Book Review: Braiding sweetgrass: Indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge and the teachings of plants and The serviceberry: Abundance and reciprocity in the natural world

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Overview

What can a Saskatoon Berry teach us about engaging in economic relationships and decision-making? In this book review, we review two books together in light of this issue's theme: two-eyed seeing. We read Robin Wall Kimmerer's new book *The serviceberry: Abundance and reciprocity in the natural world* (2024), which offers readers a unique opportunity to reflect on foundational questions raised in her groundbreaking book *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (2013). Working in economic development, it is easy for many of us to be caught up in the urgent day-to-day choices we must make. Rarely do we have the opportunity to reflect on how our cultural teachings and traditional economic relationships with the natural world can offer guidance to building an economy we are proud to be part of.

Kimmerer's books embed two-eyed seeing by incorporating lessons from Western science and Indigenous knowledge. In both books, Kimmerer explores the reciprocal relationship between humans and the natural world to reflect on modern economic life and an ethical way of being. She weaves together her personal experiences, knowledge of plants as a botanist, and traditional teachings as a citizen of the Potawatomi Nation to advocate for a more sustainable and respectful relationship with the environment in a way that may also transform the economy. Kimmerer uses storytelling and personal reflection to bridge knowledge systems and generate her arguments. In the latter half of *Braiding Sweetgrass* and at the heart of *Serviceberry,* Kimmerer explains that the modern operation of the economy is built on a principle of scarcity rather than reciprocity to which she attributes rising tensions for thinking across worldviews. Kimmerer observes how the principle of reciprocity can be found everywhere in thriving ecosystems, and finds that it fits well with an approach to economics focusing on local exchange networks that she argues may be critical for making choices for a more sustainable economic future.

Kimmerer uses storytelling not just to share knowledge but also as a method of inquiry—one that challenges assumptions about how we relate to the land and one another. Rather than only presenting abstract arguments, she turns to lived experiences, her knowledge of plants, and traditional narratives to illustrate how economies of reciprocity already exist in the natural world. These stories invite readers to reconsider what it means to take, to give, and to sustain in a good way, offering lessons that contrast with dominant economic models built on competition and scarcity. Through each story, Kimmerer provides an entry point for reflection, asking how we might learn from the land's own patterns of generosity and balance.

An Invitation to Be Curious

In *Braiding Sweetgrass,* each chapter draws the reader in as if one is listening to a talk or lecture by Kimmerer. Rather than write to present an argument, Kimmerer invites the reader to share in her experiences and contemplate the questions that emerge while she navigates a world that is both simple and complex, informed by Indigenous knowledge from the land, her family and community, as well as by Western knowledge through her training in ethnobotany. Each chapter emerges from a lesson learned from selected

medicines and stories that have shaped some of the most impactful memories of her life. Kimmerer uses those lessons to ask difficult questions about how and why we face the insurmountable challenges that we have today, such as food insecurity, climate change, and economic inequality. *Braiding Sweetgrass* explores the reciprocal relationship between people and the land, which is first introduced through the teachings present in the story of Skywoman. Skywoman is the central figure in the Haudenosanee creation story whose fall from the Skyworld and subsequent rescue by the animals below marks the beginning of life on Turtle Island. As she descends from the skies, Skywoman is caught by geese through an act of profound kindness and is brought to rest on the back of a giant turtle. Skywoman plants what she brought from her home world before her fall to earth, sharing her gifts with the animals that saved her. This story reflects a worldview built on reciprocity and mutual care, inviting readers to question whether such generosity still exists in today's globalized world. The theme of the relationship between people and the land continues to echo throughout Kimmerer's storytelling as she examines the values that shape modern society.

Sweetgrass is the second teacher offering lessons on carefully balancing the acts of giving and taking. In line with many of the land's gifts, if sweetgrass is gathered with care, it thrives; if overharvested, it disappears. This lesson raises the question: is sustainability truly about limiting what we take, or is it more about *how* we take, and ensuring that what we take does not come at the expense of future abundance? For example, a comparison is made when waiting for wild strawberries—if they are taken while they are still white, we see an act of impatience and even greed. But to wait until they ripen, to accept them as the intended gift rather than a commodity, is to engage a different kind of economy - one built on gratitude rather than extraction.

The third teachers are The Three Sisters, who encourage us to ask how we are able to support favourable conditions for gifts to be received, and if we did so in our current economy, would more gifts emerge? Kimmerer discusses the Three Sisters—corn, beans, and squash—and explains how they grow together, each offering something that the others need. Each plant plays a distinct role: corn provides a structure for the beans to climb, beans fix nitrogen to nourish the soil, and squash shades the ground to keep it moist and to prevent weeds from growing. They are three distinct beings thriving together, not in competition but in support of one another. Kimmerer tells us that this way of growing has implications beyond food production. It embodies a collective mindset and asks us if we can create conditions for gifts to be received. Readers might question if a better approach to cooperation between humans and more-than-humans would significantly improve our communities and societal relationships, and it challenges us to reflect on how we might support one another and the world around us.

Finally, Kimmerer shares lessons from a fourth teacher, the maple tree, to demonstrate *when* to engage with the gifts of the land. In the process of tapping maple trees, sap flows only when the conditions are right—when the temperature fluctuates just enough for the sap to run. This teaches patience, as it is not about demanding the gift but waiting for the right moment to receive it. The timing of the sap's flow reflects a deep understanding of the natural cycles, reminding us that the gift economy requires

not only intention and care but also attunement to the rhythms of the land. It challenges the notion of immediate gratification, urging us to recognize when it is time to take, rather than forcing the land to give when it suits the needs of humans.

In *Serviceberry,* published 11 years after *Braiding Sweetgrass,* Kimmerer engages in many-eyed seeing and reaches beyond her expertise to explore and understand ecology, ecological economics, mainstream economics, and Indigenous knowledge. Kimmerer introduces the key principles of the book—abundance and reciprocity—by way of the feelings that she experiences when she receives gifts from Mother Earth. She starts with the feeling of happiness and gratitude when she is eating serviceberries and finds that this feeling is shared with others like birds who also feast on the gifts of Mother Earth. While Kimmerer shares her feelings, she also reflects on how starkly the experience is contrasted with the abundance and excesses of the modern world such as visiting a grocery store where abundance is ever-present and not driven by seasonal rhythms. By sharing her insights into the real-time moment of enjoying Earth's gifts, Kimmerer opens a dialogue into some critical challenges that she and many others are worried about in today's current landscape of global economics and her concerns about the damage and permanence that extractive capitalism causes to the wellbeing of what she refers to as the natural economy.

The relationship between serviceberries and the rest of the natural world is a further example of the generosity that is shown by the land in how it offers fruit freely to birds, animals, and humans. This act of abundance is part of a larger cycle in which consumption is not merely extractive but contributes to ecological renewal. As animals and birds consume the berries, they inadvertently assist in dispersing the seeds, thus enabling the serviceberry to regenerate and spread. The land, through this reciprocal act, gives not only for immediate sustenance but also for long-term vitality. The serviceberry's generosity is not a simple exchange of resources. Rather, it is an essential part of a dynamic system of care where consumption is intertwined with renewal. This relationship reinforces the interconnectedness of all beings, reminding us that taking from the land is not an isolated act but that it contributes to the cycle of life where giving and receiving are inextricably linked.

In the weaving of Kimmerer's teachings shared in *Braiding Sweetgrass* and *Serviceberry,* the story of Wiindigo stands as a striking final reflection of capitalism and an insatiable hunger for more, often at the expense of balance and sustainability. Wiindigo, a rapacious monster with its endless craving and over-consumption, symbolizes a self-destructive cycle that mirrors the overconsumption and exploitation sometimes seen in today's economic systems. But when Wiindigo is "emptied" and begins to relearn the stories—particularly the creation story of Skywoman—we see a shift. If Wiindigo were to internalize the knowledge of the story of Skywoman, how would this monster be transformed? If the modern economy internalized the knowledge of reciprocity that emerges from stories and the land itself, would we see transformative change? By embracing the wisdom of Skywoman, Wiindigo's transformation could catalyze into a regenerative economy—one where growth is measured not only in accumulation but in vitality, health, and shared prosperity.

The knowledge shared by Robin Wall Kimmerer offers readers the opportunity to analyze today's world through a multitude of lenses. Through reflection of Skywoman's descent, the patience of strawberries, the interdependence of the Three Sisters, and the generosity of the serviceberry, Kimmerer reveals a world where reciprocity is not just a practice but a way of being—one that invites the reader to listen, give, analyze, and better understand our place within the cycles of the land.

An Offering About Indigenous Economic Development

For readers engaged in the understanding and practice of economic development, we see Kimmerer as offering a simple, but perhaps crucial message amidst the technical and complex things involved with economic development: do not forget the knowledge that Mother Earth has to offer. She makes a compelling case to ensure that we do not leave it behind because that knowledge shapes not only what we do and how we do it, but it also carries forward reminders of why ancestral knowledge is critical for building ancestral futures.

Reading Kimmerer's books raise many questions for readers that are both theoretical/conceptual and pragmatic. We discuss a few here. One conceptional question that arose for us as readers came from her critique of capitalism. Specifically, she suggests that "the capitalist system" creates artificial scarcity that could be alleviated by living according to the principles contained in traditional teachings and the lessons from plants. Yet, one could question whether scarcity, in principle, is harmful. It is hardly unnatural. Scarcity is a fundamental reality in many environments. It may galvanize the need for community connections, an individual sense of purpose, or a shared sense of meaning in ways that a feeling of abundance might not, especially if you have difficulty seeing your role in creating it. Are the modern challenges that Kimmerer identifies around inequality and environmental degradation best understood as a product of "artificial" scarcity? Or is it better conceived as "artificial abundance"? Specifically, modern markets often do not recognize the environmental constraints that exist on economic activity. Rather than eliminating scarcity, perhaps the more pertinent question is: *How do we build institutions that help us live well within it?* Market economies do not exist in a vacuum. They exist under the constraints of government policies and laws and our individual choices within them.

This raises perhaps one of the major missing components of Kimmerer's reflections: the role of governing institutions around markets including the nature of property rights and land regulation, jurisdiction, environmental regulations, competition regulation, and what goods are publicly provided and which are provided by the market. The pure "capitalist" economy arguably does not exist anywhere, so rather than seeing current social challenges as the product of unchecked markets, perhaps the question is how government actions and structures have contributed to the issues highlighted by Kimmerer, such as environmental degradation. One might also consider exploring how those with political power may have influenced such actions and regulatory structures to their personal benefit without consideration of the social costs.

In our reading of Kimmerer's works, we see her as offering at least two pragmatic suggestions of individuals acting in an economy and wanting to build one that aligns with ethical principles of reciprocity, generosity, and moderation. The first is living your personal life in alignment with these principles. The second is "scaling down" and focusing on building more interconnected local economies. As readers, we see the clear potential benefits of both suggestions but suggest more caution when addressing the latter. While "storing one's wealth in the belly of my brother" is very appealing to all of us, assuming the best brother to store your wealth with is the one next door can come with its dangers. What happens when an entire community faces disaster? Many geographically diverse trading partners can act as forms of insurance by offering resources and support beyond local networks. Diverse trading partners also offer opportunities that local ones may not. While we have questioned whether scarcity is truly so detrimental to the human condition, we would be amiss to deny the creative power of sharing with people globally that is potentially facilitated by market transactions. We would also be wrong to deny the suffering and loss of life that can occur with extreme scarcity that markets may be able to prevent if organized correctly. Perhaps we must ask ourselves how we create dense networks of both kinds: can we "store our wealth in the belly of our brother" locally while engaging in broader systems that ensure collective resilience?

For economic development practitioners, this reflection is more than theoretical. Economic decisions often involve weighing competing worldviews and values and knowing when we are facing choices that require us to apply the lessons from various teachings. Ultimately, we see Kimmerer's work as reminding us that different knowledge systems offer valuable teachings that can guide economic development in thoughtful and holistic ways. The challenge for economic development practitioners, communities, and policymakers is simultaneously holding multiple lenses and making choices that honour immediate needs, long-term stewardship, and our values.