

## ***Braiding Sweetgrass* Lesson Plan 4**

### **Embracing the Gift Economy: “Defeating the Windigo”**

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**Overview:** The final lesson examines the economic systems outlined in *Braiding Sweetgrass*, such as the critique of consumer capitalism and exploration of alternative economic systems—like the gift economy discussed during the previous lesson. Students will explore how the Windigo—a cannibalistic being representing insatiable greed—serves as a metaphor for destructive economic patterns. By connecting the book’s Indigenous wisdom with critical economic patterns, students will develop a deeper understanding of alternative models centered on reciprocity rather than extraction and exploitation, as well as how the Windigo functions as a metaphor for modern economic systems (and ecological devastation).

### **Objectives:**

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

1. Analyze the critique of consumer capitalism as a “Windigo economy.”
2. Compare gift economy principles with market economy structures.
3. Discuss and respond to Kimmerer’s reflection on how capitalism intersects with environmental degradation and post-colonial concerns.

### **Class Structure (50 minutes)**

*5 minutes:* Freewrite activity

- Present students with the following prompts: What does it mean to have “enough”? How do you know when you have enough—of food, possessions, success? What happens when “enough” becomes “never enough?”
- Once students have completed their freewrite, encourage them to share key insights (e.g., what surprised them, are their definitions the same, etc.).

*10 minutes:* Introduction to Windigo and Economic Systems

- Discuss Kimmerer’s concept of the Windigo as a symbol of insatiable consumption.
  - In “Windigo Footprints,” Kimmerer defines the Windigo as “a human being who has become a cannibal monster. Its bite will transform victims into cannibals too.... The more a Windigo eats, the more ravenous it becomes. It shrieks with its craving, its mind a torture of unmet want. Consumed by consumption, it lays waste to humankind” (304-305).
  - She then explains that the Windigo represents a “positive feedback loop, in which a change in one entity promotes a similar change in another, connected part of the system. In this case, an increase in Windigo hunger causes an increase in Windigo eating, and that increased eating promotes only more rampant hunger in an eventual frenzy of uncontrolled consumption” (305).

- Have a student draw on the board a diagram of the positive feedback loop of Windigo hunger: More hunger → more eating → more hunger → etc.
  - Emphasize that the threat of the Windigo is not just that it will consume too much or consume the wrong things, but that that consumption will spread uncontrolled: “Its bite will transform victims into cannibals too” (Kimmerer 304)
- Connect the concept of the Windigo to modern consumer culture; Kimmerer suggests that our modern economic system has been a kind of Windigo economy.
  - What do you think this means? What are some examples of over-consumption leading to environmental harm?
- Prompt students to brainstorm examples of overconsumption in modern life:
  - **Major worldwide issues:** Exploitation of finite resources, single-use plastics, the fast fashion industry, planned obsolescence, etc.
  - **Social media trends:** Shopping hauls, unboxing videos, “retail therapy,” constant upgrading of technology.
  - **Individual behaviours:** Impulse buying, accumulating possessions, always wanting the “next/new” thing.
- During the conversation, ask students to consider:
  - **When does consumption become over-consumption?** Guide students to consider: When do needs become wants? When does acquisition become compulsive? When does consumption harm others or the environment? What differentiates consumption from over-consumption?
  - **What drives overconsumption?** Possible answers include: advertising, social pressure, status anxiety, the belief that more equals happiness, and disconnection from consequences.
  - **What habits or mindsets drive over-consumption?** Possible answers include: social media influence, peer pressure, marketing, and systems that reward endless growth.
- Connect this back to the Windigo: How is our consumer culture like the Windigo’s bite—transforming others into consumers?
- Review the economic systems contrasted by Kimmerer in the book:
  - **Gift economy principles:** reciprocity, sufficiency, and community well-being
  - **Market economy characteristics:** growth, competition, and individual accumulation
  - How do these different economic models shape our relationship with the natural world?

*15 minutes:* Group Brainstorming Activity

- Break students into small groups and have each group choose a chapter from the book. Write down on the board or slide what chapter each group will be focusing on, in order to prevent overlap.

- Ask students to explore how their chosen chapter addresses economic and cultural values, especially focusing on the contrast between **gift economies** and **market economies**.
  - Connections can include, but are not limited to:
    - **Key quotes** that illustrate values, exchanges, or relationships (especially those referencing reciprocity, commodification, or consumption).
    - **Brief explanations** of how these quotes connect to gift-based or market-based thinking.
    - **Images, symbols, or metaphors** that Kimmerer uses to portray abundance, scarcity, greed, reciprocity, etc.
    - **Connections/parallels to other course readings or personal experiences** that help deepen understanding of the chapter's message.
- Once students are finished, consider the following prompts:
  - How does the chapter portray the difference between a world where relationships are based on gift-giving and reciprocity versus one based on ownership and consumption?
  - What are the consequences of viewing nature as a commodity? How does this differ from viewing it as a gift?
  - How are characters or cultural stories utilized to critique or model different kinds of relationships to land, resources, and community?
  - How might the chapter challenge us to rethink our own assumptions about value, wealth, and responsibility?

#### 5 minutes: Conclusions

- Kimmerer writes, “Scarcity and plenty are as much qualities of the mind and spirit as they are of the economy. Gratitude plants the seeds for abundance.... Gratitude is a powerful antidote to Windigo psychosis.... [Gratitude] celebrates cultures of regenerative reciprocity, where wealth is understood to be having enough to share and riches are counted in mutually beneficial relationships” (Kimmerer 376-77).
  - How does this passage invite the reader to rethink their definitions of wealth, abundance, and success?
  - In what ways might gratitude and reciprocity offer an alternative to the individualism and consumption often associated with market-driven economies?
  - Can you think of examples that illustrate a different way of understanding what it means to be “rich”?

#### Sources:

Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Milkweed Editions, 2016.