

Theo Claire

Oct 24, 2021: Reflecting on the Grammar of Animacy

As many of us tend to, I often seek solace and wonder in nature. I experience the profound, the divine, the spirit of life --- whatever you call it --- in the land around me, and by paying attention to the waters, soils, plants, birds, and sky. My childhood and adolescent experiences along the American River especially motivated me to pursue the study of ecology, and then environmental field work and research in salmon restoration. I came across the Potawatomi scholar and botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer's book *Braiding Sweetgrass* for the first time while taking a course on Indigenous Environmental Activism a few years ago, and I am glad to share some of what that text has to offer this morning.

In *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013), Robin Wall Kimmerer brings together two ways of knowing, scientific inquiry and traditional ecological knowledge, to explore the human relationship to the land around us. Kimmerer contrasts how science and traditional ecological knowledge can yield different answers to questions about the living world and the place of humans in that web of life. Kimmerer invites us to ask: How do we know what we know about nature, and our place in it? How do the answers to these questions affect our relationships with the land and nonhuman beings around us?

Science is one method of producing knowledge to answer questions about the natural world. The scientific method strives towards rational and objective inquiry. Traditional ecological knowledge is another method of producing knowledge about the natural world, but this method is grounded in millenia of Indigenous relationships with specific landscapes and the

nonhuman beings inhabiting those landscapes. Traditional ecological knowledge includes methods of observation and inquiry, but also storytelling, ceremony, and relationship as valid ways of producing knowledge. To contrast the two, Kimmerer says that western science views the living world as an object of study. For example, take botany: science looks at plants and asks “what is it?” and “how does it work?” In science, Kimmerer (p.42) notes that “no one asks the plants “who are you?” or “what can you tell us?” But these questions are at the heart of traditional ecological knowledge. Both approaches to environmental knowledge seek to answer questions about the living world, so what accounts for the difference?

In English, now the most common language in the world of academic scientific publishing. In English, only 30% of all of our words are verbs. In Potawatomi, 70% of all words are verbs. That difference means that words that are nouns for us in English -- rock, tree, river, soil --- are animate in Potawatomi. For example, the word bay, the geographic definition of which is body of water partially surrounded by land, is a noun in English, and inanimate. I went to the bay. I am the subject, and I alone am acting. In Potawatomi, the word for bay is *wiikwegamaa*, a verb. To *be* a bay. I went to *be with the bay*. I am not acting *on* the bay, but *with* the bay. The bay has its own agency, the bay is its own being. Language shapes the very way we know to even think about the world. Kimmerer calls this language in which everything is alive *the grammar of animacy*.

To illustrate her point about the grammar of animacy, Kimmerer (p.55) offers the following example: “imagine seeing your grandmother standing at the stove in an apron and then saying of her, “look, it is making soup. it has gray hair.” We might snicker at such a mistake, but we also recoil from it. In

English, we never refer to a member of our family or indeed to any person, as *it*. That would be a profound act of disrespect. *It* robs a person of selfhood and kinship, reducing a person to a mere thing.” Kimmerer (p.55) continues to say that “in Potawatomi and most other Indigenous languages, we use the same words to address the living world as we use for our family. because they are our family.”

If I were to write a scientific research proposal referring to the river or the salmon as members of my family, as beings that I have relationships with and ethical obligations to, I would never be funded. So it is that much of our western knowledge, knowledge which underpins our sense of how the world works and our place in it, does not make room for the nonhuman kin that we share the planet with as anything other than objects. But what changes when we translate our environmental knowledge into a grammar of animacy? Imagine treating the river, or an old oak, or a spawning salmon with the same respect and dignity that you treat your grandmother. Questions like “who are you” and “what can you tell us” not only make sense, but become critically important. If these questions informed our resource management, our relationship with the land that nourishes us might look a lot different.

Be it scientific or traditional ecological knowledge, our ways of knowing largely determine the ways in which we interact with the world, the considerations we take, the things we prioritize and the values we hold. I am an ecologist; I believe that the scientific method is a valuable tool for understanding the world. But there are questions about meaning and value that science cannot answer. To practice viewing the world with a grammar of animacy can help us deepen our relationships with the nonhuman world around us and nurture in ourselves a sense of wonder and connection. Try

it the next time you take a walk and notice a shrub, or a bird, or a stream.
Say hello, and ask who are you? Keep an open heart. Listen for an answer.