

**The Storyteller Who Ate the World:
Interview with Layla AbdelRahim**

conducted by Bellamy Fitzpatrick for *Backwoods* journal

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In this interview, Layla AbdelRahim expands on the analysis of the predatory and parasitic foundation of civilized economies. She explains how narratives, whether fictional or scientific, encode templates for socio-economic praxis and clarifies the concept of rewilding that she develops in her books *Children's Literature, Domestication, and Social Foundation* (Routledge 2015; 2018) and *Wild Children – Domesticated Dreams: Civilization and the Birth of Education* (Fernwood 2013).

Bellamy Fitzpatrick Question 1. *One of the main themes of your writing is that the stories we tell ourselves, and perhaps more importantly our children, are of the highest importance, that they shape the ways we think and view the world on levels we don't even notice because they are so normalized to us. Can you talk a bit about how you became interested in this topic with your radical analysis, and then further on how you see civilized stories as crucially different from indigenous ones?*

Layla AbdelRahim Answer 1. Storytelling in general, and especially recorded stories, provide an efficient mechanism for the transmission of cultural choices. After all, even in oral traditions, stories have proven to be effective in recording past experiences, which they transmit along with warnings, instructions, and prohibitions. Thus, stories can serve as an ethnographic or historical record and concomitantly influence our actions.

I became aware of the insidious power of stories when I was working in journalism in the late 1980s. Everyone had their own story to tell: the rebels leading wars in Africa had their story, the presidents and economy ministers had theirs, while the neo-colonial state representatives provided the metanarrative that fit everyone into one camp or another. After all, it was these foreign representatives who decided how much “aid” was going to be given and to whom, whether the IMF was going to interfere and devalue the national currency, or whether military invasion was going to take place. I soon noticed how my pieces could be framed within the political narrative a newspaper was adhering to and my contributions could end up being inscribed into that narrative regardless of the truth or facts and regardless of what I was saying. Most important, there were always serious economic, political, and existential repercussions to the story one chose. This was one of the reasons I ended up moving away from journalism to anthropology and comparative literature. I wanted to understand the Truth behind or beyond the Story.

However, it soon became clear that the same forces were at play in scientific production. After I received my Masters in Social Sciences from Stockholm University, I got hired as an anthropologist by the Swedish Board for Health and Social Work (the main ministry of Sweden called *Socialstyrelsen*; which literally means: “the government of the social”) to study the encounter between the centralized Swedish medical system and Somali immigrants. At the end of the year, I began to write my report while still in Sweden but applying for funding for another project. Things didn’t work out and, less than two years later, I decided to return to Russia. When I picked up the report to finish it in Russia, now that I had no funding and no intention of going back to Sweden, I noticed how different my perspective was on subtle yet important points in that encounter. I then saw clearly that funding was domestication *par excellence* and that the purpose of education was to prepare people to take their place in its hierarchy, heed its perspective, and desire to satisfy its needs for a few pennies in return. In short, it dressed us to stick to the Narrative.

These are some of the experiences that prompted me to re-examine the foundation of knowledge and its manifestation through both narratives and praxis. My subsequent research confirmed the intricate nexus where anthropology, philology, and economics meet and prompted me to redefine how we understand literature and culture. Basically, I arrived at the conclusion that stories – whether fictional or scientific – reflect how a group chooses to understand and depict itself. Yet deeper than that, it is the premises at the heart of the stories that the narratives propagate and thereby reproduce the cultural choices that had been made in the past. The most fundamental choices any group of living beings can make necessarily pertain to the economy of subsistence (linked to the socio-environmental culture), reproduction of bodies, and the reproduction of the choices themselves.

So, what do I mean by cultural choices? Living organisms devise life strategies, namely, (1) where to obtain the energy to sustain their movement, reproduction, subsistence, and emotional nourishment; and (2) where and to whom to provide the same services. Hence, cultural choices are rooted in subsistence economy and socio-environmental culture. For life to continue on earth, these systems *must* be sustainable and, if we study the history of life on earth, we see that, indeed, they have been sustainable throughout the history of wilderness –3.5 billion years – while the Anthropocene has proven to be hazardous for life – after a mere 11 thousand years, *Homo not-so-sapiens* has already [ravaged](#) and [consumed](#) over [80% of wilderness](#) (Potapov et al., 2017) and shows no signs of slowing down.

However, the metanarrative of civilization flips these facts and presents a skewed, if not false, picture of the nature of life. And, as my book on children’s literature shows, even the stories that try to challenge this narrative, inadvertently fail, because they continue to

operate from the same premises. They actually end up reproducing the same false narrative.

Therefore, if we want to halt the apocalypse and allow life on Earth to continue, it is not enough to simply change the stories we tell. It is imperative that we address the premises about who we are and who we can evolve to be. Equally important, we have to demolish the institutions that ensure the self-propagation of this predatory culture. Unfortunately, all we have is the very same technology that, in the first place, has been responsible for reproducing violence and predation: human language and symbolic culture. The challenge is to move beyond these technologies, beyond the stories and language. We have to go to the root of our anthropology and the physical institutions that work in tandem to ensure the smooth operation of civilization.

As with regards to Indigenous stories, while I discuss the premises of wilderness at length in my books, I would like to point out that it is dangerous to essentialize and idealize the Indigenous story-telling tradition. I see people either doing that, or deprecating it, particularly in the White groups that embrace hunter-gatherer cultures. First, blind imitation is meaningless, if not harmful. Second, the human First Nations on this continent had also developed systems of hunting and sometimes this led to civilization, e.g. Maya, Inca, Aztec, among others.

Furthermore, I have come to view as problematic the term “indigenous” to refer exclusively to First Nations people, because this term obscures the nomadic origins of *all* humans and veils the fact that all humans and nonhumans are migrants. We all, including the First Nations, at some point, have come from somewhere else and we should all feel indigenous to Earth. In any case, the terms we use to refer to earlier human inhabitants are settler colonial names. But, at least, “First Nations” captures more aptly the fact that these were the humans who came to the continent before the present settlers, and it allows for the fact that other nonhumans have been here before the First Nations themselves. This leaves us with the question: whose seniority should we honour then? It is here where wild and First Nations stories can teach us what it means to be indigenous, that being indigenous is shedding our human hubris and shifting back into the animals that we have always been. For, non-domesticated stories do not have a grammar for murder. Their meaning is derived in the presence of the story-teller, which bonds the community but never in a deterministic and permanent manner. Most important, they are not anthropocentric and the community is defined as multi-species. Humans and nonhumans in these stories interchange experience, consciousness, and shape. They tell of a deep kinship between us and the rest of life. The final question is: what are we going to do about this kinship?

BF Q2. *Central to your critique of civilization is the concept of domestication, a word with many valences. Both anarchists and non-anarchists have asserted that domestication is intimately tied to the origins of civilization - and hence our present crises - but precisely what constitutes domestication (and therefore what it would mean to try to stop doing it or undo it) is not so easy to say. There are many significantly different definitions of this word on offer from academics in various fields who have studied it, and I have one here that is typical: "Domestication is a sustained, multigenerational, mutualistic relationship in which one organism assumes a significant degree of influence over the reproduction and care of another organism in order to secure a more predictable supply of a resource of interest, and through which the partner organism gains advantage over those individuals who remain outside this relationship, thereby increasing benefiting and often increasing the fitness of both the domesticator and the target domesticate." Now, that probably captures most people's conception of domestication roughly, but I am guessing you, like me, seriously disagree with this definition on multiple levels. Can you talk about your definition and why you think domestication is important to understanding our current crisis?*

LAR A2. Indeed, I strongly disagree with the typical definition of domestication, for it describes the relationship from the human perspective. It is a narcissistic description, in which the one who domesticates imposes a definition on the dominated and this definition is contingent solely on the value the domesticator sees for himself with total disregard for the well-being of others. If the human domesticator sees little or no value in the "resource", this spells death for the "pest". If the slave becomes too costly, the slave is disposed of. Referring to human civilization as benign and referring to domestication, its main institution, as "mutualistic" assumes that rape, enslavement, and slaughter are good for others and that the victims themselves want it. This definition ignores the suffering of the victim and claims that the signs of pain are instead signs of joy. In his autobiography, titled *Narrative of a Slave Written by Himself*, Frederick Douglass describes his incredulity at the White liberals' – probably deliberate – ignorance, their deafness to the deep pain expressed in Black people's song: "I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake. Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears" (Douglass, 1997:30).

The same is true of all nonhuman people. They suffer, and they fight to the last breath to protect their children and to be wild and free. Even though horses were domesticated over 5 thousand years ago, still to this day, every foal needs to be "broken". Breaking someone is not mutualistic. It is sadistic.

In a state of anarchy or wilderness parties enter into mutualistic relationships out of free will, because each of them sees that the relationship will bring them happiness and health. When bees engage in the intimacy of plant procreation, none of the parties suffers. On the contrary, not only both of them thrive, but whole communities of life around them do as well. The same is true of the disseminators of seeds, such as primates and mice. When wild disseminators engage with plants, they do not kill or harm the plants or other members of the ecosystem. They engage in a mutualistic economy where everyone in their diverse community flourishes. This is also true of another symbiotic relationship, the commensalistic, where one party benefits but the other remains unaffected.

Of course, the situation is different with the other two symbiotic relationships, the parasitic and amensalistic which exist in the wild. However, these systems are in the minority and if the ecosystem is healthy, it keeps these economies under control, particularly the parasitic ones. For, if a parasitic system takes over, the result can be devastating for the whole region. This is what human civilization has done; it has become an epidemic, only on a much larger, global scale.

To go back to the beginning of your question, regarding the origins of civilization and domestication, I see them both as the result of an unviable economic choice that some humans had adopted at a certain point in history, prior to the emergence of domestication, namely that of predation. As I discuss in my work, and will address in-depth in my forthcoming book, because hunting is too expensive (i.e. it is unviable), domestication is a logical response to the deficit in that system; and civilization, with all its horror, desertification, and extinctions, is the material manifestation of that choice. Therefore, if we sincerely want to get out of this mess – and we *must*, at least for the sake of the nonhuman victims of civilization, who have *not* signed up for this ride – we have to address the roots of the problem – predation – and extinguish the cancer from there.

BF Q3. *First, as a persnickety side note, I actually will push back on the point comparing parasites and civilization, as parasites are an important part of the biosphere. It is estimated that fully half of all organisms are parasites, and they act to keep populations in balance with one another, since as a population of creatures increases, it becomes more vulnerable to its parasites and vice-versa - as the parasites increase, they bring down their host populations' numbers and then decrease in numbers themselves, in a perpetual cycle. So the parasite, as harmful and unpleasant as it is to the individual host, is still healthy in its relations to its ecosystem: it takes and gives in balance. Civilization is not like that, though, since civilized humans consume whole ecosystems to increase the numbers of themselves, their domesticates, and their machines, and then just move on and expand when an area is depleted. So, I would say civilized humans' relationships to each other are parasitic, whereas our relationships to other creatures are better*

described, as you said later, as cancerous, as a cancer will keep taking from its host and expanding until it kills the host and thus itself.

LAR A3. In my Routledge book on children's literature, I discuss in-depth the different symbiotic systems and their effect on the environment. To summarize and reiterate my point above: a parasitic relationship is when one party benefits from the association, but the other one is *harmed*. This is textbook definition. If there is no harm to the second party, it is a commensalistic relationship. In a healthy system, parasitic relationships are either eradicated or kept under control and prevented from growing or spreading. Otherwise, the parasite will kill the host. But unlike cancer, who dies with the demise it brings upon the host, the parasite is contagious and spreads to other hosts.

Human predation and parasitism are different from other species, for they have come to constitute a perilous epidemic that has gone out of hand. And yet, in spite of the evidence of the global extent of the anthropogenic destruction of life systems on our planet, people continue to abide by the narrative that insists on false analogies, such as: "look there are parasites who do well; see, lions eat zebras; you cannot tell me I should be different". But we are not *Giardia liambliia*, nor are we lions. *Giardia liambliia* measures 10-15 μm in length and, so far, has not taken over the world or threatened with the annihilation of life on Earth. Nor have the lions, who like other predators, have always kept their numbers low, slept long hours, and ate a little sporadically. We are apes. And as such, even if we have made up a story that we are *liambliia* who need to mindlessly imitate lions, the evidence shows that, no matter how hard we try to pretend, this is not so. Mental illness and the extreme violence of civilized societies (rape, poverty, war, etc.) are only some of the manifestations of the problems associated with such pretense.

BF Q4. *Second, regarding domestication, I agree wholeheartedly that how a culture eats - and even more fundamentally, how it views the other creatures it depends upon - is the core of that culture and thus the core of our crisis. One of the things we are trying to do in Backwoods is arrive at a more precise understanding of where 'tending the wild' ends and agriculture begins - it is relatively easy to point at certain clear examples of one or the other, but there is a lot of gray area that is relatively harder to parse. How do you distinguish domestication from co-evolution and symbiosis? Influencing the growth and evolutionary trajectory of other species seems impossible to avoid, since even by foraging we are shaping other creatures - an act as simple as selecting the most enticing fruits of a tree means encouraging the spread of some seeds and not others, meaning the genetic characteristics most desired by the frugivore are encouraged while less desirable traits are suppressed. More intentionally, one might deliberately plant the seeds of exceptionally delicious fruits, placing them in prime locations. Moving a bit further along, one might then do some occasional light cutting of plants surrounding this fresh planting in order to offer it more light and then mulch the soil surrounding it with the*

plant cuttings, and so forth. Imagining this spectrum continuing, where does 'tending the wild' end and domestication begin? It seems to me, at least prima facie, that we have something like the ancient Sorites Problem in philosophy - the fact that there are infinitesimal edge cases makes the boundary hard, if not impossible, to precisely define. Moving to the nonhuman world, various ant species, for instance, rear aphids and scale insects like cattle and tend to fungal gardens upon which they even practice a kind of pest control with the secretions of symbiotic bacteria that live on the ants' exoskeletons. These fungi exist nowhere outside of ant colonies, and the ants are totally dependent on the fungi for survival - a similar phenomenon occurs with certain termites and fungi. Do these interspecies nonhuman interactions constitute domestication? Finally, in light of all of these philosophical problems, what do you think are the most ontologically and ethically salient features of domestication?

LAR A4. First, evolution simply means change through adaptation. Co-evolution is change through co-adaption, i.e. when both parties change and adapt to each other. All life continues to change and adapt, including under civilized and domesticated conditions. Serfs in Europe or kidnapped Africans during the slave trade, for example, all had to adapt to the system of domestication of the time, while working to resist and demolish it. Had they not adapted and had they not resisted most of us would not be here today.

Second, there are viable evolutionary choices and there are unviable ones. In wilderness, species and groups within species cooperate to make the world viable. Domestication is an unviable cultural choice. It is a system where one group imposes, often by means of violence, its will and interests on others with disregard to the others' well-being. We have evolved under these pressures. The same with the other domesticated people, like cows, horses, wheat, among others. We have destroyed the economic relationships with others they had in wilderness and instead we have, and continue to, murder and exterminate other species. The fact that they refuse to die and instead choose to continue to survive in the horrendous conditions, which our perceived needs and civilization impose on them, should not be taken to blame the victim and say they chose it themselves. And it is wrong to bring in the "look the ants do it too" rhetoric when the principles of what the ants do are the complete opposite of what the civilized humans do. The ants and the fungi enjoy an intimate relationship that does not eradicate whole systems allowing them to obtain full possession of the land they are on. These ants do not threaten anyone. On the contrary, their relationship is an important link in the viability of the biosystem.

A more accurate analogy between civilized humans, fungi, and ants would be the parasitic fungus *Ophiocordyceps unilateralis*, who attacks the brains of the ants and forces them to sacrifice themselves for the short-lived benefit of the parasite. But of course, the Narrative discourages us from using this analogy, because the principles of the unviable economic choices that the brain-controlled zombie ants are forced to make

on behalf of the master of their minds are the same that prompt the brain-controlled zombie humans in domestication to continue to harm themselves and the world around them. Where the analogy fails to work, however, is the scale of the suffering and destruction that the humans and the fungi can cause.

In short, it is easy to distinguish human domestication from wild symbiotic relationships. The problem is that often those who have a higher standing in this system and who are not directly threatened with annihilation, by virtue of being categorized as “human” and having the right to access “resources”, tend to be resistant to the truth of the brutality and unviability of human parasitism. Hence, they tend to be more willing to go along with the false analogies of the Story of civilization. After all, it seems to be serving them adequately. And perhaps the most nefarious lie is that the Story implies that humans have reached the epitome of evolution and that we cannot change who we have become, that we cannot choose to cease to be predators, parasites, cancerous, and civilized. But that is the beauty of evolution: we continue to evolve and we can still make a different, wild and viable choice.

BF Q5. *Third, you advocate for veganism as a means to exit the Predatory culture. Many would say veganism is only possible through agriculture, as the diet generally involves consuming legumes and nuts as storable, primary protein sources, which would likely necessitate at least some significant management of land and the coordinated harvest, processing, and storage of these foods to last through the winter (depending on the local climate) or at least between yields. Many anarcho-primitivists, in contrast, view moderate hunting as a means to live relatively more lightly on the land, and/or as a way to avoid, or at least mitigate, the potential social problems (hoarding of wealth, weaponizing access to food, bureaucratization, etc.) that come from dependence on stored surplus. How would you respond to these arguments? I am especially curious on a personal note, as I actually stopped being vegan (after seven years of strictly keeping the diet) because I thought it was better to eat meat and live more immediately off of my land base, and it seemed impossible to keep vegan while doing that without managing relatively large areas of land to try to grow enough legumes and the like for myself.*

LAR A5. I advocate for wilderness. I do *not* advocate for agriculture. The fact that many equate rewilding of the civilized human primate to either adopting a hunting culture or a subsistence based on vegan agriculture is a good illustration of how the civilized narrative works in tandem with the institution of predation. It frames the problem and the solution in a narrow, self-serving binary of “either, or”: “Either you kill and eat wild animals or you participate in their extermination through agriculture; there is *no* other option”. But, refusing to participate in a predatory system does not mean that the only alternative is agriculture. In the first place, agriculture has been a response to the choice for predation. Both are intimately interlinked and both are unviable.

The fact that you have access to a land base and to killing the few remaining wild animals (more than 80% of wilderness has been eradicated by humans) indicates that you are not in the 80% of human population around the world with *no* access to either a land base, or to wild or domesticated animals. You cannot give this as an argument to the people in refugee camps around the world – to the displaced, who have to walk thousands of kilometers through the desert. The displacement of humans today has nothing to do with voluntary migration, and hunting is simply not an available solution for the millions of these refugees in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East.

In fact, hunting is what brought us here in the first place: it is too expensive and requires a classification of work specialization by gender. Have you tried hunting a buffalo when you were 7 or 8 or 9 months pregnant or having a newborn clinging to your side? No, you would have been required to stay behind and practice the domestication of plants in order to produce the surplus to sustain the hunter who was not at risk of being pregnant or otherwise physically disabled. Hunting is the root of hoarding, ableism, gender, and speciesism.

The problem, however, is that the many who are resistant to re-evaluation of civilized anthropology have never been in a refugee camp, not even as an observer. These are the people who own or control land and who have access to supplementary sources of energy. The surplus of resources they can access has to be produced by others. Again, in wilderness these are self-balancing economies; while in civilization the workers are forced to labour at great cost to themselves and the detriment of the eco-system. And, yet, the people who are intentionally ignorant of the suffering, the feeling of loss and deprivation their “prey” endure, keep pushing their narrative on everyone – a narrative that is based on the needs and experiences of a predatory minority and which keeps eclipsing the real problems and viable solutions. I advocate for the abolition of this anthropology and the culture that violates life on Earth. I advocate for humans to stop being the harbingers of death and instead reintegrate themselves into wild economies as disseminators, the bearers of life.

BF Q6. In reply to your answer to question four: *I agree with you that there is a clear and immense difference between the human practices of agriculture and animal husbandry on the one hand and the activities of the various insects and parasites we have been discussing on the other hand - but I want to parse out exactly what that difference is because I think the discussions amongst radicals who are critically analyzing domestication often end up with the term 'domestication' being poorly defined. Most critical definitions are based on force, domination, exploitation, and so forth, but it is quite plain that some interactions among nonhumans feature these elements: parasitoids often seize control of their hosts' minds, as you mentioned, and eusocial insect colonies*

involve violently enforced hierarchies and behavioral norms. So, to revisit the issue a final time - what are the key, specific elements that differentiate human domestication from these nonhuman behaviors? It seems to me that you are saying the distinguishing element is how these behaviors fit into the broader ecology, is that right? Ophiocordyceps is brutal to its prey, but it isn't ecologically harmful.

LAR A6. I agree with you that people often operate from a superficial, in fact domesticated, understanding of the term “domestication”. That is why I delve into these terms, “domestication”, “civilization”, “culture”, “wilderness”, and “rewilding”, in-depth in my work and dedicate a full subchapter to each term in the introduction to my book on *Children’s Literature*. Namely, I propose to approach these phenomena with a cross-species and cross-cultural analysis. This method has allowed me to look at the essence of the socio-economic relationships that emerge under the various conditions. These relationships manifest themselves in cultural production and the imprint they leave on the environment. By studying the nexus of the conditions under which they operate and the socio-economic systems they concomitantly re/produce, we can reveal their principles and essence. In short: I examine which socio-economic cultures lead to the health and happiness of its individuals and the bio-system and which do not. There are both qualitative and quantitative differences between human and nonhuman parasitism and it is from these various levels of comparison that I draw my conclusions. So, yes, I am approaching these terms from a broader ecological perspective, a perspective that threatens human supremacy. Probably thence the resistance on the part of those people who would like to improve the quality of their lives but have no desire to give up their own status as “predator”; some even proudly refer to humanity as the “ultimate predator”.

BF Q7. In reply to your answer to question five: *Certainly, I am not and was not advocating hunting-and-gathering as a solution for the global population (I have actually criticized some anarcho-primitivists on this front for not offering a practical praxis for most people), least of all those who are displaced - I find this to be a very odd counter-argument, though, given that those same people are obviously not able to do what you are advocating (vegan foraging in wild lands), either, since, as you said, very few people have access to such land and there is less and less wilderness all the time. Regardless, I do not think there is any ecologically sane and healthy solution that can be practically massified to seven billion human lives, since it is only industrial agriculture that allows for over seven billion humans to be living on this planet. So, I am not advocating a global, mass-solution blueprint, but I also think we need to put forth some sort of positive vision of ecologically-whole life if there is ever going to be a return to sanity (whether that happens after some sort of civilizational collapse or not) - as you say, we need to learn how to "reintegrate [our]selves into wild economies as disseminators, the bearers of life." I agree with all of my heart and mind. And so my specific question is whether and how veganism fits into that ideal, when, to me - both as a former staunch vegan who is*

now actively part of a subcultural effort to transition toward ecological harmony in everyday life and as a layperson who has listened to and read anthropology on indigenous people in my area (the Northeastern United States) - it is very difficult to see how it would be possible to live harmoniously as a vegan: that is, non-agriculturally, as in not clearing and maintaining significant areas of land for legumes and the like - at best, I can imagine some sort of legume and nut-tree polyculture, which could be relatively benign on a small scale, but still certainly horticultural, with sedentism and fairly closely managed land. Do you disagree? Perhaps you do, as I have heard lectures and discussions of yours where you have in passing mentioned vegan indigenous groups living in the Northeastern United States, which surprised me because I have never heard of such people. Who were they?

LAR A7. It appears that you are ascribing to me a position that is not mine. Nowhere in my published work or in my talks and interviews do I call for the unleashing of 7 billion – and growing – human population onto the last remnants (about 17%) of fragile wilderness, a wilderness that is occupied, defined, and encircled by civilization. I do *not* advocate this for vegan foraging *nor* for hunting. In fact, I have already said in previous interviews that it would be, not only unfair towards the nonhumans whom we have already dispossessed, it will continue the devastation of the very last bits of viable wilderness.

What I call for, instead, is a collaborative effort around the globe to addresses several levels of the system simultaneously. The most urgent problems are the epistemic and demographic, which are interrelated. To approach the anthropogenic environmental catastrophe, we have to rewild our anthropology, or self-knowledge, and we have to halt the growth of domesticated populations, both of nonhuman and human animals. And, no, I do *not* call for the genocide of either of these populations. Instead, I call for the rewilding of the spaces they currently occupy, that is rewilding the social and other economies so that nonhuman and human animals can reintegrate themselves into biodiverse and thus viable ecosystems. Fertility rates go up in domestication and go down and balance out in wild primates and other animals.

The following statements summarize what I usually get as “argument” against my critique of predation: 1) *yes*, most people around the world cannot afford to consume animal flesh in their diet; 2) *yes* there is a massive exodus of people from lands whose ecosystems have been destroyed by the industries that support civilization; 3) *yes*, I know, alas and alack, most of the starving are Brown and Black; 4) *however*, you cannot say that carnivory is wrong, *because* “we” cannot feed the population “out there” on veganism; 5) *therefore*, you must concede that I should continue my carnivorous sustenance, since it is available to me.

Regardless of whether this logic is expressed by supporters of agriculture or by critics of civilization, this is a *status quo* position that is pro hierarchical predation and pro civilization in its current manifestation as a White Supremacist, Humanist, capitalist, patriarchal system. This rationale is the cohesive fabric that informs all the shades of liberal, radical, and conservative ideologies, with the difference that the conservatives are more aware and honest about how civilization works, while the liberals come up with all sorts of self-serving, made-up stories, which Trump referred to as “Fake News”. What unites them is the agreement that this predatory order is not only natural, it is the best and thus must be maintained as the only order at all cost. Their main disagreement is with regards to who should preside at the table and who should constitute the resources, pests, and the “waste”. In fact, often, even those who cannot afford a carnivorous life-style aspire to a place at the table with the Ultimate Predator and thus continue to work towards sustaining a system that allows some to devour everyone else, even when they themselves are the primary losers.

If, we accept statements 1, 2, and 3 as true; if we agree that civilization is the cause of ecocide and tremendous suffering; and if we have empathy for the suffering of our fellow earthlings, then we need to examine what brought about civilization and understand our own place in its hierarchy. This is precisely why I wrote *Children’s Literature, Domestication, and Social Foundation*.

As for your personal dissatisfaction with the agricultural diet, I am on board with you. However, I brought up the refugees in response to your using yourself as an example to illustrate the necessity of the carnivorous diet for you. You explain above that you do not advocate your lifestyle as a solution for the “global population”, because, fundamentally, you understand that your solution is globally unsustainable. I would add that it is not even regionally sustainable and it is definitely not available to the majority of the inhabitants of the Pacific Northwest, because those who are employed spend their time working for the system, thus solely relying on farming, while those who are unemployed cannot afford to use the infrastructure that is both unsustainable and intentionally designed to keep them stuck in the squalor of their neighbourhoods with no access to wild spaces.

Furthermore, there is the fact that the disaster “there” – the places global refugees flee – is part of the food chain that supplies the “here” (gas, oil, “market”, etc.). There is also the fact that if all of the present-day “migrants” – the millions displaced by the arms and bombs – or even if only the inner-city dwellers of the American cities descended upon your bit of land, it would be ravaged before you could blink. Therefore, it is important to recognize that your diet, whether it comes from domesticated sources or from the 17% of the remaining wilderness, depends not only on the wars outside of your country, but it also requires the wall – be it physical, legal, or symbolic; be it Clinton’s, Obama’s, or Trump’s; be it the fence that designates private property and *No Trespassing*; this wall must be protected by armed guards and backed by an “effective” prison system and

detention centers. There must be a wall that keeps out those who bear the brunt of civilization's collapse while letting in the resources taken from their lands. All of this needs an epistemic system that delivers a story to assuage the ensuing cognitive dissonance and make both the predator feel good about himself while causing pain to others and the prey accept this order and pain as natural and ineluctable.

These threads, such as the problems of immigration, education, economy, private property, diet, among others, must be examined together as they constitute important factors in the development of civilized socio-economic paradigms. That is why my book on children's literature and narratives (Routledge 2015 and 2018) gives so much weight to this nexus and to examining the legitimating aspect of civilized epistemology, which has been constructed by the very same people responsible for genocides and ecocide, while my book on education, *Wild Children – Domesticated Dreams* (Fernwood 2013) explains how the pedagogical cultures in civilization train the civilized subjects to be apathetic precisely so that some can blithely consume the lives of others without understanding or responding to their pain.

In this interview we can touch on only some of the aspects of the violent foundation of our co/existence. But even here we can see that the only analysis that explains the ecological disaster, as well as the current political and economic events in the U.S. and the rest of the world, is my analysis of predation, because it considers all of these issues together and thus offers a way forward.

BF Q8. And some new territory: *A theme of your examination of stories is how they influence our ontology - that is, our view of what fundamentally exists and what the qualities of existence are. This issue is one of the deepest and most subtle, since the ideology of techno-industrial modern life is that we, the dominator culture, understand the world better than anyone ever has and that there is little that is mysterious or unclear about our everyday lives. Why do you think ontology is important, and what do you think is wrong with the modern, civilized view in this respect?*

LAR A8. Simply put, ontology is the study of being. Like any "study" or body of knowledge, the explanations for what exists and how it came about to exist, in civilization, works to support the hierarchy of things. This body of knowledge consists of religious explanations, philosophical musings, and scientific explorations that inadvertently share the departing premises from which the inquiries stem. That is why I pay so much attention to the underlying premises that inform our knowledge and praxes. I discovered that the main difference between these premises is not due to the epistemic discipline or tradition from which they operate; their differences stem from whether they presume the universe as existing for its own purpose or from the civilized desire to control and consume. So, it is not stories *per se* that influence ontology, rather, the

ontological explanations we devise influence how we experience, act, and narrate. Story-telling is merely the means for the cementing and transmission of these fundamental ontological explanations, which then our actions reify.

BF Q9. *You discuss in your work the importance of monotheism in shaping the Western worldview, even among self-described secular people. How do you see monotheism shaping our values and our conception of what exists in the world?*

LAR A9. To clarify, in my work, I discuss the evolution of the civilized narrative and I demonstrate how monotheism evolved from polytheism. I also argue that polytheism has had a much longer experience under civilization. If we look at the religions that originate in Asia, they are as effective as the monotheistic ones, if not more so, in segregating the different human castes and nonhuman groups and normalizing violence. It is obvious that monotheism informs present-day civilized epistemology, be it Western or Eastern. At the same time, none of these texts are monolithic. They all contain forces of resistance, voices that call for the triumph of Wilderness, Chaos, and Life. And there have always been animistic approaches to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, such as the various mystics and the Sufis. Namely, they relied on the personal, physical, cognitive, and spiritual reconnection with what is beyond the self and thus threatened organized religion, which relies on language and a linguistically instituted order that ruptures the integrity of body, praxis, and soul. The point of my book on narratives (*Children's Literature*, Routledge), particularly the chapter on language and literacy, is to show how any text, be it religious or scientific, regardless of its contents, within civilization will end up upholding the interests of its institutions and will inevitably be inscribed within the metanarrative, or the Fake News, of civilized epistemology.

BF Q10. *Many thinkers have lain at the foot of monotheism a whole host of the problems facing us today: the domination of nature, as Yahweh says in Genesis that humanity will rule over other creatures; patriarchy, due to the Biblical portrayals of Eve and Lilith; the desacralization of the Earth, which is profane relative to the transcendent Deity, angels, and Heaven; the universalization of Truth and the Good in God; the elevation of submission to authority and deferred enjoyment to virtues; the eventual advent of metaphysical materialism, in which the world is viewed as fundamentally made of dead, manipulable matter; one could go on ad nauseam. Often, thinkers critiquing monotheism contrast it to animism or pantheism, which are seen as liberatory. I find these arguments very persuasive myself, but what are we then to make of dominator societies with non-monotheistic religions? - take, for instance, Japan, where the state religion now (Shinto) and folk religions historically is and were more or less animistic; or pre-Christian Rome, which was polytheistic; or the early Mongol Empire, which was again something like animistic before it became cosmopolitan and heterogeneous?*

LAR A10. Yes, this is what I argue in my work. Namely, I demonstrate that organized religion is an institution of civilization, regardless of place or whether it is polytheistic or monotheistic. I touch on this in my essay titled “Genealogies of Wilderness” published in the Paulinian Compass in vol. 1, no. 4 (2010) and I elaborate this point in my book on children’s literature and narratives. To close this interview, I would like to share the following passage from the introduction chapter, “The Root of It All”. It discusses the evolution of the epistemic tradition from animism towards domestication, i.e. through paganism and the rest of the debris of civilization, until we get to the present-day dogmatic religions, including that of secularism, all of which, and regardless of their internal tensions and contradictions, uphold violence and predation as the basis of what makes us human:

This violence can be traced throughout the history of the written word. Most stories rationalize murder by weaving ontological reasons for killing into their stories of origins that explain the *raison d’être* of beings. The slaying of disobedient deities, of human animals, and nonhuman people, or of trees in these stories rationalize the necessity of these acts of violence and destruction. For instance, one of the earliest written texts is “The Stories of Heaven and Hell” from ancient Mesopotamia, dating more than 2,000 years B.C.E. The most well-known of them, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, recounts the murder of the guardian of the forest, which is followed by the felling of the cedar trees and then by the murder of animals. This great act of violence moved mountains and hills and changed the world.

“At the third blow Humbaba fell. Then there followed confusion for this was the guardian of the forest whom they had felled to the ground. For as far as two leagues the cedars shivered when Enkidu felled the watcher of the forest, he at whose voice Hermon and Lebanon used to tremble. Now the mountains were moved and all the hills, for the guardian of the forest was Killed” (Sandars, 1972: 83).

Sacred Hindu texts, too, speak of the violence of domestication and the destruction of chaos: “The Devī Durgā has eight arms and in her many hands she holds the weapons and emblems of all the gods, who turned their weapons over to her to kill the demon of chaos” (Eck, 1985; p. 28).

AbdelRahim, L. *Children’s Literature, Domestication, and Social Foundation: Narratives of Civilization and Wilderness*; Routledge 2014, 2018; pages 21-22.

To right this wrong we have to bring back the Forest. I do not mean this metaphorically or only in the abstract “out there”, but right here within our city spaces, our bodies, our minds and hearts. And thus, we need to disarm the gods of civilization, those predators we have constructed, whom we feed, and in whose image we choose to see ourselves. We have to disable these gods, regardless of whether they masquerade in the robes of Justice, Piety, or Knowledge, and give back the world to those who know how to care for it.