Great Forgetting has caused us to forget? As one way to respond to these questions, I offer the following Blackfoot story of the Beaver Bundle that, among many other insights, teaches ethical relationality, sacred ecology, and the interconnectivity of life. Importantly, the story describes the position of human beings within the relational kinship networks that generate life and living for all. In terms of the contested space that resides within the human being, and the curricular and educational significance of this space, this story provides brief insight into the Blackfoot imagination regarding how to live as a *real human being*. Consider this imagination in juxtaposition with the cultural mythologies of individualism, Progress, and anthropocentrism seen in the imagined person of *homo economicus* as you read.

Ksisskstaki Amopistaan – The Beaver Bundle¹²

A long time ago, a man named White Grass brought his wife and infant son to live beside four large lakes at the base of the mountains. He worked so hard to support his family that his wife would see him only at night. Eventually though, she grew lonely, and there was a young male beaver living at the lake who noticed this. One day, the bachelor beaver transformed himself into a man and charmed her into following him into his family's lodge.

When White Grass returned home that evening, his wife was nowhere to be found and their infant child was alone, crying and hungry. At first, White Grass was angry about his wife's negligence, and called out for her. When she didn't answer, he set off following her footprints, which led him down

¹² The story shared here is condensed from a written version shared with me by Ryan Heavy Head.

to the edge of the water, where they seemed to disappear. But the only thing he saw were the recent paw prints of a large grizzly bear. Then he knew, logically, that his wife must have been eaten.

That night, White Grass sat up late in his fire-lit lodge, the infant boy crying by his side, and he himself convulsing with tears, imagining the horrible fate that had befallen his beautiful young wife. White Grass may have cried himself to sleep. In the darkest period of night, just before dawn, an old man came into his lodge, sat down and told him not to mourn his wife. "She's not dead," the man told him. "She's been charmed underwater by a young beaver who appeared to her as a man. They are staying together in his parents' lodge. Do not mourn for her, and I will return again with instructions on how you can get her back."

When White Grass awoke the next morning, he wasn't sure if what he'd experienced was a dream, or if the old man really did come to visit. If it was a dream, it had been powerful. White Grass decided to do as he'd been told, to cease his mourning. He turned his attention instead toward consoling his infant son who was now beginning to starve for the nourishment of his mother. But there was little White Grass could do in this regard.

That night he was again visited by the old man. "If you want to save the life of your son," the man told him, "you will need to steal a small beaver pup with white fur. This is the favourite child of the beavers, the ones whose older son took your wife. They guard this pup closely. Do not attempt to capture it until I return to give you instructions."

White Grass waited another stressful day. That third night, he was given precise instructions on how to successfully capture the beaver pup. The old man warned White Grass that once he caught hold of the pup, he was not to let go. Rather, he should take the animal into his lodge and await further directions.

When White Grass awoke on the fourth day, he was relieved to finally take action. Following the advice of the old man, he covered himself in duck droppings and concealed himself in a hole along the lakeshore. He waited all day in that hole for the white pup to appear. Just as he was ready to give up, the albino pup appeared and he quickly seized it.

As he sat in his lodge, holding both his own starving infant son and the young white beaver pup on his lap, the old man came to visit again. He told White Grass to hang onto the beaver pup at all costs. There would be an emissary sent to negotiate an exchange. This ambassador would ask White Grass to release the young beaver in exchange for his wife. But he was instructed to refuse this, remain in his lodge, and wait for the most elder beaver to come bearing gifts. The old man told White Grass what gifts he should demand before agreeing to the exchange for his wife's return.

Later that same night, an otter transformed into human shape entered his lodge. This otter man told White Grass that the beavers had sent him with a message, that if their favourite child was released, so too would the woman be returned. White Grass sat in place with his infant son on his lap while gently stroking the albino beaver's fur. "No," he said, "I think we'll keep him until my boy's mother has returned."

Hearing this, the otter man left, and all was quiet again. Sometime later, White Grass heard voices of many people singing as they approached the shore. These were the all the other animals and birds who lived in the lake. They were soon joined by some of the land animals – the buffalo, coyote, fox,

badger, and others. It was a very large group, all walking single file in the night, singing as they went along. This procession made its way around the lodge four times before entering. They were led by the elder beaver and White Grass's wife, who carried a pipe bundle on her back.

When they came inside, White Grass was sitting on his bed, still holding his boy and the young albino pup on his lap. With hand signals, he motioned for his wife to sit next to him on his south side, and for the elder beaver to sit on his north. When all had found their seats, the elderly beaver turned toward White Grass and reasoned, "Your wife has been returned safe, now you should release my son." But White Grass, following the instructions of the old man who had visited him, sat still, gently stroking the young white pup. "No," he said, "It's good that you've returned my wife, but if you want to take this pup away, you will have to give me something more as well."

The elder beaver began to sing. As he sang, he brought items out of the pipe bundle that the woman had carried in, and set them in front of White Grass. The beaver man sang seven songs in total, placing in turn the eagle's tailfeathers, the pelt of a black coyote, red kit-fox, and fisher, the hide of a white buffalo calf, the pelt of a marten, and the hide of a cow elk. "This is the sacred Beaver Bundle," the old one said, "I'm transferring it to you in exchange for my son."

White Grass sat quiet, petting the young albino beaver. All the animals waited for his reply, but he just kept stroking that beaver until, finally, he looked up at the elderly one and said, "This is not enough."

Hearing those words, the beaver made an announcement. He called on all his relatives, the animals and birds who had come from the land, skies and underwater, to step forth and offer something to the bundle. After this was done, they all sat back and waited for White Grass to respond.

The trapper remained unimpressed, betraying little emotion as he sat petting the white pup on his lap, "It is not enough."

After all the animals had given him their most valuable belongings, White Grass saw that he had received everything the old man had told him about. At this, he consented to the exchange, and returned the beaver pup to its relatives.

With the exchange, the first transfer of Ksisskstaki Amopistaan was concluded. Since then, all of the birds and animals of both the upper Saskatchewan and upper Missouri watersheds were allied with the Blackfoot as relatives. And still today, twice a year, Beaver Bundles are opened in Blackfoot territory for performances that renew this earliest of transfers. It is to these openings—enactments of that waterside exchange—that many people go, in the first days of spring and just before winter, to dance as those animal spirits, restore harmonious relations, resolve sickness, and escape danger.

Imagining Curricula that Honour Other Ways to be a Human Being

There are many wisdom teachings that can be derived from the story of Ksisskstaki Amopistaan. Important insights into Blackfoot imagination and worldview can be discerned by those who are committed enough to engage in careful study and interpretation of its various interconnected teachings. This can take a lifetime. However, it is important to remember that it is not just a story. Ksisskstaki Amopistaan conveys Blackfoot memory, experience, ceremonial ways, and worldview which, more generally, provide guidance on how to live a good life. So, the spirit and intent of the story itself must inspire people to *do* something to honour the bundle exchange and the

kinship alliance made that day with the birds and animals or the wisdom it offers becomes static and inorganic. Nothing good grows from it unless people enact its teachings in their daily lives.

Of course, this is not a dynamic that is unique to the Blackfoot context. Most worldviews and mythologies are re-enacted daily by people who hold them as true. As human beings, we live in the logic of the stories we tell about the world and our place in it. It is for this reason that the story of Ksisskstaki Amopistaan was provocatively and purposefully juxtaposed with the opening sections of this book chapter that focused on curriculum ideologies and mythologies derived from market logics. As a cultural experience, most readers would be quite capable of comprehending the main messages of the opening sections because they bring focus on a cultural context that is familiar and presumably well-understood. On the other hand, though, most readers would not have a cultural context for comprehending the story of Ksisskstaki Amopistaan. Juxtaposed with what is considered normal, universal, acultural, and commonsensical as described in the opening sections, the story presents as an intensely cultural expression of a traditional way of life that is no longer viable. In this juxtaposition of ideologies and mythologies, the example from Blackfoot culture provided in the story of Ksisskstaki Amopistaan is *interesting* as an artifact of a former way of being, but is typically dismissed as *unrealistic* as a way of being today.

This juxtaposition is shared with hope that it sparks creative responses to the question of how we might re-imagine curriculum, how we might meaningfully follow other ideologies and mythologies, and thus work towards honouring other ways to be a human being that are not fully circumscribed by Enlightenment-based logics. It is one way to draw attention to the curricular contestations that arise whenever we deliberate on the meaning and purpose of life and living. A key point in this consideration is that the composition of curriculum is basically an exercise dedicated to the creation of a particular kind of human being. This is what makes considerations of curriculum simultaneously also about the contested space within the human being and suppositions held regarding how that person should live.

The complexity of these considerations cannot be addressed by simply replacing one story with another under the purview of inclusion.¹³ If a story like Ksisskstaki Amopistaan is ‘infused’ or ‘incorporated’ into curricula as just a story, and without the necessary care and attention given the ideologies, mythologies, and ways of becoming *real human beings* it describes, nothing good will grow from it. In his scenario, the fundamental curriculum mythologies of individualism, Progress, and anthropocentric maintain their hegemonic influence as universalized common sense, and the story is marginalized based on those cultural assumptions.

So, what to do? It has become clear to me that the real work of reimagining curriculum and honouring other ways to be a human being involves the articulation of a new story that guides us to live on more ethically relational terms with humans as well as our *more-than-human* relations (Donald 2012). Of course, we cannot just make up stories that suit our interests and desires and expect people to follow them enthusiastically. Stories that give life emerge from people sitting together in the spirit of good relations and thinking carefully on their shared future as human beings. For me, such work of is guided by the Cree concept of *wahkohtowin* (LaBoucane-Benson et al. 2012) which teaches that, as human beings, we are enmeshed in series of relationships (human and more-than-human) that give us life. The model of a *real human being* that *wahkohtowin* provides is one who acknowledges those relationships daily and strives to live in ways that sustains them. To do otherwise is to act against life and the survival of those relational networks. I believe that the organic tension that is generated from enacting such ethical forms of relationality provides potential sources of creativity that can be simultaneously life-giving and life-sustaining for us all.

¹³ For more on this point see Donald (2013).

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