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A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO EDUCATIONAL EX-  
HIBIT DESIGN: LINKING EDUCATIONAL THEORY  
TO POPULAR CULTURE AND ECONOMICS

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## **Abstract**

Raven Mackinaw, a Cree elder from Alberta, summarized the misguided approach he saw in environmental education with the statement, "until you understand that wilderness and storytelling are the same thing, you can't get it right." I will explore the implications of this statement as it relates to the indigenous belief that stories are rooted in landscape and the things that belong in those landscapes. If zoological and theme parks are to 'get their words right' it will be through understanding how to craft stories that belong to the land. At the moment, stories are more likely to be rooted in novelty or anomaly or exotica than in careful attention to the land. I argue that careful attention to the land will allow us to tell the right stories and that these will, in turn, lead us back to paying careful attention to the land.

About the Author: **Joe Sheridan** is an Assistant Professor of Education and Environmental Studies at York University in Toronto, Ontario. He grew up in Parry Sound, Ontario amidst the largest fresh water concentration of islands in the world on the Georgian Bay. His early years were spent between a subsistence farm on the mainland side of a Scots-Irish community which was connected by a railroad bridge to the Wasauksing First Nation on Parry Island. This article arose from a five generation relationship between his Irish forebears and the Ojibway people of that area. This article was meant to be *said* rather than read. Its style was meant to fulfill that purpose.

## The Authenticity of Story

Last Friday I spoke to the Society for Ecological Restoration right here in Seattle. Our concern was in the restoration of wildness to restored ecosystems. Fundamentally, I suggested that the ‘wild’ was a quality not only of places but people and what separated a collection of trees from a forest was that definitive quality of wildness. Our nervous systems can also become the equivalent of a collection of trees instead of, say, a Druid’s grove. This is the problem and challenge I see for educational exhibit design, we’ll call it the domestication of the wild in us.

I am probably not alone in mourning the loss of wilderness, but am more likely to be lonely in grieving for the wild mind. Not the savage mind as depicted in countless bad anthropological tracts or Saturday matinees, but a mind that thought, or perhaps dowsed (i.e. water dowsing), the meaning of the land they lived on. If you know you belong to a place, and, that place lives in your heart, you know the meaning of land because, well, you *know it*. That is, to me, a wild mind, and I contrast it with the mind of global village idiots (condominium conservationists), who spend increasing amounts of time in front of their televisions to get closer to ‘nature’. And probably know more about rain forest depletion than what grows in their back yard.

Being wild operationalizes local thinking and pays careful attention to where you are. Strictly speaking, global thinking is impossible, as Wendell Berry<sup>1</sup> assures us, and, I think it ruins our ability to understand how our ancestors understood the land. They were far more local and less abstract than are we.

Global thinking can only be achieved using symbols. The symbols on the TV about nature are not themselves nature and their messages are not about nature but about what we think nature is. That’s a big difference. Nature is messy stuff because biological systems are so interconnected that even John Muir couldn’t write about a birch tree without having to connect it to the chipmunk and to

the grass, and on and on. The point here is that if you're immersed in local interconnection you won't have much use for the stories of another place without first knowing thoroughly about your own place. Like begets like. And shallow understandings of where we are make anomalies and the exotic very appealing. If we can accept that knowing the land and how to dowse the meaning of the place entails knowing how to tell its stories, then we can see that the only way the stories can be legitimate is to somehow be grounded in (a) location(s). We can't account for them by creativity alone. Better yet, we know that placeless events are impossible, but by seeing story not as product of a communion with place but as a fixed text somehow independent of place, renders that symbol placeless. And, who'd want to live there. But, if we understand story as an environment where teller and the surroundings are always told, then we'll be reminded of how surroundings effect how we make meaning.

If we had lived in Turtle Island for seventy thousand years we might even have been inclined to see this continent as a wild animal kingdom, of sorts. As with indigenous peoples, we may even have felt compelled to make the land live in our language because we loved this land so much. We may even have crafted our stories of the places that make up this land as *the story* of what it means to be here. But tragically, we haven't done those things and most of the elders who could have taught us how to fashion such symmetries with the land are either going or gone. However, if we can understand that the time is right for us to again make stories that will give this land enduring enough meaning that it can withstand the sophistry of mall developers and kindred, bulldozing, prosperity hucksters, then there may be a solution for thinking as this continent once did and now needs to once more. At least for me and five generations of Sheridans who've glued themselves to Georgian Bay, it's high time to recognize the need to become native to Turtle Island.

One way to begin this is with origin stories. And that means kid's curiosities and elder's answers. I know we can do better than conventional science texts. They tell us that we originated when some "fundamental orifice blasted forth effluvia and gas"<sup>2</sup> and that by fuel loss or inevitable nuclear accident we'll shuffle off the green planet. Some story. If educational exhibits are to tell stories that nourish love of land and create an ethic of recognizing and protecting special and sacred places, then we have plenty of opportunity. I'm asking us to become storytellers, you know, and what follows are some reasons why.

First, and back to kids, we need to understand that for children the desire to be outside is motivated by a love of thinking with the things in their environment. Its often called participatory consciousness and you've all experienced it in your childhood's when your head was in the clouds and the clouds were in your head. Because children have not yet learned to think with the symbols that represent place, they want to stay outside to continue telling themselves the story of the place they are in. That's what their play accomplishes and why they love to talk to themselves. I, for one, would never insult the imagination of a child

whose communion with the spirit of the land is made manifest in pet animals only they and their companions can see. But this is a crucial first step in our natural ability to dowse the 'genius of place', as Alexander Pope called it. We begin our lives as meaning makers very close to the ground. What we encounter there should be validated rather than dismissed, for it is in recognizing that the relationship of land to mind is mythic, that we can understand how to craft our symbols to be consistent with those mythic dimensions. In short, if the kid hears the genius of place it is not because they are hearing things but because we aren't. When was the last time you cried over a dead caterpillar or the pouring of a foundation on an abandoned lot? How did either become mythic in the first place? How did they lose their mythic quality before that?

Second, middle age puts us furthest away from the authenticity of story for a couple of reasons. We leave the place dependency of our childhood in adolescence and wander our way to the place dependency of old age. In between, we are less referential to place than we have been or will be. The same is true of story, since story is the common tongue of the elder and the child. There is a big difference between the two groups but they seem amply able to solve those differences when they start talking. If you think about it, the only complete children we have are our elders, for they are the only one's who know what it is to be old growth children. And they know land once again with the intimacy that comes from slow and methodical going, and the chance to reflect on what those childhood stories mean in old age when one is entitled to speak of how and why those meanings have revealed older and deeper levels of meaning.

Crow storyteller Wapaskwan describes how the meaning of children's and elder's stories mature over a lifetime and unfolds their meanings as we age:

There are checks for validity of the story at each level and between levels. The stories have to fit, precisely, at all levels, to be coherent....At some levels there is very explicit and precise spatial and temporal information. At one level, that sequence of the story contained a very precise topographical description of a stretch of the Missouri River and the basin around it, just south of its confluence with the Yellowstone. At another level, that same sequence contains a very precise set of principles for relationships between specific kin. A hearer isn't meant to understand the story at all levels, immediately. It is as if it unfolds.<sup>3</sup>

The reason that these meanings unfold this way has very much to do with understanding how the nervous system matures and what we tend to think about and how we tend to think about it as we get older. When this is accounted for and metaphors are made within stories that are themselves always empirical descriptions of land, then we can get rid of the seduction of placeless symbols. What I mean is, good metaphors reveal as much about how we think as about what we think with. Which is why First Nation's culture has always been so

methodically careful not to deplete its biological systems, it's 'genius of place'. Place is what they think with and, as such, think in ways appropriate to the land they live on, in, and with. In other words, there is a conservation ethic inherent in making a culture resonant with its natural surroundings.<sup>4</sup> If the question we need to answer is in learning how to be native to Turtle Island, we are required to think with those other creatures that live here. Thinking with symbols not grounded in the land we live on goes against the praxis of a conservation ethic. And against the legitimate understandings of place among grounded people, including our children and elders.

When we get the foundations of our meanings confused, it is really hard to consider solutions that lie outside our habits of thought. That said, I'll ask why the hell we insist on telling stories in parks and zoos that don't belong there? In other words, stories that have no relation to the spirit of the land as it was dowsed by indigenous peoples or our kids or old timers. Neither am I advocating that we trot off to the anthropology collections and raid their stash, I simply want it understood that when we get rid of Cartesian divisions that prevent us from seeing that we're part of nature, we have to be prepared for a far more sensually integrated and mythic sense of what it means to know what it means to be native to this place. As an example of what it means over the course of a lifetime to have nature in mind and mind in nature, I refer to the late Saulteaux author Linda Akan, who wrote:

If one were to try to give a metaphorical description of some of the features of First Nations thought, one might say that they go to school in dreams, write in iconographic imagery, travel in Trickster's vehicle, and always walk around.<sup>5</sup>

If we see that our educational exhibits could echo the meanings of the land and erect mythic meaning so resonant with that place that it unfolds over a lifetime and becomes part of you, then we might be ready to come home to the land and its cultural importance here in Turtle Island. If we are ready, and that's a big responsibility, I think we have all it takes to make meanings of this dimension and complexity. Although, I expect First Nations principles should guide us in the endeavor.

One of those principles is that we are biological systems and so is the land. Our symbiotic relationship with place could be phrased like this. Story is to mind, what ecology is to land. Without preserving the integrity of land, we will surely lose the integrity of our stories. When zoo's preserve the land they also preserve the biological diversity that is itself the land's self-organizing intelligence. When land and mind come together, we create serious meanings of place, like those that indigenous culture spent 70,000 years crafting. If we treat zoo's as entertainment centers whose menagerie is based on the sales potential of the exotic and the novel, we risk becoming one of P.T. Barnum's 'suckers.' Worse yet, we sell the illusion first and most fundamentally to ourselves.

If we are to be mindful and deeply appreciative of the land we should seek to create a state of combined ecological and cultural identity. And by adopting an ethic of care, learn how vital is the connection between its health and our own, its integrity and our mental health. In the same way that we should fear mass mind we need to understand that it comes from mass place. That is, as the built environment looks more and more homogenous the minds that dwell therein are more likely to be less responsive to engagement with place because they all look the same. Such could never be said about biological systems in their natural terrain. Seeking to encourage and perpetuate local habitat is then a moral good, a lesson in why diversity of all kinds underpins our ability to withstand the homogenizing influences of globalization. Using symbols of things that are not native to where we live can be seen as a willingness to remain placeless rather than to dig in and do the work of creating the stories we need to create with the things that are around us in North America. We may live here now but have we made a home for ourselves in our symbolic systems, have we ever matched indigenous stories in their beauty and belonging in Turtle Island? I believe the time has come to make a home for ourselves and own up to the responsibilities and challenges of saying what it means to live here and what it means to let that love have its way with our stories. This is what I want to spirit our educational exhibits.

It may be from that appreciation of place that we will have a way to understand the importance of taking remedial action to preserve endangered species. The zoo could self consciously define itself and its role as sacred ground and find within that renewed meaning, the most ennobling educational theme since Noah's ark. And not be inconsistent with preserving local habitat. For, in spite of Diaspora, as engineered by colonialism, imperialism and globalization, we have the free will to choose to be somewhere other than where we originated. How well we succeed in being where we feel we belong depends on how much we see ourselves as shipwrecked sailors, storm-tossed on a grudgingly foreign shore we seek to survive upon, or as ecologically reciprocal beings able to understand that North America adopted us as much as we did it, and to finally take our homecoming seriously.

To dedicate ourselves to making Turtle Island function again as an interconnected ecology of story and place allows us to recognize that we are doing sacred work in dowsing the myths that belong here especially after so long annihilating them. In doing this, it is equally important to recognize that our stories need to have locales that integrate a deeply spatial and chronological understanding of place that recognizes that the biological systems we are part of were once far younger and looked different, just like us. From there, to recognize in ourselves how the meaning of place changes as time matures us. Were a lot like places, aren't we?

There is a challenge here because we are asking ourselves to become storytellers without benefit of having been readied by elders who nourished us with stories.

We may, because of this, feel uncomfortable or shy at being mythopoeic. Perhaps the best advice is to remember that we begin life and end life in proximity to the great mystery...the place we come from and go to. Either side of that gap in the life circle there is an enthrallment with story and place that can guide us.

If there is a first step to be made, perhaps it is to dedicate our stories and activities to preserving biological systems, to understand how these ground our symbols and how, when grounded, we can restore a culture that is mindful of place and duties toward it. In so doing we can become apprentice elders ourselves and however incomplete we may be, feel good to have aged in the service of rediscovering the sacredness of place and childhood and old age and stories that encompass all three. If Sean Kane is right in summing it up recently by saying, "Life is a playground of intelligent, roving energies...what goes around comes around."<sup>6</sup>...then middle aged stories and places could move us closer to our natural responsibilities.

In closing, I'll ask Joe Rhode what Disney's take is on the validity of Raven's idea that wilderness and storytelling are the same thing? Further, is Disney ready to believe biological systems preservation and restoration could, in themselves, be a holistic educational exhibit? And, if being mindful of the biological systems in which we live grows kids into adults and elders and in turn crafts places into stories, are the Disney symbols helping mature our devotion to these purposes or are they keeping us childish? If so, can Disney tell stories that keep children contented with real places and help make and keep intact real and biodiverse places where kids and elders alike can make their own stories? Joe, is Disney ready for elder responsibility?

## Notes:

1. Berry, Wendell. 1991. *Out of Your Car and Off Your Horse*. Atlantic Monthly. February 61-63.
2. Listen especially to: 1991 Mark Graham. *Natural Selections. Andy's Front Hall Records*. Voorheesville, New York.
3. Lightning, Walter. 1992. Compassionate Mind: Implications of a Text Written by Elder Louis Sunchild. *Canadian Journal of Native Education* 19:2:232.
4. See especially. Egan, Kieran. 1987. *Literacy and the Oral Foundations of Literacy*. Harvard Educational Review. 57:4.
5. Akan, Linda. 1993. *Pimosatomowin Sikaw Kakeequaywin: Walking and Talking, A Sauleaux Elder's View of Native Education*. *Canadian Journal of Native Education* 19:2:213.
6. Kane, Sean. 1995. *Wisdom of the Mythtellers*. Broadview Press. Peterbor-



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