

The Community of Deep Attention: A Response to “Of Gifts, Reciprocity and Community”

Erika Bullock
*Stanford University*¹

Mary Jo Hinsdale’s “Of Gifts, Reciprocity and Community” reflects on the question, “how might we re-imagine a decolonial education through Indigenous conceptions of nature, ones which emphasize gift-giving, reciprocity and gratitude?”² Lessons from Potawatomi botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer’s book *Braiding Sweetgrass* serve as the centerpiece of Hinsdale’s essay. In the chapter “The Sound of Silverbells,” Kimmerer reflects on her teaching experience while an advanced PhD student, teaching botany to evangelical Christian students in the Bible Belt during a research trip to the Smoky Mountains.³ This vignette provides Hinsdale with two main themes: how a pedagogy of gratitude manifests through contact with the natural world and its gifts and how community can be developed in difference, gift-giving, and humility.

In conversation with Hinsdale and her various thinkers, and with Robin Wall Kimmerer’s vignette at the center, this response essay offers three contributions to Hinsdale’s analysis. First, I encourage Hinsdale to expand upon her conception of the “gift,” and focus on deep attention as a particularly relevant educational gift to be given and received. Second, I question the essentializing language in Hinsdale’s account, considering tensions between individuality and group identities. Finally, I suggest that Hinsdale’s emphasis on transformative labor has much to say about attentive educational practices and structures — ones with gift-giving and reciprocity at the center.

WHAT CONSTITUTES A GIFT?

The gifts of an education are central to Hinsdale’s essay; worth further exploration is Hinsdale’s definition of such a gift. In reading her essay, it appears that a gift can be a multitude of experiences or relationships. For example, Hinsdale offers *Braiding Sweetgrass* itself, the “gifts and teachings of

plants,” curiosity, humility, Hinsdale’s own students’ “dreams, their research training, their confidence,” and the meta-gift of a “pedagogy of reciprocation and gift-giving” as possible examples. Hinsdale enriches the definition of gift further: few of her students, she writes, may even know that they are giving gifts when Hinsdale first receives them. Perhaps this multiplicity is a feature of educational gifts. I was curious, however, to know if Hinsdale sees any particular gift to be illustrative of her Indigenous, decolonial frameworks.

To this last point, I want to draw out the gift of attention in Hinsdale’s argument. Attention offers connectivity to Robin Wall Kimmerer’s engagement with the natural world and plays a role in activating the “other community.” “Deep attention” shows up throughout Hinsdale’s analysis and in friendly texts. Kimmerer has written on attention to the natural world elsewhere, saying that “[e]very one of us is endowed with the singular gift of paying attention,” which she defines as “that remarkable focused convergence of our senses, our intellect, and our feeling.”⁴ Paying attention to nature means attending to both its pains and joys; it means engaging with “a near-universal form of currency” across human and natural worlds.⁵ Paying attention means naming and acknowledging interdependence and individuality. These remarks suggest that deep attention could be at the center of a decolonial, Indigenously-inspired relationship with the natural world and with others.

These qualities of attention connect relationship with nature more explicitly to Alphonso Lingis’ other community, another key concept in Hinsdale’s argument. Kimmerer continues, “[d]eep attention calls us inevitably into deep relationship...and neither partner in the exchange can be anonymous. They are known; they have names ... It is a sign of respect to call a being by its name, and a sign of disrespect to ignore it.”⁶ Kimmerer and Lingis are in conversation here. As the philosopher Gert Biesta writes in his analysis of Lingis, “[T]he other community ... comes into presence as soon as one responds to the other, to the otherness of the other... It comes into existence when one speaks in one’s own voice, with the voice that is unique, singular, and unprecedented.”⁷ By paying deep attention in rational community to individuality, the other community can emerge. Further explicating Kimmerer and Lingis’ con-

ceptions of individuality and relationality reveal that deep attention is a core conceptual link between Hinsdale's "gifts" and "community:" a powerful gift to keep in mind for the questions raised in Hinsdale's essay.

ESSENTIALIZING LANGUAGE AND THE "OTHER COMMUNITY"

Deep attention's connections to both individuality and "other community" introduce my second contribution to Hinsdale's argument. Next, I explicate a tension between essentializing language in Hinsdale's treatment of the "Sound of Silverbells" vignette and "Indigeneity" and the "unique, singular and unprecedented" voice of the other community.

Hinsdale sometimes uses essentializing language in her analysis of "Sound of Silverbells," and this obfuscates individuality essential to forming the other community. By Hinsdale's account, all the students in this episode are evangelical, settler, while Kimmerer is Indigenous, the descendant of the colonized. In Hinsdale's analysis, Kimmerer and her students occupy oppositional positions, characterized by single lenses on their identities. In reading "Sound of Silverbells," I am unconvinced that Kimmerer's vignette gives us enough to totalize across the class of students as Hinsdale does. However, Kimmerer does this too: she refers to her students as "the sons and daughters of the bluegrass aristocracy," collapsing their identities into one descriptor.⁸ This obfuscates other positional dimensions that may tell us something very different about the classroom environment: race, gender, sexuality, and ability are not discussed here. Furthermore, these descriptions appear to contradict the qualities that Biesta and Lingis tell us are essential to activating the other community.⁹

I have a similar question about the language of "Indigeneity" used throughout Hinsdale's analysis and what this language obfuscates. I wonder to what extent we can call some of these gifts and educational practices uniquely Indigenous as a generalizable term. Surely, there is a specific attention unique to Kimmerer's relationship with nature: a kind of non-Cartesian, non-hierarchical, post-humanist relationality. However, I am unconvinced that we can say that these gifts that Hinsdale addresses are fundamentally Indigenous gifts, es-

pecially when presented by a teacher with a unique (Potawatomi) tribal origin. Perhaps the blanket statement of “Indigenous ways of knowing” obscures the culturally-diverse practices and environments experienced by Indigenous individuals in the US and elsewhere.

Of course, this language is an obvious constraint of writing. We must use language to describe and shorthand complex social environments and positions. At the same time, such language lets us highlight various hegemonic power relationships: I agree with Hinsdale that we must pay attention to the broader settler-colonial dynamics in Kimmerer’s teaching environment, for example. These words help us to articulate how power operates between and within social groups.

Here we find a fundamental tension: we cannot let essentializing language mask the individuality crucial to the “other community,” and yet we also cannot allow for individuality to overshadow historic and social inequities and structures of racism, classism, and settler-colonialism that must be addressed. The natural constraints of language complicate this. How can we make room for that “unique, singular and unprecedented” voice that calls forth the other community, while still addressing power and the constraints of communication?

This brings me back to deep attention. I’d like to briefly propose a way forward in Gert Biesta’s “pedagogy of interruption,” which suggests that both social positions and uniqueness can be held at once. When we acknowledge the members of Kimmerer’s rational community in “Sound of Silverbells” as individuals, they are always-already strangers to one another in a myriad of combinations. Kimmerer’s deep attention to her students as individuals within the context of their situated social positions and rational communities allows for that strangeness, openness, and interdependent individuality to fully emerge. In Biesta’s words, other community “forms, comes into presence, in the interruption of the work and the enterprises of the rational community... It lives inside the rational community as a constant possibility.”¹⁰ He encourages us to see attention as interruption which acknowledges individuality layered alongside marginalized and privileged social identities. Considering this ‘ped-

agogy of interruption’ suggests deep attention as an entry point into a community of difference.¹¹ Further, it highlights how to hold uniqueness alongside the important historical and social contexts of identity.

THE TEMPORALITY OF LEARNING

As a final contribution, I offer a few provocations of Hinsdale’s analysis of transformative labor in education. Education built on transformative labor suggests, to me, new forms of educational relationships and schooling. Lewis Hyde writes that those undergoing the labor of gratitude work “sometimes for years, until the gift has truly ripened inside us and can be passed along.”¹² He continues, “a transformative gift cannot be fully received when it is first offered . . . But I should qualify this. Some part of the self is able to apprehend the gift. We can feel the proffered future.”¹³ Kimmerer writes of one weekend in the woods; Hinsdale writes of years of mentoring; Owen speaks of a single course’s tenure. It is hard to know, as Hyde reminds us, how long the gift may take to fully ripen.

This long horizon of transformation has implications for both our educational relationships and structures. If inner transformation and deep attention take more, or different, time than the credit-hour, the semester, or the two-to-four-year degree pathway, what must an educational structure attentive to these qualities look like? What does it mean for educators if the fruits of our labor ripen outside of the direct experiences we have with our students and our teachers? How does a gift-giving paradigm focused on attention and labor, in contrast to productivity and the work of the rational community, reconfigure our schooling structures? These questions are fundamental as we look to align the ideas in Hinsdale’s essay with practices in schools.

CONCLUSION

I, like Hinsdale, have experienced the transformation of *Braiding Sweetgrass*. In reading Kimmerer’s book, I have been given a long-moving gift: the copies I read between were gifts from my roommate and my partner, both well-loved with edges frayed from revisiting the text’s teachings. Hinsdale’s article is a gift of attention to education’s many presents and that ever-elusive

“other community” we seek to cultivate in educational institutions. She provokes many questions about a decolonial educational experience, my response to which I have tried to arrange in a triptych addressing educational gifts, community in individuality, and the timeline of transformative education. It is yet another labor of gratitude to respond to her work and give deep attention to these ideas in turn.

1 This response essay is supported by a graduate fellowship award from Knight-Hennessy Scholars at Stanford University.

2 Mary Jo Hinsdale, “Of Gifts, Reciprocity and Community,” *Philosophy of Education* 78 (2022).

3 Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 216-222.

4 Robin Wall Kimmerer, “Returning the gift,” *Minding Nature* 7, no. 2 (2014): 18-24.

5 Kimmerer, “Returning the Gift.”

6 Kimmerer, “Returning the Gift,” 20, my emphasis.

7 Gert Biesta, “The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common: Education and the Language of Responsibility,” *Interchange* 35, no. 3 (September 2004): 319, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02698880>, my emphasis.

8 Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 217.

9 Alphonso Lingis, “The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common,” *Studies in Continental Thought* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994).

10 Biesta, “The Community,” 319.

11 Biesta writes of this “pedagogy of interruption” elsewhere; see “A Pedagogy of Interruption,” in *Good Education in the Age of Measurement* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 73-91.

12 Hyde, “Transformation,” 112, qtd. Hinsdale, “Of Gifts, Reciprocity and Community,” *Philosophy of Education* 78 (2022).

13 Hyde, “Transformation,” 111.