

# Pedagogy of Attention: Subverting the Strong Language of Intention in Social Justice Education

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Article abstract

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# ***Pedagogy of Attention: Subverting the Strong Language of Intention in Social Justice Education***

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*Abstract: In this paper, I explore the possibility of social justice education as pedagogy of attention rather than simply pedagogy of intention. Drawing on Gert Biesta's (2010) concept of "strong" education, I begin by explaining how the language of intention in social justice education relies on a discourse in which "in-puts" will result in specific and immediate "out-puts." In this sense, social justice education can proceed too quickly to action-oriented imperatives. Following this, I take up Jan Masschelein's (2010) notion of poor pedagogy: pedagogy that requires nothing more than paying attention to argue that creating a space in which the only goal is to pay attention offers the potential of producing a shift in how social justice education proceeds. Pedagogy of attention subverts the primacy of pedagogy of intention by making an important contribution to social justice education, presenting the world in a way that is not contained by the frames (limitations) of what students are told exists, allowing for the possibility of transformation.*

## **Introduction**

In this paper, I explore the possibility of social justice education as pedagogy of *attention* rather than simply as pedagogy of *intention*. The language of intention in education, or the expectation that "in-puts" will result in specific "out-puts," is present within models of social justice education focussed on immediate and observable behavioural change in students. When social justice education places too much emphasis on measurable outcomes or behavioural benchmarks the texture of social struggle is flattened. One reason for this is that the time and mental space necessary to shift students' awareness are overlooked. Secondly, social justice education is constructed as a linear process in which students receive information that then provokes a change in the way they behave in the world. Pedagogy of attention, or paying attention, disrupts the ubiquity of this discourse because it displaces the expectation that social justice education ought to focus solely on students' immediate and observable action. This disruption is not to discount the import of action, but rather to acknowledge the necessity of balance between observation (or reflection) and action. While action should remain an ultimate aim in social justice education, we ought to create space in between "learning" and "action," in which contemplation is invited. Pedagogy of attention offers a crucial juxtaposition to the language of intention in social justice education in that it forges moments of connection by positioning students to encounter and respond to otherness in a way that cannot be observed or evaluated.

Gert Biesta (2010) critiques the use of "strong language" in education, which he equates with "the language of effective schools, effective teaching, strong leadership, and teacher-proof curricula" (p.

354). This strong language structures education as safe, predictable, and accountable; it is a language of *intention*. Pedagogy of intention occurs when particular outcomes are inseparable from the education itself. Given that public education in Canada is currently driven by standardized outcomes (Moll, 2004; Westheimer, 2010) and, less cynically, that the connection between deliberation and liberal-democratic ideals within citizenship education are well documented (Hess & Avery, 2010; Kisby & Sloam, 2009; McAvoy & Hess, 2013), it is not surprising that performance standards are an integral part of social justice education. However, I suggest that observable and measurable outcomes are not sufficient to elaborate, illustrate, or confront the complexities involved in issues of injustice. I propose that they be complemented by what Jan Masschelein (2010) has labeled a poor pedagogy, pedagogy of *attention*, in which students are simply asked to pay attention with little directive and no prescribed outcomes. Pedagogy of attention problematizes the impulse to view pedagogy solely in terms of outcomes, even within social justice education. By simply having students pay attention, teachers create the potential for them to encounter injustice, oppression, and marginalization more holistically than by presenting concepts, case studies, or examples. By complicating intention (the instrumentalization of social justice education), the possibility of a more intricate and embodied sense of the texture of injustice becomes possible.

I begin by introducing Biesta's (2010) notion of strong education, illustrating how social justice education can slip into outcomes-based pedagogical practices, and argue that, due to the often dire tone of its content, social justice education is viewed as immune from critiques of performance-based education. Then I frame paying attention as a form of mindfulness forwarded by Buddhist scholars and taken up by critical race and feminist scholar bell hooks (2010; 2003; 1994). I point to how and why the discourse of mindfulness is helpful in the context of social justice education, mainly for its capacity to reassert a necessary subjectivity in the practice. Underlying hooks' "engaged pedagogy," however, is the belief that through personal transformation positive social and structural shifts will occur. In the final section, I forward a more radical possibility for paying attention: that it may provide no results, immediate or otherwise. I make a case for "poor pedagogy," pedagogy in which nothing happens insofar as there is no immediate or foreseen instrumental end. Paying attention for the sake of paying attention runs counter to the aim of social justice education—to act in ways that counter oppressive structures. However, it is my contention here that injustice must be encountered on more than simply a cognitive level, that this encounter needs to be embodied and that multiple subjective shifts must be involved. To pay attention without expectation opens up these spaces and offers more potential to encourage a shift in the whole person. My aim is to frame an approach to social justice education that inserts a call to attention alongside immediate and prescribed calls to action.

## **Strong Education**

Biesta (2010) has described strong education as "something that is, or has the potential to be, secure and effective" (p. 354). Strong education is secure because it harnesses strategies and practices that, wherever possible, sublimate uncertainty. It is effective because, as Biesta puts it, "the aim [in strong education] is to create a strong and secure connection between educational "inputs" and educational "outcomes" (p. 354). Strong education puts in place practices that are most likely to ensure positive results, which might include high grade point averages or scores on standardized tests, but may also

include less immediately measurable results such as higher civic participation rates. The discourse of strong education involves a language of intention, a language that presupposes the ends of education can be, and ought to be, prescribed. As Osberg and Biesta (2008) have argued, “education, for the main part (and for whatever socio-political reasons), is organized around the idea that its primary purpose *is to promote ‘outcomes’ in certain areas deemed important (for whatever reason)*, and the curriculum (i.e. the content and pedagogy supporting it) is the primary tool by which such competencies are achieved” (p. 315).

Strong approaches to education are not uncommon. For example, in their article “Revitalising Politics: The Role of Citizenship Education,” Kisby and Sloam (2009) provide a compelling illustration of a model of citizenship education that they believe has the potential to ease what they argue to be a crisis in citizenship by re-engaging youth in civic participation. Although they concede that this process is convoluted and complex, they view education as significant to the project of increasing civic participation. The form of education that they envision is “a more effective form of citizenship education” through practices such as “intensive deliberation and critical analysis—reflection on experiences and participatory acts” and “outreach beyond the school environment (e.g. service learning)” (p. 313). In Kisby and Sloam’s view, citizenship education needs to connect with the politics and experiences of young people in more engaged and sustained ways if it is to revitalise democratic processes. Their argument in favour of bridging the perceived gap between “school” and the “rest of the world,” and pedagogical practice with visions for what this education might achieve, for the purpose of reconstructing the political sphere offers a compelling example of strong education. It is important to note that strong education is not necessarily associated with neoliberalism, an economic ideology whereby students are treated as clients and measurable outcomes trump intellectual, artistic, or civic pursuits. Strong education is defined, rather, by the attempt at complete coherence between how education proceeds and what is expected to come of it.

The concept of education, in and of itself, is premised upon an input/output model in which expectations for what ought to be accomplished, or achieved, is integral. In many ways it is unproblematic that education devoted to social justice, more than other educational pursuits, should adopt concrete practices aimed at dismantling injustice. My contention is that this dismantling ought to be framed in a way that invokes the possibility of real shifts in how students envision and engage with the world. My aim here is rather conservative in that I am not seeking an overhaul of the education system, but rather to explore a practice that might be established within the confines of public schooling that might bring forth more profound insights into the mechanisms and experiences of injustice.

### **When Social Justice Education Is Strong Education**

As Hytten and Bettez (2011) have illustrated, “social justice education” has taken on multiple meanings and inspires multiple practices.<sup>1</sup> Often, social justice education aims to disrupt sexist, racist, and other discriminatory “common sense” narratives such as “girls are less apt at mathematics and science” and “young black men tend to be violent.” A social justice approach to education might center on practices

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<sup>1</sup> For example, in her article “Why Are Schools Brainwashing Our Children?,” Cynthia Reynolds (2012) provides a controversial illustration of the ways in which the label “social justice education” has been used to justify ethically questionable pedagogical practices.

and activities that aim to have students carefully consider privilege and power, how these intersect, and how they are manifested in seemingly normal or neutral ways (Kumashiro, 2009). Or an education devoted to social justice might work with student-centered pedagogies promoting agency and change, translatable to the world outside the classroom (Hackman, 2005). Other approaches are inspired by the belief that by being confronted with various analyses of oppression, as well as engaging with activities that reveal their own complicated relationships to privilege and power, students will encounter the complexity of oppression, including their complicity in it (McIntosh, 1989).

Despite the divergences in approaches to, and assumptions surrounding, social justice education, the expectation of immediate and observable outcomes remains integral to many models within Canadian public school systems (Alberta Ministry of Education, 2005; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013). These appear in the form of “benchmarks” which require students to engage with their peers in ways that promote tolerance across difference and to recognize and articulate the value of human rights. Of course, these curricular expectations are justified due to the urgency of the content area. An education that confronts students with the insidiousness of sexism or blatant persecution sanctioned by Islamophobia would typically not advocate inaction. It would appear counterintuitive, even illogical, to introduce narratives and practices that disrupt dominant power trends and were not, at least in some way, intended to be enacted.

The issue lies with the complete focus on pedagogical ends. If the ultimate aim of social change is simply understood in terms of demonstrable pedagogical goals, classrooms are then treated as theatres in which teachers and students alike perform the values associated with social justice as they appear in the curriculum. The very aim of social justice education, however, is to promote action beyond the confines of the classroom, which requires complementary practices that speak to students as whole beings. Strong social justice education risks imposing a narrow view of student subjectivity, of pedagogy, and of politics. The content of social justice education—that is, discussions of racism, sexism, and homophobia, for example—is complex and deeply entwined with the students’ sense of themselves, the world, and themselves-in-the-world. Assuming that a broader sense of the perspectives on issues of injustice is sufficient to incite change in how the student speaks and behaves reduces the student to that of an end to social change. This discourse promotes immediacy and proactivity thereby minimizing the import of reflection. Social justice education that integrates a slower component would allow students the time and space to uncover the multiple layers of social and systemic oppression (or even observe that multiple layers exist).

My argument is not that strong education is without value or that we ought to be suspicious of it, but rather that its ubiquity has led us to stop asking meaningful questions about when it is necessary and when we might loosen its grip—disrupt the discourse—in favour of pursuing practices that hone connectivity through empathy and responsibility. I trouble the notion of social justice education being a strong education by asking what it might mean to forfeit an active approach and open up a space in which evidence of learning and the intention of action is set aside momentarily. I ask: What if social justice education functioned as a call to attention rather than an immediate call to action?

## What Does it Mean to Pay Attention?

The concept of attention lies at the center of Buddhist philosophy and is deeply connected to mindfulness (or meditation). As Virginia Heffernan (2015), columnist for the New York Times, has observed, the term “mindfulness” has taken on “muddied” meanings, signalling a number of practices loosely derived from Buddhist philosophies. That mindfulness has been co-opted and branded to sell anything from healthy lifestyles to yoga pants (or buying yoga pants for a healthy lifestyle) speaks to Heffernan’s analysis of “muddied” meanings. This muddiness may indeed be due to the same logic that makes strong social justice education problematic: dominant understandings of mindfulness, like social justice education, value immediate and visible benefits over the intangible, the long term, and the substantial. In this section, I will explore what it means to pay attention, primarily through a discussion of the concept of mindfulness, in the context of social justice education.

As Buddhist philosophies have shown, the act of paying attention (also known as mindfulness) can have powerful effects in tuning us in to our surroundings. “To be mindful [or to pay attention] is to wake up, to recognize what is happening in the present moment” (Germer, 2004, p. 24). Jon Kabat-Zinn (1994) has famously defined mindfulness as “the awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (p. 4). Mindfulness is associated with stillness, inaction, and non-judgment. It is the act of not acting and indeed of cultivating a practice of non-action. Its purpose is to open up a liminal space in which we are able to see how things are in order to see how they might change. As Gethin (2011) says, “being non-judgemental is about making space for a different perspective on how things are” (p. 273). Attention without judgement is not about creating or enforcing a specific set of perspectives but rather it is about creating a space in which it is possible for people to develop their own views about what surrounds them. This space is liminal because it encourages a “practical stance rather than a final vision on the nature of things” (p. 273).

However, the definitions presented thus far have pointed us to mindfulness as an individual practice with finite benefits. Conceptually, mindfulness takes the act of non-action farther in that it coordinates the personal with the political. An interpretation that provides a holistic view of mindfulness and lends itself to a social justice perspective is well articulated by Thich Nhat Hanh (2006). He does this by singling out mindfulness for its particular role in terms of both personal fulfillment and political obligation, clarifying that “meditation [mindfulness] is to see into our own nature and wake up. If we are not aware of what is going on in ourselves and in the world, how can we see into our own nature and wake up?” (p. 42). Being mindful, or paying attention, to who we are as well as to our surrounding world is a necessary interplay in that one cannot be fulfilled without the other, Nhat Hanh argues.

It is within this interaction between the individual and the political that mindfulness gains traction as significant to the practice of social justice education. In the initiation of contemplation and creation of space, students are able to see past their limited realities and observe their broader surroundings in new light. To pay attention, therefore, is to create connection. It is an act of building relationships. The process of observing *what is* is of value because of the social bonds that it forms. As Joseph Goldstein (2006) explains, mindfulness “keeps us connected to the people around us, so that we’re not simply rushing by them in the busyness of our lives” (p. 122). When we pay attention we establish a relationship between ourselves and the object of our attention. That is, to be attentive is to make an

offering and to build a rapport. It is to acknowledge that the object of attention is deserving of being attended to.

### **Mindfulness in Education**

Bell hooks (2010; 2003; 1994) has played an important role in fusing Buddhist philosophies and feminist theory with critical education. For hooks, the embodied cannot be removed from the intellectual in the same way that practice cannot be excised from contemplation.<sup>2</sup> Entering the classroom as “whole” and not as “disembodied spirit” is essential for education focussed on justice (hooks, 1994, p. 193). Just as hooks calls for increased connection between spheres constructed as distinct, her work has demonstrated how three bodies of literature that are traditionally viewed as disparate are entangled. Drawing the student (and teacher) out of the realm of the individual and into a possibility of “union of mind, body, and spirit” is significant for hooks. From her perspective, education that liberates is education that resists disconnection between self and other, theory and practice, mind and body. Hooks laments the denial of these fundamental relationships and argues that it has enforced fundamentally patriarchal and Eurocentric narratives that underpin public education. Education that liberates, according to hooks, moves away from traditional Western conceptions of education and relies on Buddhist insight. A prime example of this is hooks’ notion of “engaged pedagogy,” drawn from the work of Nhat Hanh, which has emphasized “the focus of practice in conjunction with contemplation” (hooks, 1994, p. 14). Hooks’ conception of mindfulness is associated with a fundamental resistance to oppressive educational structures. While she does not specifically advocate mindfulness as a pedagogical practice in and of itself, the aim of her work is to enact Buddhist perspectives as a theory of liberation in classrooms. For hooks, this practice is an attitude that infuses pedagogy in all of its respects, such as curricular decisions and language. This approach remains within the Buddhist framework in that it begins with the self and envisions that social change will ebb from individual shifts. “Engaged pedagogy” maintains that the individual can and will incite systemic, structural change, but it does not quite fit Biesta’s view of strong education. It is an education in which outcomes (liberation) are kept in view, but the actual process of producing these outcomes is not predetermined. That is, the ebbs of individual shifts to create large scale social change are indeterminable; “engaged pedagogy” is therefore based on a belief that education that makes explicit the interconnections between reflection and practice will prompt such change. “Engaged pedagogy” remains pedagogy of intention.

My interest here is in exploring what it might mean to make a radical gesture towards openness, in which all remnants of intention are omitted. The difference is a matter of degree and emphasis; whereas “engaged pedagogy” has an eventual, undetermined, yet positive end in mind, my plan is to outline a pedagogy that focuses on subjective shift but in which there is no end, no aim, no prescriptions for outcomes, merely the possibility of connection. The possibility of opening up space for a level of observance strikes me as exceptionally pertinent for social justice education. Education devoted to social justice might articulate a language of *attention* rather than of *intention*. Treating students as subjects rather than simply as learners (Biesta, 2010) has the potential to serve the aims of social justice

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<sup>2</sup> Hooks has attributed much of her thinking around this to Paulo Freire’s (1993) concept of *praxis*.

education in a less direct but more profound way: by “leading out” of the mindsets and worldviews that (re)construct conditions of injustice. My aim here is to outline how paying attention, what Biesta (2010) might call weak education and Masschelein (2010) has called a “poor pedagogy,” disrupts the strong education of intention as the sole legitimate form of social justice education. The value here is in the disruption of the language of results as sufficient in the context of social justice education.

### Outlining Pedagogy of Attention

In “E-ducing the Gaze: The Idea of a Poor Pedagogy” (2010), Jan Masschelein offers a narrative of how paying attention might cause subjective displacement in a pedagogical context. Similarly to Biesta’s call for education of subjectification, Masschelein clarifies how a poor pedagogy

is not about arriving at a liberated or critical view, but about liberating or displacing our view. It is not about becoming *conscious* or *aware* of a particular state of affairs that a teacher has predetermined as worthy of awareness, but about becoming attentive, about paying *attention*. (p. 44, italics in original)

Attention, Masschelein claims, “is the state of mind in which the subject and object are brought into play” (p. 44). Being attentive reconstructs the subject through her engagement with the object, enacting openness towards encounter as an ongoing practice, rather than as a singular act. Attentiveness might be viewed as a discipline: the willingness and ability to be displaced, to not only understand other perspectives, but to be changed or moved by them. This practice embroils students in an experience of encounter, of vulnerability, and of uncertainty. These embroilments situate students in a position to see themselves as connected to, rather than disconnected from, the other.

Biesta (2010) has advocated an education of “subjectification” that aims to displace the notion of the individual as discreet and apart from others, in favour of positioning students in relation to others. An individual faced with an other is placed in a position of responsibility and therefore of connection. For Biesta, following Levinas, education of subjectification is ultimately an education of responsibility, as these cannot be disentangled. “Responsibility in fact is not a simple attribute of subjectivity, as if the latter already existed in itself, before the ethical relationship. Subjectivity is not for itself; it is, once again, initially for another” (Levinas, 1985, p. 96). It seems that Biesta’s call for education in general to be subjectified is most appropriate in the context of social justice education, in which the ultimate aim is to harness social change through mutual understanding. An education of “subjectification” is akin to an education in mindfulness in that it demands that students and educators ask different types of questions—questions “that hint at independence from [existing] orders” (Biesta, 2010, p. 356). This is particularly important for social justice education as the nature of hegemonic power convinces us all that the ways in which things “are” are how these must be.

I suggest an approach to social justice education that is aligned with a poor pedagogy, a pedagogy of attention. As Masschelein (2010) says, “a poor pedagogy is simultaneously artful and deficient; it has no determined end, no destination, nor measurable outcome. Instead, a poor pedagogy fixates on waiting, mobilizing, presenting” (p. 49). Turning the notion of strong social justice education on its head, a poor pedagogy offers no comfort. There are no promises of safe spaces as envisioned in the strong social justice education of Adams, Bell, and Griffin (2007). Similarly, there are no assurances that



such a project will move us forward in a predictable way: neither teachers nor students experience the satisfaction of emerging better, stronger, or more equipped to deal with injustice. “A poor pedagogy does not promise profits. There is nothing to win (no return), no lessons to be learned” (Masschelein, 2010, p. 49). A poor pedagogy does not invite students to react, respond, or take action in an immediate sense. It does not provide a determined set of perspectives. Rather, it is produced by a sort of anti-aim in which sustained attention opens up spaces in which to face blind spots created by privilege, the normalized realities confronted by marginalized groups. Through an act of disempowerment, the subject is left in a state of vulnerability, but also openness, as a result of having been displaced. Displacement, attention to subjectivity, and the demand of attention present less tangible but more powerful, and more productive, engagements with injustice. By paying attention, students are able to enter “a state of mind which opens up to the world in such a way that world can present itself to me (that I can ‘come’ to see and I can be transformed)” (Masschelein, 2010, p. 44). Simply paying attention, then, makes an important contribution to social justice education: that of presenting the world in a way that is not contained by the frames (limitations) of what students are told *is*, but rather of allowing for the possibility of transformation.

### **Enacting Pedagogy of Attention in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside**

Vancouver’s Downtown Lower Eastside is known for its lack of housing and stigmatized for being a blemish on Vancouver’s otherwise pristine landscape. Pete McMartin (2014) of the *Vancouver Sun* has described the Eastside as a “ghettoization of the city’s mental health and addiction problems,” a ghettoization that other residents of Vancouver have tacitly agreed to “for fear those problems might spread to their own neighbourhoods.” This concentrated area offers an amplified illustration of how legacies of colonialism and patterns of racism manifest elsewhere. While the Downtown Eastside puts many of Canada’s failings with Indigenous and other minority populations on display, it makes explicit the dynamics that occur throughout the province and indeed the country.<sup>3</sup> It characterizes many of the issues associated with marginalization: poverty, dispossession, and disempowerment. While paying attention in any space is adequate for pedagogy of attention, doing so in the Downtown Eastside and spaces like it offers an especially sharp contrast to the majority of Canadians’ everyday realities. This is because, as McMartin implies, there is a willed blindness inflicted on areas that broadcast our greatest social and political failures. Poor pedagogy might occur by simply asking students to *pay attention* to the Downtown Eastside, rather than asking students to *identify oppression* in the Downtown Eastside.<sup>4</sup>

While a strong approach to social justice education might (re)construct the scene through multiple intersecting lenses such as socioeconomic, racial, and gendered inequality, taking up a pedagogy of attention would mean staying away from any predetermined frames, leaving students to their own observations. Through their observations of the dynamics, interactions, and movements, students are

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<sup>3</sup> For an excellent analysis of how historical narratives around colonialism and power have been constructed in Canada and Québec, see Austin (2010).

<sup>4</sup> Poor pedagogy, however, need not be carried out in a context afflicted by extreme suffering. The practice of paying attention can be carried out anywhere, as the belief within social justice education is that injustice is pervasive. Since there is no expected result, and the aim is within the practice itself, subjective displacement is possible by paying attention anywhere.

placed in an affective and embodied experience in which they may experience any number of emotions or ideas about what they are seeing. Students may experience discomfort, as may educators in resisting to make this a “teachable moment,” leaving the students to encounter, confront, question, mock, and even ignore what they see. This practice should leave students and educators alike with “a burden, a charge: what is there to see and to hear? And what to do with it? How to respond to it?” (Masschelein, 2010, p. 50). These questions cannot be answered definitively; they are to be grappled with. Similarly, students’ immediate reactions cannot account for the possibility of their transformation. A student who mocks the homeless in the moment may be undergoing a shift in her worldviews. The insecurity and potential sense of being unsafe is in the fact that there can be no direct connection between the “in-puts” and “out-puts.” Pedagogy of attention is risky and unsettled. Through its disruption of the strong language of education, it offers the possibility of reinventing students’ relationships to the world.

## Conclusion

Pedagogy of intention, because it is bounded by prescribed expectations framed by an in-put/out-put model of education, masks the subtleties of how oppression plays out. The dominant expectation is that heightened understanding and critical thinking skills will result in changed individual and, eventually, systemic practices. We might view such approaches as calls to action: equipped with increased insight into how certain populations bear the brunt of unequal political, social, and historical power relations, students would then be willing and able to participate in our communities in a way that diminishes toxic social and political relations. Strong language constructs social justice education as a discourse of intention, one that focuses it on political action through the deepening of perspectives, maintaining an instrumental view of the purpose of education. While action should remain the primary aim in social justice education, a space in between “learning” and “action,” in which contemplation is invited, is necessary. What I have suggested here is one way in which we might loosen the grip of the strong language of intention to also engage in practices of poor pedagogy. One example of this pedagogy is the practice of paying attention without having to account for specific outcomes. By paying attention, students and teachers would experience a form of education that subverts the imperatives of “understanding” and “acting” currently engrained in the ethos of social justice education. As well, paying attention would empower students to move beyond the realm of worldviews by creating deeper connections to their surroundings. In short, pedagogy of attention calls into question the primacy of pedagogy of intention, a pedagogy that reinforces the view that the aims of social justice can be reduced and simplified to a set of (pedagogical) prescriptions.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Many thanks to Claudia W. Ruitenbergh for seeing me through multiple versions of this idea.

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