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Book Review

The Serviceberry: Abundance and Reciprocity in the Natural World
By Robin Wall Kimmerer
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Born from lessons in nature, *The Serviceberry: Abundance and Reciprocity in the Natural World* invites readers to reflect on the way societies organize and govern relations between the self, food systems, community, and the earth. Offering lessons to food studies scholars and practitioners through alternative governance arrangements, Robin Wall Kimmerer presents a compelling case for creating more place-based connections in an increasingly disconnected world. The author does this through the lens of gift economies, also referred to as economies of care.

While gift economies have long been present in cultures and communities around the world, including with respect to food, capitalist norms have become pervasive and influence much of daily life. Yet, *The Serviceberry* shows how gift economies help achieve more prosperous futures. Wall Kimmerer notes, "Gratitude and reciprocity are the currency of a gift economy, and they have the remarkable property of multiplying with every exchange, their energy concentrating as they pass from hand to hand, a truly renewable resource" (p. 14).

Gift economies may seem to be an elusive and unattainable way to govern but Wall Kimmerer meticulously lays out how these alternative economies are already in motion and further, how pervasive capitalist norms are grounded on a flawed foundation. For example, *The Serviceberry* questions the underlying economic assumption of competition and scarcity (specifically human manufactured scarcity, as pointed out on p. 79, rather than natural scarcity). In particular,

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Wall Kimmerer points to the way resources are valued for extraction over regeneration: "It pains me to know that an old-growth forest is 'worth' far more as lumber than as the lungs of the Earth. And yet I am harnessed to this economy, in ways large and small, yoked to pervasive extraction. I'm wondering how we fix that. And I am not alone" (p. *26).*

In response, *The Serviceberry* offers many examples of gift economies in which resources are stored by sharing with each other – or "in the belly of my brother" (p. 32) – treating food as sacred rather than as commodity. Counter to mainstream economic thinking, the principles of gift economies are built on acts of reciprocity as a way of creating cyclical relations that foster community well-being and therefore, the well-being of the individual. As Wall Kimmerer notes, "A gift economy includes a system of social and moral agreements for indirect reciprocity, rather than a direct exchange. So, the hunter who shared the feast with you today could well anticipate that you would share from a full fishnet or offer your labor in repairing a boat in the future. The prosperity of the community grows from the flow of relationships, not the accumulations of goods" (p. 34).

Gift economies are the foundation for celebrations and gatherings such as potlatch. However, colonial governments – both past and present – undermine and even attempt to eradicate these alternative ways of constructing value and connection. As *The Serviceberry* points out, the ideas of reciprocity and collective care were seen as antithetical to principles of modern society (e.g. private property and accumulation).

Yet, these economies of care re-emerge. Tightly knit communities and extraordinary circumstances suspends the rules of capitalism and allows space for gift economies. So, how could care economies be integrated into current western food systems governance systems without crisis as a catalyst? And can they?

In many ways, the work of practitioners and scholars in food studies have tried to show the value of alternative economies and the need for diverse ways of knowing. In addition, scholars (e.g. Elinor Ostrom), Indigenous practices, and community actions have all proven these challenges (e.g. tragedy of the commons) can be overcome with mindful stewardship. Indigenous communities have integrated resource management for common goods into economies of care across generations and centuries. Wall Kimmerer highlights how the Dish with One Spoon governs relations between communities and land in ways that considers each other and future generations. In relation to this sacred relationship, Waller Kimmerer highlights that the guidelines of the Honorable Harvest ensure that if we "Sustain the ones who sustain you and the earth will last forever" (p. 65).

Wall Kimmerer highlights the small and big ways that we can support each other through developing care economies by sharing abundance. On the farm next door to Wall Kimmerer lives a couple who planted Saskatoon berries (a variety of Serviceberries). When the berries were ready for harvest, the couple called neighbours to come and enjoy in the bounty by picking free of charge. As the neighbour later explains to Wall Kimmerer, the act of caring for your neighbours has a ripple effect that tether economies of care and scarcity.

The same neighbours who came to pick berries may come back to buy produce or offer patience if the farmers' sheep get out. In short, an act of care helps to foster community well-being even within a scarcity-based economy. These radical acts of care are both organized by individuals, community, and through public policy. Little libraries, free farm stands, and the maintenance of trails that can be walked on by all.

As a public policy and food studies scholar, *The Serviceberry* elicits important questions for my work about the transformation of governance and

government. Wall Kimmerer's work helps build understandings of place-based governance through Indigenous ways of knowing as well as how (and if) gift economies can live alongside current forms of western capitalism, including its manifestations in food systems. As *The Serviceberry* states "I don't think market capitalism is going to vanish; the faceless institutions that benefit from it are too entrenched. The thieves are very powerful. But I don't think it's pie in the sky to imagine that we can create incentives to nurture a fit economy that runs right alongside the market economy" (p. 92).

However, even after reading *The Serviceberry*, I still grapple with my own understanding of whether systems of scarcity can genuinely exist next to economies of care. As *The Serviceberry* alludes, I feel the answer is more complex than a binary yes or no. In reflection, *the Serviceberry* offers ways to navigate the complex webs of care and relations between the earth, community, food systems, and ourselves.

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