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A METAMORPHOSIS OF TEACHING: BECOMING A MORE ECOCENTRIC EDUCATOR IN AN ANTHROPOCENTRIC WORLD

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Dedications

This thesis is dedicated to my students of the past, present, and future, as well as the red dirt prairies of Oklahoma—I hope the work I do can secure a better future for us all.

Abstract

Our world faces a seemingly unsettling fate, made visible by seemingly unbreakable systemic problems. Racism, classism, sexism, and other harmful ideologies invade our lives each day. At the same time, human-led exploitation of our planet has resulted in an enormous environmental crisis. Anthropocentrism, the belief that the world was made for humans and everything in it is meant for human use, often goes unnamed in conversations about systemic issues. Yet, this pervasive worldview is at the root of our ecological crisis and is deeply intertwined with other unjust ideologies. Schooling in the United States has historically perpetuated many societal problems, and anthropocentrism is no exception. Yet, I believe that education can be a transformative space for educators and students to address these issues. However, there are many barriers in place that have prevented even the most well-intentioned, environmentally conscious educators from discussing anthropocentrism in their classrooms.

This critical autoethnography details my journey to becoming a more ecocentric educator despite these barriers. First, I outline my path to becoming a teacher who cares deeply about confronting the worldviews that sustain our ecological crisis. Then, I reflect on the challenges I continue to face when sharing this passion with my students. I conduct a historical analysis to better understand how and why anthropocentrism is such a pervasive aspect of western culture. I also draw heavily on the literature in ecological philosophy as a framework. Finally, I discuss the possibilities of an ecocentric education in my classroom.

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Chapter One: Planting the Seeds

My Path to Becoming a Teacher

I walk into my classroom each morning, surrounded by beige concrete bricks. There are no windows radiating natural light; there is no indication that a world exists outside. Room N146 is familiar to me. Not only do I teach here every day, but I was once a student in this space. This is the same room that I took Advanced Placement (AP) European History during my sophomore year of high school. It is a strange feeling, sort of a "full circle" moment, to be teaching students who are in the same position I was once in. Things are different for me, though. I am a much different person than I was nearly ten years ago.

Many people ask me why I chose teaching as my career. Those in my hometown will automatically assume it was because of my parents. I come from a family of teachers. My mom is in her 30th year of teaching Special Education at our local middle school. My dad taught 7th-grade geography and coached for nearly 10 years at the same school. My parents may have subconsciously influenced my path to become a teacher. However, I mostly felt like they were *against* me becoming a teacher. My entire life, they would tell me, "Don't be a teacher unless you want to be disrespected, overworked, and underpaid." Despite this, they still loved their jobs, and I *really* loved school.

School has been my safe space throughout my life. It still is, which is partly why I am writing this thesis now. It was the one thing I was "good" at. While other kids played sports or had other activities they enjoyed, school was what gave me confidence. I enjoyed reading, taking those usually dreaded timed math drills, and doing homework. Looking back, much of my success in elementary school was guided by my mom. Her educational background encouraged

her to push me, and she advocated on my behalf to find classes that best suited my needs. Not many other kids had the same opportunities I did, and for that, I am lucky.

Middle school was an interesting time in my life. Sixth grade was a huge transitional period. All the elementary schools in the district were integrated into one school, and my friends and I were scattered across different teachers. I was excited, though, because my mom and dad were in the same building as me. In the spring of that year, my dad was diagnosed with lung cancer. It was late stage but still thought to be treatable at the time. He continued teaching and coaching throughout the year and worked into the summer. When I picked up my class schedule in August, my dad's name glistened in recently printed black ink. I felt proud to see it, but it was a stark reminder of our new reality. He wasn't coming back to school. In fact, he would never teach again, and he passed away shortly after Winter Break.

Still, school remained a safe space for me. Despite all my friends and teachers knowing about my situation, I was not pitied. It was exactly what I needed. I wanted to maintain my dignity and confidence and just keep pushing on. So, I did just that. School was there for me as an escape when things got hard at home throughout high school. Even still, teaching had never crossed my mind. I started my higher education journey at a private university in the nearest city, majoring in Economics and Political Science with plans to become a lawyer.

The COVID-19 pandemic hit during March of my freshman year of college. By that time, I realized I was enrolled in a degree program and school where I did not belong. We were forced to go virtual for the remainder of the year, and I would never return to the same university. I finished my associate's degree at a community college not far away, knowing I would transfer to one of the research universities in Oklahoma. I was unsure of which path to take when I got there. One day, it just occurred to me. I wanted to teach. I could not envision myself doing

anything else. School brought me joy, and I hoped to share that same feeling with others. Additionally, I wanted to make school feel safer for students who do not share that same experience. I knew it would come as a shock and even a disappointment to my friends and family, but it was what I wanted to do.

When I transferred, I enrolled in the Social Studies Education program. As I write, I am in my second full year of teaching. I taught 6th-grade geography for a semester in my university's town after graduating with my bachelor's degree. Then, I decided to return to teach AP European History and AP Human Geography at the same place where it all started - my alma mater.

Returning Home

The decision to teach at my alma mater was uninfluenced by convenience or proximity to my family. I came back home for a specific reason: to challenge the dominant paradigms being perpetuated in my school and community.

To give some background, my hometown is a suburb of Oklahoma City. It is on the land that was once the traditional homelands, hunting, trading, and gathering sites of the Kickapoo, Osage, Comanche, Kiowa, and Wichita & Affiliated tribes.[1] After the Indian Removal Act was passed by Congress in 1830, what is now known as my hometown became the destination for Mvskoke (Creek) and Seminole peoples who were forcibly removed from their traditional homelands. Following the Civil War, the United States government's concentration policy forced Indigenous nations to cede even more land, leaving approximately 2,950 square miles of

[1] Source: https://native-land.ca/. Indigenous Peoples have historically been excluded and misrepresented in cartography. While this is not a perfectly accurate given the complex nature of boundaries, it is a meaningful attempt to eliminate the colonial influence of superimposed borders, critically examine notions of white territoriality, and recognize Indigenous sovereignty and toponymy.

"Unassigned Land" that was eventually "opened" to white settlers in April 1889 (Oklahoma Historical Society, n.d.). My hometown began to emerge after some of these settlers laid claims to land during the Land Run of 1889.

The growth of Oklahoma City during the "Great Annexation" period, led by Stanley Draper in the 1960s, would surround my hometown and solidify its status as a prominent Oklahoma suburb (Anderson, 2018; Oklahoma Historical Society, n.d.). Like many suburbs in the United States, discriminatory housing practices in the mid-20th century led to its growth through white flight (Rothstein, 2017). Today, it is a predominantly white city with an increasingly diverse population. Yet, many white residents hold on to discriminatory beliefs.

These beliefs infiltrate and are perpetuated in our schools, and I was complacent in this process. Throughout much of my life, my thinking mirrored that of my conservative community. It pains me to admit, but I was simply a byproduct of my upbringing. I underwent a radical transformation watching the horrific and tragic death of George Floyd and the subsequent mobilization of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in 2020. Things just started to click. James Baldwin describes my experience in the best words, "the paradox of education is precisely this—that as one begins to become conscious, one begins to examine the society in which [they are] being educated" (1963/2022, p. 17).

As I became conscious, I began to question not only society but also the education that I received. How could I have taken a semester-long state-mandated Oklahoma History course and never learned about the Tulsa Race Massacre? How could I have had an entire European History course without knowing the vast ills of imperialism? I never learned the histories of peoples who did not look like me. I was rarely encouraged to think critically, despite being in nearly all Pre-AP or AP courses. I realized that my education had prepared me for a life of perpetuating

harmful ideologies, and it needed to be changed. It was because of this that I chose to be a teacher. I was never "called" to the profession, and I certainly never dreamed of teaching from a young age like many others. Instead, I wanted to return home to my community and work to disrupt the dominant narratives being taught to students daily.

Stepping Into the World of Ecological Social Studies

At the time I decided to dedicate my life to education, I was extremely naive. I knew that systemic issues such as racism and sexism existed, but I never understood the depth and complexity of such issues. I knew that climate change was (and still is) ravaging our planet. Yet, there was a piece of the web missing, and without it, I could not quite make sense of our world and its seemingly inevitable destruction.

Things became clearer in my first Social Studies Education course. We were tasked to read *Ishmael* by Daniel Quinn. On the first page of the novel, the unnamed narrator (who we later discover in Quinn's sequel work, *My Ishmael*, is named Alan Lomax) is flipping through the ads in the newspaper when he reads, "TEACHER seeks pupil. Must have an earnest desire to save the world. Apply in person." When I first came across these words, I felt a tightness in my chest. That ad felt like it was meant for me. I thought to myself, "I have an earnest desire to save the world." In typical preservice teacher fashion, I wanted to find solutions to all our world's problems. Then, I imagined influencing one student at a time in hopes of enacting great change. Looking back on this time in my life, I was not even remotely aware of all the world's problems (and I still probably am not). However, things started to become clearer as I dove into the reading.

The teacher from the advertisement was none other than Ishmael, a telepathic gorilla who uses the art of maieutic teaching to elicit his students' knowledge. In each session, he leads Alan

down a path that unveils more about our world. He divides society into two groups, the "Takers" and the "Leavers."[2] According to Ishmael, "Taker" culture resides on the premise that "the world was made for man" (p. 66). This is antithetical to Leaver culture, which essentially lives in communion with the Earth. My naivety about the world became abundantly clear—the notion that people could live in communion with the Earth was a revelation.

I was aware of a looming environmental crisis at this point in my life, but it was unfortunately not a priority for me. I never traveled much as a child, and I hardly spent time outdoors. I had a lack of experience with the natural world. Despite this, I have always had a deep love for animals, and I honestly enjoyed spending time with them more than humans. I collected roly-polies in the corner of my daycare playground instead of playing with the other children.[3] My drawing books were filled with sketches of horses (mainly because that was the only animal I could somewhat accurately depict). I also differed from most of my childhood friends because I never had dolls. Instead, my room was filled with stuffed animals and farm animal figurines. I was the type of kid to show up at my house with a stray animal and expect my mom to let me bring it in. I had everything from fish, a frog, birds, and even a hedgehog. My sweet dog, Millie, who lies beside me as I write, was brought home spontaneously the summer before my senior year of high school after a trip to my aunt's farm for July 4th. I was involved in 4-H and FFA from 8th grade to my sophomore year, where I showed pigs and sheep. When our last livestock show of the season would end, I would always feel great sadness knowing my animals were going to slaughter. But I was raised to come to terms with this quickly. These animals that I pumped full of chemicals to look aesthetically pleasing to livestock judges' eyes

[2] The "Taker"/ "Leaver" framework can often be viewed as a false dichotomy. Daniel Quinn acknowledges that this is an oversimplification for illustrative purposes and that there are an infinite number of complexities within this apparent binary.
[3] Pill-bugs, or Armadillidium vulgare.

were fulfilling their duty: to feed humans. I became desensitized to this process, convinced it was just part of life. My agricultural educators always emphasized that our work was important; *agriculture feeds the world*.

Additionally, I consistently defended the drilling of oil and natural gas, even during a surge of earthquakes in Oklahoma induced by fracking. Several members of my family, including my estranged biological father, work in the oil fields. Oklahoma's economy has been reliant on the extraction of oil and natural gas since *before* its inception as a state. To reconcile with my involvement in the exploitation of our Earth, I would ask myself questions like: *Who cares about the methane production from large-scale cattle farming when the beef industry feeds the world? Who cares about water pollution from pesticides and fertilizers when more food helps feed more people? Who cares about the environmental implications of drilling for oil and natural gas when it provides a way of life and income for people?* Justifying the degradation of the environment alleviated the discomfort I felt inside.

Even when primed with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's notable "Danger of a Single Story" TED Talk (2009), I had a difficult time accepting that things could be different. "You're captives of a civilizational system that more or less compels you to go on destroying the world in order to live," says Ishmael (1992, p. 28). That's exactly what it felt like when I first started my journey in ecological social studies education. I felt hopeless, and honestly, I still do sometimes. Yet, I am constantly reminded that there are other people who "have an earnest desire to save the world" (Quinn, 1992, p. 1). In many ways, I was influenced by my professor (the same one who required us to read *Ishmael*), who has a deep passion for ecological education. Each class I have taken with him has unveiled the complexity of our environmental issues. During my undergraduate education, one of my peers, who was in his master's program seeking initial

teacher certification, also cared deeply about the environment. My student teaching mentor did as well, often focusing on sustainability in his 7th-grade geography classroom. These individuals all had a significant influence on my decision to make ecological education a priority. It may truly have just been a coincidence, but I feel as if my experiences and relationships with each of these individuals were not by happenstance. Unlike my experience with teaching itself, I feel as if I was truly "called" to the work of ecological social studies. Here I am, in search of hope for humanity and all the other species with whom we share the Earth.

The Problem: Destructive Dominant Paradigms

The hopelessness that I, and many others, face stems from many challenges. Among these challenges are systemic problems such as racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and more. While I feel like these are all important to address, there is one deeply rooted systemic problem that sits at a crossroads between all others: *anthropocentrism*. Anthropocentrism is a dominant worldview in western[4] culture, where humans envision themselves as separate from and superior to the rest of the natural world (Cavazos, 2023). This perceived separation leads humans to believe that their value as humans is inherently more than anything else, resulting in the exploitation of nonhuman beings and the Earth for human use. Often unnamed and unexamined, anthropocentrism is the "root to all ecological destruction" (Mackie, 1998, p. 13). Not only is this pervasive problem the root of ecological destruction, but it is also a "fundamental cause" of the persistence of intersecting issues such as "racism, classism, and patriarchy" (Houser, 2024, p. 25).

[4] The word "western" is generally capitalized when referring to culture, as it is considered a proper noun. However, I have chosen to use lowercase to decenter it from its position as the dominant culture.

Methodology: How I Approach This Work

Education flourishes with possibilities to deconstruct dominant paradigms such as anthropocentrism. However, even educators who strive to implement environmental education in their classrooms face many barriers in their endeavors (Cavazos, 2023). Being an early-career educator, I find it necessary for me to continue developing my identity in the classroom. For these reasons, the type of qualitative research I have chosen to conduct is critical autoethnography.

Autoethnography is "a form of qualitative inquiry where the researcher takes a personal, reflexive journey into parts of her experiences and systematically analyzes those experiences within the cultural context of where those experiences occur" (Battacharya, 2017, p. 25). *Critical* autoethnography looks at those experiences within a cultural context that assumes the existence of and need to challenge asymmetrical power relations and inequities within society. Given the nature of the problem that I seek to address, I think it is essential to critically examine the way that my culture[5], western culture, or what Quinn (1992) calls "Taker" culture, has created and sustained inequitable power structures between and among humans and nonhuman beings.

I would also argue that this work is more than a critical autoethnography. It is also existential. It is a deep investigation of myself. I often found myself thinking long and hard about who I am and what I am doing in this world. The existential nature of this work led me to draw on philosophy, but I still felt that something was missing. I needed to know *who I am* but also

[5] Since this is a critical autoethnography, I will be referencing "my culture" throughout. While culture is an extremely complex concept, I use it here to refer to what has been defined as "western" or "western European" culture. Western culture's traditions, evolving from ancient Greek and Roman civilizations, include individualism, humanism, capitalism, and colonialism. Additionally, western culture has been significantly influenced by Christianity. While I do recognize the potential harm of generalizing myself and others to western culture and risk the impression of a logical fallacy, concepts of western culture largely influence my personal and professional life as well as much of the world. This culture also closely corresponds to the "Taker" culture described by Daniel Quinn (1982).

how I got here. Weaving together critical autoethnography with historical, philosophical, and existential dimensions, I sought to develop a more complete vision of myself—past, present, and future.

In this chapter, I have identified serious concerns regarding the perpetuation of anthropocentrism. However, to understand how I could better address this problem in my classroom, I had to understand how it emerged and why it has become so pervasive. This is the focus of the second chapter, where I examine the challenges I continue to face in resisting this problematic paradigm as well as how it has become so embedded in western culture. Chapter two draws heavily on the literature in ecological philosophy to serve as a framework. In the final chapter, I will explore the possibilities of becoming a more *ecocentric* educator. To me, ecocentric educators work to deconstruct the hierarchical, anthropocentric human-nature relationship sustained in western culture. They do this by providing transformative physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual spaces that allow students to rethink their relations to and in the world. Further, ecocentric educators encourage students to live in ways that lead to a more sustainable future. With that in mind, this thesis is guided by these questions:

- Why has anthropocentrism been so difficult to understand and address?
- How can I better address anthropocentrism through my teaching, given the barriers/obstacles I, like others, continue to face? How can I address this problem in a system that does not leave much space to do so?

Chapter Two: A Personal, Historical, and Philosophical Inquiry Into the Reproduction of Anthropocentrism in Schools and Society

To begin understanding the possibilities of ecocentric teaching, I needed to understand why anthropocentrism has been so problematic and difficult to address. For the first part of this chapter, I draw on my own experiences as an early career social studies teacher and identify the barriers I have faced when trying to name anthropocentrism in my classroom. I also examine the ways in which teaching and schools have helped perpetuate this powerful but destructive worldview. The challenges I have faced attempting to address anthropocentrism led me to conduct a deep evaluation of western culture's history, which is outlined in the second part of this chapter. In the final part of this chapter, I provide an ecocentric framework with which to think about myself, our society, and our world.

Challenges to Resisting the Reproduction of Problematic Paradigms in Public Schools

Social institutions play a significant role in shaping culture. To uphold the beliefs and values of a given society, these institutions are often reproductive—for better or worse. As social institutions, schools also tend to be reproductive and act as microcosms of society. The issue with the reproductive nature of schooling lies with its tendency to perpetuate problematic paradigms that uphold the dominant or hegemonic culture (Anyon, 1980; Gramsci, 1971; hooks, 1994). Public schools, as they currently exist in the United States, perpetuate anthropocentric thoughts and tendencies, along with other systemic problems. However, schools could also serve as sites of transformation.

In my first full year of teaching, I hoped to draw on the transformative nature of education and share an awareness of the problem of anthropocentrism with my students. My AP Human Geography class started our agriculture unit in the spring semester upon our return from

winter break. This seemed like the perfect space to introduce the concept. My students were very bright and passionate. Many of them cared deeply about the environment. I assumed I understood their sensibilities, so I included Jared Diamond's (1987) "The Worst Mistake in the History of the Human Race" in a lesson about agricultural revolutions. In this piece, Diamond uses well-supported evidence to argue that agriculture was the worst mistake humans have made. When developing this lesson, I had planned for the class to independently read the article. Then, we would come together as a group to discuss it. We did not get to the meaningful discussion as I had hoped. My students immediately rejected it and refused to consider his argument. When I asked them their opinions on it, they said it was "stupid" and even suggested that Jared Diamond was "mentally insane." I was devastated by their responses. "They should have been able to handle it," I thought. The article is an easy read for most students, especially at an Advanced Placement level. They had plenty of experiences in my class where they came to understand different perspectives, so why was this one so implausible? It was in this moment that I realized anthropocentrism is distinct from other systemic problems—it has been virtually unnamed.

"Naming" a problem is the first step to challenging it or perceiving possible solutions (Greene, 1988). Given our primary goal of *citizenship education*[6], the practice of informing our students about and preparing them to tackle the major issues of our time is inherent to social studies education (Barr et al., 1977; National Education Association, 1916; Parker & Jarolimek, 1984). Yet, we have fallen short of addressing one of the most pressing issues of our time—the climate crisis (Crocco, 2022; Hooven et al., 2021; Houser, 2009; Kissling & Bell, 2019).

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[6] Citizenship education as a defining goal of social studies has been complicated and contested by other scholars largely on the grounds that "citizenship" has often served as a basis for inclusion and exclusion. While I do acknowledge that it historically has resulted in the exclusion of certain groups, the current use of citizenship education, according to the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), is generally well-intentioned in including all students regardless of national origin, race, religion, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, or other identifying characteristics.

Anthropocentrism is so thoroughly embedded in the language and attitudes of our culture that this obstacle has been difficult even to name (Cavazos, 2023). Efforts that have been made in social studies to focus on the environment, though well-intentioned, often perpetuate anthropocentric tendencies (Ross, 2020). Educational scholarship, particularly mainstream social studies journals that inform the practices of many educators, often do not communicate anthropocentrism as an issue to be addressed (Houser et al., In Review). Social studies teachers who do make additional efforts to include the environment in their teaching face obstacles to engaging their students on a deeper, more meaningful level. In a recent study, Cavazos (2023) found that "lack of time, state standards and testing pressures, political and social pushback, and a lack of sufficient knowledge" were all obstacles for participants wanting to implement meaningful environmental education (p. 74).

I have faced and continue to face all these obstacles as well as physical and financial barriers in resisting the problematic paradigm of anthropocentrism in my classroom. Not only do they prevent me from addressing anthropocentrism in my classroom as a problem, but they also tend to force me into situations where I unintentionally and unwillingly perpetuate it (and other systemic problems) in and through my teaching.

Time-Related Pressures

As I reflect on my experiences during my first two years of teaching, it seems that *every minute* matters in the teaching world, and I never feel that I have enough of them. I wake up each school day, get ready quickly, and drive just three minutes down the road to work. As much as I would like to take a moment to myself or watch the sunrise, I do not hesitate to leave my car and make my short journey across the asphalt parking lot. Every minute in the morning counts. I arrive around 7:20 a.m., just minutes before students are allowed to enter the building. I use this

time to set my things down, turn on my alternate lighting and Smart Board, and take a breath before the day begins. Soon, my students start trickling in. Yet, my contract hours do not begin until 7:40 a.m. I arrive early out of necessity, for both myself and several students who regard my classroom as their morning sanctuary.

I dread the mornings when I have duty or meetings. Every teacher in the school is required to complete either morning, lunch, or afternoon duty. Usually, our teachers select duty stations and times through a shared spreadsheet that the head principal sends out at the beginning of the school year. Last year was my first year at this school, and I remember my colleagues' anxiety surrounding this spreadsheet. They anticipated the email and stormed it to sign up for the thirteen days of duty they wanted. I felt the pressure, especially as I *had* to have a morning duty since I leave early after school some days for graduate classes. My computer crashed when the spreadsheet was released last year. Luckily, my mentor teacher was able to sign me up. Things got so heated amongst staff members over the shared spreadsheet that our head principal decided to streamline the process this school year. We filled out a duty preference form and were randomly assigned fifteen days throughout the school year. I was lucky in getting morning duty again. However, this requires me to be at my duty station at 7:25 a.m.—15 minutes before my contract hours. On these days, I must get to school even earlier and rush to prepare, especially if my duty location is on the other side of the school. I do the same on monthly faculty meeting days. These start at 7:20 a.m., so I end up adding nearly an hour to the start of my workday to get in, prepare my room, and walk across the other side of the school to the library in time for the meeting to start.

My first hour is my planning period. It can be a peaceful and productive start to the day—when it is not interrupted. I open my email some mornings to find a message from our substitute

teacher coordinator titled “URGENT URGENT URGENT.” This means that I must go cover a class for an absent teacher because we do not have enough substitutes in the building. Due to teacher burnout and a shortage of substitutes, covering classes has become a norm. We are randomly selected to cover, so I have no idea when it may happen until I get that dreaded email. I am immediately sent into a panic and must abandon any hopes of lesson planning.

In addition to these challenges, every Tuesday, my planning period is interrupted for Professional Learning Team (PLT) time with my teammate and our evaluating administrator. We sit in the sterile main office conference room with a list of tasks we are supposed to accomplish, usually pertaining to the requirements of our evaluation system such as filling out and reevaluating “SMART” goals, completing instructional rounds, or reading for a book study. Every now and then, our district curriculum coordinator comes to PLT meetings to discuss assessment data with us. I am sure she has boxes to check as well. I see the possibility in everything we do in PLT time to improve my teaching practices, but in reality, these tasks feel artificial and meaningless. This often leaves me and my colleagues feeling as if we are constantly being asked to do extra work.

Also, as part of our evaluation system, my school requires the submission of daily lesson plans for every course we teach. Our administration recently implemented this requirement in response to the increase in hiring of emergency certified teachers. We must submit the learning objectives, opening/connection to prior knowledge, explanation of active learning, closure, technology/resources used, connection to literacy, and accommodations/modifications for each lesson. By the time all the information is included, my lesson plans are around three pages each. Typing the plans out for both classes takes anywhere from 30 minutes to an hour each day in

addition to actually planning the lesson. If we do not complete them, we are docked heavily on our evaluation.

This accountability measure is extremely demoralizing. Each time I complete them, I feel my expertise and abilities being called into question. I studied for four and a half years to become a teacher, and I do not need constant surveillance to do the job I love. It takes entirely too much time away from creating meaningful lessons, and it exhausts me to complete them.

Each teacher at my school is also required to serve on a committee of some sort to fulfill part of our evaluation requirements. I am currently on our AP Advisory Committee, which meets biweekly (sometimes more) during my lunch period. This committee was created to foster teacher ownership over the AP program, hoping to increase student participation and test scores through collaboration and cross-curricular support. While having seemingly beneficial goals, this committee has resulted in extra time and energy spent on mitigating our administrators' workload. Instead of looking at how to best support students, we have reviewed AP drop forms, planned and executed events such as our AP Open House, and completed conference proposals to make our administrators look good to the district.

Aside from all the extra duties and meetings, teaching itself requires a significant amount of time. As an early career educator, I often feel like I spend more time than veteran teachers do preparing for my classes. I am admittedly not an "expert" in European History or Human Geography, so I am still learning the content for both of my courses. I also feel an immense amount of pressure to be perfect. Norms of perfection are even greater than usual in the competitive climate of Advanced Placement. The other AP social studies teachers know their content in great depth, and I feel like I have barely scratched the surface. Many of them were history majors or have taught the subject for years, so I try not to compare myself too much to

them. Unfortunately, I often let comparison be the thief of my joy and confidence. I study on my lunch breaks and after school to make sure I am prepared for each lesson. Even still, I find myself forgetting content I just taught or not knowing the answer to simple questions students may ask. It is embarrassing. In my heart, I know that being the "expert" in the room is not necessary to be a good teacher, but that is the norm in my school, and it is difficult not to internalize it.

In addition to learning my courses' content, I find myself often building each of my lessons almost entirely from scratch. I do have some resources available from former teachers or colleagues at other schools, but it still takes time and effort to adapt them to my students' needs. Lesson planning often takes me hours in the evening and on the weekends. Grading takes even more time. I currently have 110 AP European History students and 26 AP Human Geography students, and I dread grading any sort of exam because of the extensive feedback they require. In my AP European History class, several of our exams are Document-Based Questions (DBQs). Any time I give one of these essays, I plan to spend at least an additional ten hours in my week grading. I work well beyond my contract hours each week. Even still, I have an endless list of tasks that require my attention. Most days, I am merely surviving and hoping to make it to the next day without drowning. Exhaustion consumes me constantly. I want to teach about things I care about; I want to address anthropocentrism in my classroom. Yet, how do I do this when it feels like the clock is against me?

Standardization and Testing Pressures

Along with a lack of time, standardization and testing pressures are also significant obstacles to becoming a more ecocentric educator. According to Tyack & Tobin (1994), public schools in the United States have been trapped in the "grammar" of schooling, of the

organizational practices that classify students into groups, assign them to classrooms, and divide their time between subject areas. This "grammar" of schooling is focused on efficiency, standardization and testing, and short-term thinking (Gruenewald, 2007; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Since the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002, student success has been measured based on quantifiable data, namely their performance on high-stakes mathematics, reading, and writing tests. Instead of equalizing opportunities for students as the policy intended, it has created a culture of competition based on test scores. A rise in technocratic approaches to schooling has devalued educators and deemphasized critical thinking skills for students (Giroux, 1985). The "grammar" of schooling has made it difficult for me and other teachers to engage with meaningful curricula beyond preparation for standardized tests. By expecting our students to learn the same skills in the same order at the same time, we often fall short of awakening their minds (Quinn, 1997).

I chose to be a social studies teacher to discuss major problems of our time and to guide my students on the path to becoming contributing citizens. I never envisioned throwing isolated facts at them, hoping they would stick. Yet, that is what I am expected to do because of standardization and testing pressures. Standards are supposed to set goals for what students should be able to know and do at each grade level. We are expected to teach these as fact. Unfortunately, social studies standards—on both the national and state levels—frequently perpetuate a separation between humans and nature or human domination over nature, further normalizing anthropocentrism in western culture. For example, in the Oklahoma Academic Standards for Social Studies, geography is said to examine "the ways people both adapt to and modify *their* environment" (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2019, p. 2, emphasis

added). Whether intended or not, the word “their” can reinforce the idea that the environment belongs to people. This is just one of the numerous places that reinforce anthropocentric ideals.

Fortunately, I do not have to entirely abide by the Oklahoma state standards since I only teach Advanced Placement courses. However, the discourse surrounding the standards in schools and the public affects the way my class is perceived by administrators, parents, and students. Instead of the Oklahoma Academic Standards, I am required to teach the content and skills in the AP *Course and Exam Descriptions (CEDs)*. Yet, the language in the AP Human Geography CED is also heavily anthropocentric, which is consistent with its human-centered name and nature. Units five through seven are centered around “land use” through agriculture, urbanization, or industrialization. The essential knowledge markers listed for Topic 1.5: Human-Environmental Interaction are as follows: “(PSO-1.B.1): Concepts of nature and society include sustainability, natural resources, and land use. (PSO-1.B.2): Theories regarding the interaction of the natural environment with human societies have evolved from environmental determinism to possibilism” (p. 34). I am required to teach my students that any nonhuman beings are natural resources that can be extracted and used, and land is meant for human utility and can be adapted for human activity. If I am to address anthropocentrism, I must directly challenge the content I am required to teach, which is an intimidating task.

Another factor is that AP exams are high stakes for my students, making the challenge even more difficult. The rigorous nature of these courses means I must fill every 53 minutes of class, leaving little room for other endeavors. My students want the content and skills that will prepare them to pass their exam. They spend $105 to take it, and many of them are riding on the chance to receive college credit, so I feel like I am doing them a disservice any time I teach them something or have them do an activity unrelated to the AP exam. To account for the extra effort

often required to teach AP, I am offered a $500 stipend at the end of the year. However, I only receive my full stipend *if* my test scores improve. There is a lot riding on the AP exams, so I frequently find myself falling into the "grammar" of schooling, unintentionally perpetuating problematic paradigms and leaving myself little space to challenge them.

Political and Social Pushback

I also find it difficult to challenge problematic paradigms like anthropocentrism because of potential political and social pushback. I live and work in an extremely conservative state. In 2021, lawmakers passed the vague House Bill (HB) 1775. According to this law, any conversations that could cause a student to feel "discomfort, guilt, anguish or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race or sex" are prohibited. Teachers are legally limited in our ability to have meaningful discussions about race, gender, identity, and other "controversial" topics in the classroom. I knew I was entering a politically charged profession when this law passed, yet I remained committed. Recently, my state endured the nearly three-year tenure of Ryan Walters, a controversial State Superintendent of Public Instruction. He previously served as the Secretary of Education and made early waves in his attacks on what he deemed "woke" teachers. I still remember the fear and uncertainty I felt in 2022 going through my undergraduate program after a local teacher was fired for sharing a QR code to a Brooklyn Public Library banned books resource. What started as a parent complaint turned into a full-blown attack on teachers led by Walters. His policies, including heavy promotion of conservative Christian values in schools, have contributed to our state's ranking of 50th in education nationwide. Among his many endeavors while in office, Walters tried to implement Bible instruction in public schools, proposed immigration checks during school enrollment, and advocated for the decertification of "woke teachers."

Many other policymakers, parents, and community members supported Walters' endeavors, further intensifying the culture of fear for non-conservative educators. This was especially true in my community. Many families I know, and even my colleagues, tend to support his ideologies. I teach down the hall from a city councilman whose 2022 campaign constantly reaffirmed Walters' "conservative" values. Students, likely influenced by their parents, can also push back. Last year, a student complained that I taught "too much about race and feminism," even though it is a required part of the AP European History CED. I feel that I must constantly censor myself when I am teaching. Discussing issues deemed "controversial" in my classroom could result in me losing my career, making it a significant risk to address anthropocentrism in the classroom.

Lack of Sufficient Knowledge

Even if I am able to navigate the potential social and political pushback, I still find myself lost on how to challenge problematic paradigms in my classroom due to a lack of sufficient knowledge. I am already struggling to keep up with learning the anthropocentric content in my classes, and the environment is seldom considered in social studies. Aside from my ecologically focused advisor and one course on United States Environmental History, I had limited experiences discussing the possibilities of ecocentric education in my teacher preparation program. This leaves me with no choice but to look outside my prescribed standards and formal education. Unfortunately, there is a lack of accessible academic resources that could aid me in my endeavors. The few articles on ecocentric education are largely theoretical, making it difficult to envision how exactly to put it into practice.

Physical and Financial Barriers

In addition to the barriers identified by Cavazos (2023), I also face physical and financial barriers to addressing anthropocentrism in my classroom. As previously mentioned, my classroom contains no windows. This is true for many of my colleagues and schools throughout the country as many public-school buildings physically isolate students from the environment. The design and use of physical space is not neutral, and the anthropocentric nature of public schools can be visualized in their architecture. Many classrooms remain disconnected from the natural environment, which further intensifies the perceived separation of nature and humans in western culture (Gruenewald, 2007). Though public schools do not currently operate under the same premise, the physical perpetuation of anthropocentrism in and around school buildings has a precedent in 19th and 20th century boarding schools that systematically targeted Indigenous students in the United States. Boarding schools were places designed to eradicate Indigenous cultures and values that contradicted colonial discourse by forcefully assimilating Indigenous students into western culture (Cavazos, 2023; Ewing, 2025). Indigenous students and nonhuman elements of nature were "made to conform with white concepts of order, space, and beauty" in boarding schools as superintendents implemented "manicured lawns, pruned trees, and contoured gardens" (Adams, 1995, p. 114).

The altering of landscapes around boarding schools demonstrated western habits to attempt to tame nature, and these practices remain prevalent in public schools today. As an example, just a few weeks ago, my school decided to cut down several trees in the student parking lot and cover the soil with concrete to prevent it from blowing around. My school also lacks sufficient spaces to sit outside. We have a courtyard, but it is a lengthy walk from my classroom. How are students supposed to learn and care about the natural environment when we

are isolated from it for nearly eight hours a day? It might be possible to connect them through field trips or hands-on activities, but our school district has limited funding, and so do I with my Oklahoma teacher's salary. My students need meaningful access to the world outside the classroom, but I feel limited in my abilities to give them what they need.

As an early career educator who cares deeply about addressing anthropocentrism in my classroom, I often feel like I am confined to a system that I cannot escape. These barriers restrict me and force me to perpetuate problematic paradigms, often unintentionally; I am stuck in a room with no windows. But even if there were windows, there are conceptual closures in my classroom that hinder me. Students' growing immersion in technology often isolates them from the outside, even in their personal lives. Further, my students live in a predominantly white suburban community that has not yet been as directly and immediately impacted as other communities by the environmental crisis. We are extremely privileged in this fact, but this creates limitations in connecting students to the issue at hand. Until the environmental crisis is staring us in the face or knocking at our door, many of us will not feel a sense of urgency to address it. So, we live our lives without bearing the burden of our own anthropocentric practices and tend to ignore the harm we inflict on historically marginalized human and nonhuman communities.

All these factors contribute to the challenges I have experienced in trying to live and teach in more ecocentric ways. To make my way towards the light of ecocentrism, I needed to understand how anthropocentrism became so embedded in modern societies, including the western culture in which I reside.

The Evolution of Anthropocentric Thought Throughout History

Quinn (1992) argues that "Taker" culture is pervasive in the north, south, east, and west. The west has taken a lead, but every continent has followed and are all now major anthropocentric players, largely due to our collective pursuit of modernity. By asserting our superiority over all other life, "modern civilization" has absorbed the problematic worldview of anthropocentrism and participated in the destruction of our shared world.

Human activities influenced by anthropocentric ideals have resulted in an environmental crisis, putting us at risk of committing *omnicide*—the annihilation of everything (Bookchin, 2005; Capra, 1982; Pedersen, 2021). This worldview is so deeply ingrained that it often goes unnoticed and unnamed, which is evidenced by my students' aversion to my lesson on Jared Diamond's article. However, things were not always this way, and it was necessary for me to learn the complex history that has allowed anthropocentrism to sustain itself in our society and schools.[7] History is important because "to a large extent, the history of a phenomenon is the phenomenon itself" (Bookchin, 2005, p. 87). By losing sight of our past, humans "threaten to kill our future" (Weisman, 2008). We must reach back and ask ourselves: *How did we get here?*

As far as I can tell, I come from the people of what novelist Daniel Quinn has called the "Great Forgetting" (1996, p. 242). Around 10,000 B.C.E., humans in the Fertile Crescent helped initiate one of the first Agricultural (Neolithic) Revolutions. The transition from a nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyle to a lifestyle centered on agriculture allowed for permanent settlements to develop, ultimately leading to the creation of what western culture considers to be "civilization." The people of the "Great Forgetting" imagine human history originating at this point—we have forgotten that for much of human history, we existed as hunter-gatherers (Quinn,

[7] This will inevitably be a largely Eurocentric and patriarchal historical narrative as western culture has been the main perpetuator of many systemic problems in the world—anthropocentrism being no exception.

1996, pp. 242-243). Indicators of human progress, such as increased life expectancy and quality of life, are generally associated with agriculture and its advancements. It is also frequently suggested that the convenience of agriculture freed more time traditionally used for hunting and gathering, allowing humans to develop intellectually and artistically. Not only does this undermine the intellectual achievements and artistic expression clearly articulated by past and present hunter-gatherer cultures, but it also demonstrates western culture's obsession with the "ascent to civilization."

While there can be benefits associated with agriculture, it has also negatively impacted our world. Western culture's goals of human progress often make us lose sight of these harms. Malnutrition from an undiversified diet, starvation and famine from an overreliance on farmed foods, and epidemic diseases are often associated with agriculture. Yet, one of the most unassuming ills from agriculture is the rise of social hierarchies and class divisions (Diamond, 1987/1997). As surpluses of food were placed under "lock and key," as novelist Daniel Quinn (1997) describes, social class inequalities continued to evolve. Quinn also coined the term "totalitarian agriculture" to describe the unsustainable style of agriculture adopted by "Taker" culture that seeks to maximize yield for human profit and exhibits "complete ruthlessness toward all other life-forms on this planet" (Quinn, 1996, p. 259). The surplus of human food created by agricultural practices proved to be desirable for others, leading to their diffusion. As more people began practicing it, territorial expansion was necessary to accommodate population growth. "Leaver" cultures that did not adopt totalitarian agriculture began to be overpowered, often leading to their oppression through enslavement. To sustain itself, totalitarian agriculture has subjugated people and the planet while yielding power to those in control of the food supply.

Not all agricultural practicing cultures have adopted totalitarian agriculture. There are many cultures that engage in sustainable agricultural practices. However, "modern civilizations," including western culture, have participated and continue to participate in totalitarian agriculture. In attempting to maintain our power, we have supported a vast system of exploitative and antiecological practices such as colonialism, capitalism, ethnocentrism, racism, and patriarchy (Capra, 1996, p. 8).[8]

Western Culture's Continuing Contribution to Anthropocentrism

Although anthropocentric views have diffused and evolved globally, the west has played a significant role in their perpetuation and proliferation. For example, the Italian Renaissance of the 15th and 16th centuries generated a "rebirth" in ideas of classical antiquity following the Middle Ages, a period of little human advancement (from a modernist western European perspective) and one marked by war and the bubonic plague. During this revival, western scholars drew inspiration from Ancient Greek and Roman philosophers. *Humanism* was the foundational philosophy during the Renaissance. While an exact definition of humanism is difficult to pinpoint, it places an emphasis on human reasoning, potential, and virtue. Francesco Petrarca, often considered the "Father of Humanism," drew on the works of Roman scholar Cicero and encouraged the study of classical texts. One major inspirational philosopher, Aristotle, claimed that our ability to *reason* is what distinguishes humans from other animals (Gaarder, 1991, p. 108). In response, Renaissance humanists celebrated this exclusively human

[8] While the main issue I discuss throughout this thesis is anthropocentrism, there are many intersecting oppressive systems that have existed and continue to exist in the world. It is important for all these injustices to be addressed. Although the scope of this thesis primarily focuses on anthropocentrism, all systems of oppression are interconnected and reinforce one another. As Fritjof Capra says in *The Web of Life*, "the more we study the major problems of our time, the more we come to realize that they cannot be understood in isolation. They are systemic problems, which means that they are interconnected and interdependent" (p. 3).

ability, frequently through artistic expressions that placed humans at the center (e.g., Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*) and intensified our separation from nature.

The Renaissance also fueled intellectual and technological advancements that led to long-distance exploration in a period now known as the "Age of Discovery." European motives for exploration can be summed up in this phrase I teach my AP European History students: "Glory, God and Gold" (Wellman, 1954). In vying for the spot as the most dominant European power, nations such as Spain and Portugal set sail to establish vast trading networks and colonies across the globe. However, the other main motives clearly illustrate western culture's anthropocentric tendencies. Christianity, as the dominant religion in Europe, was often used as a justification for colonization. Not only were missionaries sent by European powers to forcefully convert Indigenous Peoples and others to Christianity, but rationales for domination over the land were also embedded in Christian teachings. The "great chain of being" view of the universe had influenced western thought since antiquity and was revived during the Renaissance. In this hierarchical structure, God was at the top and descended through angels, humans (distinguishing between rulers, first, then commoners), animals, plants, and nonliving things (Capra, 1982, p. 71). Furthermore, the creation story in Judeo-Christian teachings preaches human dominion over the Earth as found in Genesis 1:26:

> And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017).

This passage in Genesis ultimately gives humans the responsibility to control the Earth, allowing for the exploitation of the planet, which was manifested in the European pursuit of mineral

wealth (primarily gold and silver) and agricultural wealth in the form of cash crops including sugar cane, tobacco, rice, and indigo. European powers forced Indigenous Peoples into a peonage system where they worked in extremely harsh and inhumane conditions for European benefits. Additionally, the spread of European diseases—for instance, smallpox—killed many Indigenous Peoples who had no immunity. The genocide of Indigenous Peoples in European colonies motivated Europeans to look elsewhere for cheap labor, resulting in the enslavement of millions of Africans through the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The very system upon which western culture has sustained its power—and upon which the United States was founded—has anthropocentric roots.

These roots were further reinforced through the Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment that coincided with European colonization from the 16th to the 18th centuries. Prior to this period, the medieval worldview perceived the universe as organic, living, and spiritual. This was overthrown by a mechanistic, reductionistic worldview embedded in anthropocentrism (Capra, 1982/1996). Galileo Galilei, one of the most influential figures of the Scientific Revolution, made numerous important contributions, such as confirming Copernicus's heliocentric theory with his telescope and discovering the laws of gravity. However, he measured and quantified nature through mathematical description, virtually eliminating the need to rely on feelings or the spiritual self to understand the world (Capra, 1982, p. 55). Another important thinker of this time was Francis Bacon, whose inductive method had a profound impact on science. In *The Turning Point* (1982), physicist Fritjof Capra states, "since Bacon, the goal of science has been knowledge that can be used to dominate and control nature, and today both science and technology are used predominantly for purposes that are profoundly antiecological" (p. 56).

The anthropocentric philosophies of the Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment period went even further with René Descartes. Many of Descartes' ideas reinforce anthropocentric ways of thinking and being. His method of deductive reasoning breaks up thoughts and problems into smaller parts and arranges them in a logical order (Capra, 1982, p. 59). This reductionistic way of thinking prevents us from seeing ourselves and our world as an interconnected whole. Descartes also believed in a division between mind and matter. The mind-body dualism theory suggests that human thought and consciousness are separate from the body, which ultimately acts as a vessel. The perceived division could cause a disconnect from the body and physical realm. Thus, we can become disconnected from the environment and reinforce anthropocentric ideals. Furthermore, Descartes' dualism likened the material universe and nonhuman organisms to a machine that worked in accordance with mechanical laws. According to Capra (1982), "the Cartesian view of the universe as a mechanical system provided a 'scientific' sanction for the manipulation and exploitation of nature that has become typical of Western Culture" (p. 61). Accepting this view denies the agency of nonhuman nature. Although advancements in the sciences have demonstrated that the Cartesian view of the world is outdated, it had a profound and lasting impact on western culture's view of the environment.

The Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment fostered ideas of experimentation and inquiry that led to the development of new technologies that subsequently caused the Second Agricultural Revolution. The new farming techniques and efficiency accompanying the Second Agricultural Revolution resulted in increased food supplies and surplus labor that paved the way for the Industrial Revolution, which exponentially increased anthropogenic climate change. At this same time in history, capitalism solidified its place in western society and emphasized

Enlightenment thinker John Locke's ideas of individualism, competition, and private property, which further intensified anthropocentric ideals (Capra, 1982, p. 69).

More recently, the Green Revolution has resulted in the excessive use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides as well as monocropping and the creation of high-yield variety crops. The manipulation and domination of nature in this way have been justified to feed the rapidly increasing human population. Food—more than ever before—is under "lock and key" by agribusiness corporations that prioritize profit over the well-being of people and the planet. The desire for human progress exacerbates our climate crisis as we enter a new period of excessive technological growth. We continue to deny the agency of Mother Nature and act as if we are not subject to her influence. This will change quickly as the human experience is actively being shaped by climate change.

In *The Story of B* (1996), novelist Daniel Quinn draws on the popular "boiling frog" parable to describe the history of "Taker" culture:

> If you drop a frog in a pot of boiling water, it will of course frantically try to clamber out. But if you place it gently in a pot of tepid water and turn the heat on low, it will float there quite placidly. As the water gradually heats up, the frog will sink into a tranquil stupor, exactly like one of us in a hot bath, and before long, with a smile on its face, it will unresistingly allow itself to be boiled to death (p. 258).

My culture has spent much of its history focused on human progress. We entered the pot at the invention of agriculture approximately 10,000 years ago, and the water temperature has been increasing for thousands of years. We have seen some signs of distress with rapid population growth, war, and disease. For the most part, however, we have not noticed our impending fate. Pollution, overcrowding, biodiversity loss, rising sea levels, extreme weather, and more all

signify that the water is boiling—we have reached a point of crisis. For Daniel Quinn, the "fire under the cauldron" is totalitarian agriculture (p. 260). Yet, anthropocentrism embedded in our ways of knowing and being fuels the fire that has brought us to this point and keeps us here.

Western culture has made attempts to escape the boiling water or—at the very least—to turn the temperature down, and there are other cultures and even subsects in western culture (both past and present) that do not live in this way. Yet, it continues to perpetuate anthropocentrism and other systems of oppression through the practice of *ecocolonialism*. Indigenous scientist, climate justice leader, and author Jessica Hernandez (2022) describes ecocolonialism as "the altering of our environments and landscapes due to colonization of Indigenous lands and the paradigms that are upheld to grant settlers (white people) the power to continue managing our environments and landscapes" (p. 42). This process has resulted in the suppression of worldviews, most notably Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies, that offer possibilities to preserve the Earth and our future. In our attempts to maintain power over the planet and other people, my culture continues to boil in the pot of water and bring everything else with us.

Immersing Myself in Ecological Philosophy

As I became more aware of anthropocentrism's pervasiveness, I started my search for people who were working to oppose it. Ecological philosophy is a place where I found many people untangling the web of this still largely invisible and seemingly inescapable worldview. While there are many subfields, I have found hope in addressing anthropocentrism through three branches of ecological philosophy: deep ecology, social ecology, and ecofeminism. Although the three branches have some internal differences (Zimmerman, 1994), each offers insight into how I could become a more ecocentric educator.

The deep ecology movement was founded in the 1970s by Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss, who called for a deeper look at environmental policies beyond those of pollution and resource depletion (Næss, 1973). He distinguishes deep ecology from "shallow ecology." Shallow ecology is an anthropocentric approach to the ecological movement that prioritizes the management of natural resources and pollution through the implementation of short-term, important but ultimately insufficient solutions (Capra, 1996; Houser, 2009). These "solutions" serve human interests, especially those in more developed countries (Næss, 1973).[9] Anthropocentrism is the underlying cause of our environmental crisis, according to deep ecologists, and shallow ecology's perpetuation of this ideology makes it insufficient. I do not want to discredit programs such as recycling that do impact human and nonhuman life to some extent. However, programs can be reactionary; they can be band-aids attempting to cover gaping wounds. They also "tend to give people a false sense of progress and hope" (Quinn, 1996, pp. 48-49). Deep ecology is different. It recognizes that humans are not above or even separate from nature. Rather, humans are *part* of nature, and everything in the world is interconnected (Capra, 1996). In our efforts to subdue nature, we are ultimately suppressing ourselves and preventing "self-realization," or a spiritual growth and awareness that connects us with the rest of the world (Devall & Sessions, 1985; Houser, 2009; Næss, 1973; Zimmerman, 1994).

Social ecology separates from deep ecology by suggesting that our environmental crisis stems from oppressive political and social structures. Hierarchies that formed from the human subjugation of other humans then resulted in human domination over nonhuman nature

[9] The use of "developed" and "developing" identifiers for countries is outdated and problematic. These terms reinforce a hierarchy based on the ways of life in colonial empires that have exploited the "developing" countries. I opted to use the term "more developed countries (MDCs)" as it is the most current language used in my AP Human Geography course. However, the United Nations has recently abandoned the phrase and opted to just reference "least developed countries (LDCs)." I think such designations reinforce the supposed superiority of certain countries over others, but these misnomers are still commonly used today.

(Bookchin, 2005; Mackie, 1998; Zimmerman, 1994). In the eyes of social ecologists, our environmental crisis can "only be overcome by a restructuring of society without any class or hierarchical structures" (Mackie, 1998, p. 23). Some early social ecologists, namely Murray Bookchin, reject the sacredness of natural phenomena and the human need for spiritual connection to the nonhuman world. However, social ecology emphasizes the need to address the many social inequalities that are entangled with our environmental crisis, which is an area not fully explored in deep ecology.

Although many women—such as Rachel Carson with her publication of *Silent Spring* in 1962—have served as leaders in the mainstream environmentalism movement, we have traditionally been left out of the discourse on ecological philosophy, similarly to our exclusion in other academic spaces. There are several branches of ecological feminism or ecofeminism, each with its own specific theories, but the overall message remains the same: Ecofeminism recognizes the connections between the domination of nature and the domination of women. Varying cultures have perceived women as being more intimately connected with nature in comparison to men. As it is "considered as the source and guiding force of creation," nature is personified as a woman through the given name "Mother Nature" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Additionally, female body parables including the synchronization of bleeding with moon cycles and giving birth could also be explored as uniting forces between women and nature (Spretnak, 1997, p. 429). While these perceived connections can empower women to lead the charge in environmental movements, men have often "devalued women as part of the natural realm," leading to our oppression alongside nonhuman nature (Spretnak, 1997, p. 428). It is also important to avoid an essentialist view of women's closeness to nature. Women can also participate in exploiting the environment and sustaining the patriarchy. Engaging with

ecofeminist philosophy has allowed me to better understand my gender identity and experiences in relation to anthropocentrism.

A major concern I had when beginning this immersion in ecological philosophy was balancing my affinity for humanization with the need to deconstruct anthropocentrism. Dehumanization through the exploitation, oppression, violence, and unjust treatment of peoples by oppressors is a long-standing, problematic characteristic of our world (Freire, 1968/2000, p. 44). This process regularly occurs in schools, stripping students *and* teachers of their humanity (Gallegos, 2024). Since I became a teacher, liberatory humanizing pedagogy has been important to me. So, at times, my developing ecological perspective felt as if I was being misanthropic and at risk of dehumanizing my students. Then, it occurred to me that *humanizing education* allows students to become more "fully human" (Freire, 1968/2000). Thus, leaving me to question what it means to actually *be human*.

Many anthropocentric arguments suggest that humans are superior to nonhumans due to our capacity to consciously change the environment in which we live (Warren, 1990). Yet, I believe that this consciousness does not make us inherently superior. If anything, this capacity should allow us to understand the value of nonhuman species as our relatives rather than as existing solely for our utility. Humans *are* different from other nonhuman species, but we are all ultimately members of an ecological community (Warren, 1990, p. 9). We are a distinct species in the continuous natural world (Plumwood, 1997), but this does not mean we should consider ourselves separate from or superior to other species. From this perspective, humanization, or becoming more "fully human," means understanding our role as *part of* our ecological communities. To be human is to be a member of the natural world. Understanding this could allow us to free ourselves from our oppressive nature over our nonhuman community members.

As I engaged with these ecological philosophies, I struggled to reconcile their seemingly rigid nature. These hard divisions, “while good for developing sharper theories, have a dulling effect on developing ecological movements” (Light, 1998, pp. 4-5). Despite these ecological philosophies’ differences, I find that all branches offer valuable perspectives on how to address our environmental crisis and human domination over nonhuman life. Like Mackie (1998), my own understanding of the world has been shaped by the integration of these ecological philosophies. I find space in a combination of all these ecophilosophies, where I recognize the mutual existence of the oppression of the planet and people based on race, gender, sexuality, disability, class, religion, and age (Taylor, 1997; Thomas, 2022; Smith, 1997; Warren, 1990/1997). What remains is to envision myself as an ecocentric educator who works to confront the vast and oppressive system of anthropocentrism.

Chapter Three: The Possibilities of an Ecocentric Education

Schools, despite their tendencies to reproduce problematic paradigms, can potentially serve as sites of transformation and possibility that deconstruct these perpetuated values. With a better understanding of why anthropocentrism is such a pervasive problem and so difficult to address, I have sought to discover ways that I can share my passion for facing this problem with my students. With a better understanding of myself, my humanness, and my relations to the world, I hope to continue applying ecocentric approaches in my classroom. Throughout this chapter, I detail my continued efforts to shift paradigms, seek discomfort to promote personal growth, and find hope in ecocentric education.

Shifting Paradigms

> *How can we begin to move toward ecological and cultural sustainability if we cannot even imagine what the path feels like?* – Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass* (p. 6)

Ever since identifying anthropocentrism as a problem contributing to our ecological crisis, I have wanted to make my students aware of it. If they understand western culture's role in the destruction of our world, I am hopeful that they will live more ecocentric lives. However, the barriers previously discussed have often made this passion feel impossible. It would be easier to accept a fatalistic approach and continue living life as if our world is not crumbling around us, but I cannot do that. I chose to be a teacher because I have an earnest desire to help save the world. I am here to make a difference, not to reduce my students to empty vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge. I deserve to fulfill my passion, my students deserve a transformative education, and the world needs people who care. Moving the needle does not happen overnight, and I recognize that I must work within the confines of this enormous, complex system that

keeps us in an omnicidal state. Yet, I believe there are pockets where I can start to break down the system's walls. I must start somewhere, and that somewhere begins with *me*.

I have lived my entire life as a participant in western culture. The way I have existed in this world thus far perpetuates western perspectives and practices, including anthropocentrism. To become a more ecocentric educator, I felt that I had to undergo a paradigm shift. Shifting paradigms requires "a new vision of reality, a fundamental change in our thoughts, perceptions, and values" (Capra, 1996, p. 16). Ultimately, a transformed mind is essential to deconstructing anthropocentrism (Capra, 1982/1996; Houser, 2024; Nhất Hạnh, 2008; Quinn, 1996; Smith, 2021). Given the normalization of anthropocentrism in western culture, this is easier said than done. Naming and accepting that anthropocentrism is a problem is a start, but it will not be enough. Getting outside more often, picking up trash, or refraining from killing an insect, although important, are also not sufficient for the enormous crisis we are experiencing. Dedication to unlearning anthropocentric tendencies and imagining new ways of knowing and being is needed.

Ecocentric worldviews have existed throughout history and continue today. Yet, in western culture's efforts to maintain power, we have suppressed people who have challenged the western anthropocentric worldview. One major example is through the process of ecocolonialism, which has dismissed Indigenous knowledge (Hernandez, 2022). I first came into relationship with Indigenous ways of knowing through Potawatomi botanist and author Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013). It was a required reading for my first graduate class, and it greatly challenged my perception of my relationships with nonhuman beings. Indigenous ways of knowing counter the mechanistic, reductionist nature of western culture and science by advocating for a relational and holistic view of the world (Duarte et al., 2019;

Hernandez, 2022; Kimmerer, 2003/2013; Nxumalo et al., 2022). Indigenous scholar Enrique Salmón describes Indigenous perceptions of the human-nature relationship through *kincentric ecology*, where the environment is considered kin or relative (Hernandez, 2022; Salmón, 2000). He describes the conception of *kincentric ecology* through traditional Rarámuri terms:

> The Rarámuri view themselves as an integral part of the life and place within which they live. There is among the Rarámuri a concept called *iwígara*, which encompasses many ideas and ways of thinking unique to the place with which the Rarámuri live. Rituals and ceremonies, the language, and therefore, Rarámuri thought are influenced by the lands, animals, and winds with which they live. *Iwígara* is the total interconnectedness and integration of all life in the Sierra Madres, physical and spiritual. To say *iwígara* to a Rarámuri calls on that person to realize life in all its forms (Salmón, 2000, p. 1328).

Although *kincentric ecology* could be a term that broadly encompasses Indigenous understandings of the human-nature relationship, it is important to note that Indigenous Peoples are not a monolithic group, and Enrique Salmón's explanation is just one example that demonstrates this relationship. Forced displacement and ecocolonialism have also resulted in the loss of strong relationships between many Indigenous Peoples and their ancestral lands (Hernandez, 2022).

Indigenous paradigms are often dismissed in environmentalist fields—and especially in environmental education (Cavazos, 2023; Hernandez, 2022; Ho, 2022; Houser et al., In Review; Thomas, 2022). When Indigenous knowledge is not suppressed, it has been extracted and exploited by white academics (Simpson, 2004). Some academics appropriate Indigenous culture or use Indigenous Peoples as "inspiration symbols" to further their claims in support of the environmental movement (Smith, 1997, pp. 30-31). It is important for me and others looking to

shift paradigms to avoid extraction or using Indigenous Peoples as "experts" for a more ecocentric life. Instead, we can learn what is possible from them and create new pathways for our relations to the world. It is also important to note that "Indigenous knowledge is not ethically responsible for repairing the damage inflicted on environments by capitalism, greed-based policies of exploitation, and dumb decisions made by generations of government/state policies" (Smith, 2021, p. 194). We all reside on Mother Earth, and we all have a responsibility to care for her.

Reciprocity is an integral part of many Indigenous ways of knowing and being (Kimmerer, 2013/2024; Smith, 2021). In the natural world, all things exchange matter and energy. We receive food from the land, and in turn, we can give back to it in some way. However, western culture's prioritization of individualism and competition has resulted in a long history of acquisitiveness. I believe we should all look to create reciprocal relationships with the land, but I also believe reciprocity can and should take place between myself and Indigenous knowledge. Rather than exploiting Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies for my own benefit, I have tried to open myself to a mutual exchange. As I have continued to come into relationship with this knowledge, I recognize that it is my *responsibility* to promote it. This is not a single transaction but rather a lifetime commitment to learning and building meaningful, respectful *relationships* with Indigenous Peoples who hold this knowledge. I also believe I must advocate for the sovereignty of Indigenous nations and the protection of Indigenous lands, which are the site for most ecological destruction in the United States (Smith, 1997, p. 23; Wildcat, 2013).

Indigenous cultures are not the only ecocentric cultures in the world; there are others that are often suppressed as a result of western culture's domination. Thích Nhất Hạnh, Buddhist

monk and founder of the Plum Village Tradition, conceived the Engaged Buddhism movement. This perspective promotes mindfulness practices and living a "lifestyle that is free from destructiveness" (Nhất Hạnh, 2008, p. 39). Cultivating a deep awareness of the interconnectedness between mind and body as well as humans and nature counters the dualistic narratives perpetuated in western culture. Other paradigms that challenge anthropocentrism include Taoism/Daoism in China, Confucianism in East Asia, Buen Vivir in South America, and Shintoism in Japan[10] (Haupt, 2021; Ho, 2022). Similar to Indigenous ways of knowing, these worldviews should not be extracted for superficial use or appropriation.

Audre Lorde (2017) famously wrote, "*For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (p. 19). She wrote this in response to the exclusion of Black, lesbian, poor, and "Third World" women from input on feminist theory, but I believe that this thinking can and should be extended to all systems of oppression, including anthropocentrism. Instead of using the "master's tools," we should *amplify* and *uplift* the voices of people who belong to ecocentric cultures that have been oppressed by western culture.

Although personal shifts are needed, a singular person changing their worldview will not suffice; change on a systemic level is necessary to preserve our planet and future. We are in desperate need of a "collective awakening" or a shift in collective consciousness (Nhất Hạnh, 2008, p. 2). Education provides the possibility of such change. Yet, I want to be clear that I have no intentions of forcing my students to conform to my beliefs. Such a practice is autocratic and indoctrinating—it is counterproductive to growth, which reinforces harmful practices that I want to prevent in my teaching. Barriers such as time, standardization, and potential political pushback

[10] This is not an exhaustive list. There are many other cultures and groups across Earth that have resisted and continue to resist anthropocentric tendencies.

do exist. However, I think I must ultimately act as a "gatekeeper" for curriculum and instruction in my classroom and have the responsibility for making crucial decisions about what should be included (Thornton, 1991). At this time and in my context, doing what I can to work on myself and make space for underrepresented ecocentric paradigms in my classroom is a start to becoming a more ecocentric educator.

Seeking Discomfort

Be not afraid of discomfort. If you can't put yourself in a situation where you are uncomfortable, then you will never grow. You will never change. You'll never learn. — Jason Reynolds

Shifting paradigms and working toward becoming a more ecocentric educator has required a complete unraveling of my world—how I understand it, navigate it, and perceive my place in it. Anthropocentrism has served as a justification for western culture's actions, and I am no exception. I have lived my life entrenched in an anthropocentric lifestyle, mostly because of its normalization. The process of becoming an ecocentric educator has required me to reconcile with my identity, positionality, and place in this world. It continues to require me to move away from the comfort of complacency that I have embraced for so long.

As a white, heterosexual, middle-class woman, I recognize that I have many privileges. These aspects of my identity have shaped the way I experience the world and are significant reasons why I have lived most of my life without questioning anthropocentrism. The idea that humans—specifically white humans—are superior to everything else in the world has been normalized in various ways throughout my life. I have been taught that my way of living and being is "morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal" (McIntosh, 1989, p. 1) even though there is no "right" way to think or live (Adichie, 2009; Kimmerer, 2013; Quinn, 1992). Dismissing, defending, or denying my privileges can result in further harm to people and the

planet (Thomas, 2022, p. 61), and it could prevent me from achieving physical, mental, and spiritual growth that connects me more deeply to the world. Thus, the process of becoming an ecocentric educator can require me to reconcile with my identity, which can be an uncomfortable process.

Navigating the discomfort that arises has required me to constantly engage in critical self-reflection. Paulo Freire (1968/2000) argues "authentic reflection considers neither abstract man nor the world without people, but people in their relations with the world" (p. 81). Authentic reflection is an inherently human process, making participation in it *humanizing*. By critically examining my beliefs and privileges, I believe I can become more *human* and better understand myself in relation to the world.

Authentic reflection, when paired with action, can result in *praxis*, and praxis can pave the way for liberating or humanizing education (Freire, 1968/2000, p. 79). Liberating or humanizing education, also referred to as problem-posing education, opposes education as the practice of domination. When understanding ourselves as humans *in relation* to the Earth, humanizing education can be part of ecocentric teaching. Becoming an ecocentric educator will also involve seeking discomfort in my classroom for both myself and my students.

Most of the social studies courses in my school are taught using an expert-novice hierarchical (or "banking") concept or model of education. Teachers make "deposits" where students passively receive and memorize information. This concept is oppressive and based on a mechanized view of consciousness and the world (Freire, 1968/2000, p. 77). This is further normalized by my colleagues who teach in the competitive and individualistic climate of Advanced Placement. Ecocentric education, on the other hand, can be both humanizing and liberating as we rethink who the "teachers" and the students are and how all of us come into

relationship with knowledge. I have and will continue to make instructional and curricular decisions that complicate institutional norms, which will result in discomfort.

Although not all my students identify with western culture, virtually all of them have been trained in the "grammar of schooling" and anthropocentric ways of thinking for most of their lives (Gruenewald, 2007). Just as it has been difficult for me to shift my worldview and reconcile with my identity, my students will likely undergo an uncomfortable transformation as well. Many educators argue that the classroom should be a safe space. I also have this goal to some extent. While I agree that students should experience safety (i.e., freedom from discrimination or harm) in their classrooms, I want to further complicate this. There must be a *balance* of safety in the classroom that protects students while simultaneously encouraging cognitive dissonance (Houser, 1996). A classroom with no dissonance is a classroom with no growth. On the other hand, a classroom without emotional safety for students can be detrimental. bell hooks (1994) describes how she tackles this discomfort in her classroom, noting that "there can be, and usually is, some degree of pain involved in giving up old ways of thinking and knowing and learning new approaches. I respect that pain. And I include recognition of it now when I teach, that is to say, I teach about shifting paradigms and the discomfort it can cause" (p. 43). It seems paradoxical, but safety and dissonance are not mutually exclusive and can work together to provide a transformative educational space. Guiding students through discomfort by helping them understand its value can create a sense of openness that challenges their thinking, which is integral to ecocentric education.

Making space for ecological education can create institutional anxiety (Pedersen, 2021). Climate change is often considered a "controversial" topic in my conservative state. I am at risk for political and social pushback from my students, peers, parents, administrators, and public

officials (Cavazos, 2023). Yet, I find it imperative that I work to navigate this anxiety and address issues of power, especially anthropocentrism, in my classroom. Schools are not neutral sites, and teachers are not neutral either (Giroux, 1985; Gruenewald, 2007). If we stand in silence in the face of oppression, we teach our students to do the same. Since this is the case, I must continue to work through institutional discomfort to envision my role as a "transformative intellectual" that creates opportunities for my students to be active, critical, and ecocentric citizens (Giroux, 1985).

Embers of Hope in Ecocentric Education

Every one of us can do something to protect and care for our planet. We have to live in such a way that a future will be possible for our children and our grandchildren. Our own life has to be our message. — Thích Nhất Hạnh

We each have a calling or purpose in life. Some cultures apply certain names to these callings. For example, in the western monastic tradition, *charism* can be used to describe a special God-given gift or power that connects a person spiritually (Haupt, 2021). As someone who does not follow any established religion, I have struggled with the concept of spirituality. However, I do believe that I have a calling in life—to be an ecocentric teacher, to teach in ways that result in the protection and care for our planet. For me, the process of becoming an ecocentric educator has been intrinsically spiritual. My immersion in ecological philosophies—particularly deep ecology—and acceptance of alternative paradigms has shown me that nature is sacred. To ignore the sacredness of nature is to ignore the worldviews that could help us meaningfully address our ecological crisis. In her first book, *Gathering Moss*, Robin Wall Kimmerer (2003) states, "In Indigenous ways of knowing, we say a thing cannot be understood until it is known by all four aspects of our being: mind, body, emotion, and spirit" (p. vii). Thích

Nhất Hạnh (2013) speaks to the sacredness of Earth in Buddhism in *Love Letter to the Earth* by revealing "What we call 'the divine,' is none other than the energy of awakening, of peace, of understanding, of love, which is to be found not only in every human being, but in every species on Earth" (p. 18). Understanding the interconnectedness of ourselves and our nonhuman relatives is vital to challenging the disembodiment engendered by western dualistic thought. However, it is crucial not to appropriate or exploit the spirituality of other cultures as many white environmentalists have and continue to do (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001; Smith, 1997).

I also find space in Parker Palmer's *The Courage to Teach* as I continue to undergo the spiritual transformation that is allowing me to become a more ecocentric educator. I first read Palmer's work in my undergraduate program. It was the semester before I started student teaching, and I never anticipated how much I would rely on his work. According to Palmer (1997/2017), we teach *who we are* (p. 1). Therefore, it is important that we understand our inner selves to become more confident and complete as teachers. Palmer believes that teaching itself is not just an intellectual or emotional process, but a spiritual one as well. He describes *spirituality* as "the diverse ways we answer the heart's longing to be connected with the largeness of life" (p. 5). I equate the feeling of being connected to the largeness of life with being connected to Earth and all our nonhuman relatives. Palmer also encourages educators to live an "undivided life" by "honoring our own commitment to the importance of teaching" and teaching "each day in ways that honor [our] own deepest values rather in ways that conform to the institutional norm" (p. 177). Confronting anthropocentrism is important to me. However, this value counters institutional norms of schooling that focus on the intellectual, leaving me to face many challenges as I embark on the journey to live an "undivided life" of ecocentric living and teaching.

Guided by ecological philosophies and non-western paradigms, I began to reimagine the possibilities of taking action in my classroom. I find embers of hope in two related pedagogical practices: *place-based education (PBE)* and *land education*. The concept of *place* is obscure to many of us. It may encompass different meanings, or it may be completely meaningless. Places influence and are shaped by human and nonhuman experiences. Yet, many of us do not recognize the power that places hold as western culture's mechanized, reductionistic perception of the universe prevails. We "experience place everywhere," yet "everywhere it recedes from consciousness as we become engrossed in our routines in space and time" (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 622). In perpetuating the dominant western culture, schools isolate both teachers and students from place. Ultimately, place-based education is a nonanthropocentric pedagogical approach that seeks to engage students with the perceptual, sociological, ideological, political, and ecological dimensions of a place through experiential learning (Gruenewald, 2007; Yemini et al., 2023).

Place-based education can be manifested in many ways. Though certain elements can be generalized, place-based education is contextual. It generally draws on local knowledge, history, culture, community, and issues, making it irreplicable across places. Other educators may begin drawing on elements of place-based education by moving students beyond the walls of the classroom into a different place, like a school courtyard, and teaching an unaltered, standardized lesson for the day. Perhaps, educators may also teach students *about* a particular place (Granit-Dganim, 2021, as cited in Yemini et al., 2023). While this is a feasible starting point and can be beneficial, these approaches are often superficial and can perpetuate anthropocentric assumptions. They can tend to romanticize nature or treat it as an "escape" from the seemingly separate human realm. Meaningful place-based education, however, encourages the creation of authentic relationships with the community—both human and nonhuman—through student-

centered learning. It opens space to address ecological *and* social/political/cultural issues simultaneously. Gruenewald (2007) notes this by calling for a *critical pedagogy of place* with the goals of *decolonization* and *reinhabitation*. The process of decolonization works to undo the damage and effects of colonialism and other forms of oppression while reinhabitation teaches "how to live well together in a place without doing damage to others, human and nonhuman" (p. 149).

It is important to note that not all place-based education practitioners focus on cultural responsiveness or a decolonial approach. I find that land or land-based education picks up where place-based education often falls short. Proponents of land education note place-based education's limitation in recognizing "how place in the US has been inexorably linked to the genocide of Indigenous peoples and continued settler colonialism" (Calderon, 2014, p. 25). Land education directly counters anthropocentrism by recognizing the land *as the teacher*. We must have knowledge of and create a relationship with our nonhuman relatives to confront climate change. Furthermore, this practice recognizes that all places are Indigenous, works to uncover the maintenance of settler colonialism, and encourages schools to build relationships with the land and Indigenous communities (Calderon, 2014). Land education is an important, Indigenized expansion of place-based education that counters anthropocentrism while working to deconstruct intertwined systems of oppression.

Both place-based education and land education are integral to envisioning and dreaming myself as a more ecocentric educator. While I am just beginning this process, there are several ways I have started to root myself in ecocentric teaching. The most consistent and notable way I have applied this in both courses is through language. We continually reinforce anthropocentrism in the language we use, so I often deconstruct this with my students in real-time. An example

would be our examination of the phrase "natural resources." This conversation alone opens the door for my students to understand the way western culture has viewed our nonhuman relatives as objects for human utility. Further, I am actively redefining what it means to be a "teacher." Social studies and most other subjects at my school are typically taught using an expert-novice hierarchical approach (Freire, 1968/2000). Yet, I emphasize to my students that teachers do not have to just be an authoritative adult in the classroom; they can be students or, more importantly, our nonhuman community members (Kimmerer, 2003/2013).

I must admit that I am just at the beginning stages of this journey, and in all honesty, the work will never truly end. It is an ongoing process. My tangible plans to become an ecocentric educator are not perfect—but truthfully, they never will be. One day, I envision my teaching drawing more extensively on ideas in place-based education, land education, or other ecocentric pedagogies. I see many possibilities, but I must remain realistic and recognize the limitations I face. A complete overturn of my curriculum and instruction would be impossible in my school. Still, I must remain hopeful that I can find those pockets of possibility. I can start creating more ecocentric lessons that are suitable for my class and students.

I have recently introduced "Sustainability Story Time" in my AP Human Geography class, where I share stories of people working to combat climate change and other environmental problems. Although such topics are often considered "controversial" in my state, I am safeguarded, to some extent, by the anthropocentric Course and Exam Description, which discusses sustainability throughout several units. I select children's books from non-western perspectives. Recent Sustainability Story Time books include *We are the Water Protectors* by Carole Lindstrom, *Berry* Song by Michaela Goade, and *Wangari's Trees of Peace* by Jeanette Winter. My students have responded well to them so far, giving me hope. In the future, I plan to

connect with local Indigenous nations to discuss sovereignty and Indigenous food systems. Additionally, I seek to meet with local community partners to envision a more ecocentric future for the land on which we reside. Eventually, I could include an entire unit or, perhaps, I could build up my political and social capital enough at my school to ask for an elective course that is not constrained by standards or testing. It is difficult to be patient in my endeavors given the gravity of our ecological crisis, but it is necessary to possibly move the needle with my students, school, and society.

While I do believe more technical approaches, such as daily lesson plans or a unit in my classroom, are helpful in addressing anthropocentrism, they are not enough. Self-reflection and individual growth are necessary, but it is impossible to ask a single teacher to disrupt hegemonic paradigms alone. I can, however, work to build *communities of congruence*. Communities of congruence are groups of people providing mutual reassurance toward a shared vision (Palmer, 1998/2007). The feeling of loneliness can become overwhelming, but recognizing that there are individuals, like my former classmate, advisor, and student teaching mentor, who are actively doing this work alongside me is comforting. I must maintain my relationships with them and others who support my growth. I can further build communities of congruence by encouraging others to challenge anthropocentrism, including colleagues and teacher candidates, or even family members and friends. Through communities of congruence, we can nurture and support one another in these often-demoralizing efforts.

To be an ecocentric educator is a *journey*, not a destination, that will require constant learning and growth. Despite the limits I face in an anthropocentric world, I find hope in the small steps I can take each day and in making space for the environment in an educational system that so often ignores it. There is a story told that my late leadership and student council

teacher used to share, which demonstrates my philosophy toward becoming an ecocentric educator. It is an adaptation from Loren C. Eiseley's 1969 essay "The Star Thrower," often referred to as "The Starfish Story," and goes like this:

> An old man was walking on the beach one morning after a storm. In the distance, he could see someone moving like a dancer. As he came closer, he saw that it was a young woman picking up starfish and gently throwing them into the ocean.
>
> "Young lady, why are you throwing starfish into the ocean?"
>
> "The sun is up, and the tide is going out, and if I do not throw them in, they will die," she said.
>
> "But young lady, do you not realize that there are many miles of beach and thousands of starfish? You cannot possibly make a difference."
>
> The young woman listened politely, then bent down, picked up another starfish, and threw it into the sea.
>
> "It made a difference for that one," she smiled.

When I feel guilty for not doing enough, I can use this to remind myself that small steps *do* make a difference. I must stay on this journey; otherwise, I will become at risk for perpetuating the anthropocentrism and other problematic paradigms. Empowering myself to do this work is important. If I do not give myself grace, the work will never be done, and this work is important and necessary for a more sustainable future. I have hope in what I can accomplish, but my metamorphosis of becoming an ecocentric educator is just in its beginning stages, and I have a long way to go.

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