

“Do You Think That the Earth Loves You Back?”: Two Indigenous
Women’s Environmental Writing

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Abstract

Emily Pauline Johnson and Robin Wall Kimmerer, both Indigenous women, have contributed significantly to the field of environmental writing. Their writing, both in tune with the natural world and deeply personal, demonstrates a tie with the earth that an “immigrant culture” should seek to learn from. I demonstrate how Johnson’s poetry and prose contributed to the expanding field of environmental literature while also being rooted in ancient practices. Kimmerer’s writing can be read as an extension of Johnson’s while making extra space to critique contemporary scientific modes of thinking. Both women draw from the pain caused by settler colonialism, industrialization, and the climate crisis. They both encourage their readers to place themselves in a reciprocal relationship with the earth, as a remedy for that damage. These practices of reading and writing then produce a space where we might imagine entirely new ways of flourishing on earth.

Introduction

Two women, both eloquent yet gritty in their writing, posed their words to the world over a century apart. Emily Pauline Johnson (*Tekahionwake*) (1861-1913) and Robin Wall Kimmerer (1953-present) wrote during entirely different moments, and yet, they accomplish similar goals through their writing. I encountered Kimmerer years ago. Enthralled by her personal storytelling, I wanted to connect the ideas that she shares with the writings of other Indigenous women. Johnson’s work provides insight into the reception of Indigenous women in the past; she navigates spaces where women, especially women of color, have historically been unwelcome. Therefore she helped to tend to the path that Kimmerer now walks.

Kimmerer's contemporary voice can be linked to Johnson's experience. She talks of what it is like to live within two cultures and how this might be seen as a gift rather than a burden (Kimmerer 1 Dec. 2022). Johnson, her father a Mohawk chief, and her mother a British woman, experienced life in two polarized spaces. While it is clear that her audiences failed to understand her through an intersectional lens (not allowing space for her various identities to intersect and overlap), she was able to draw attention to many environmental and Native issues that might have otherwise gone unnoticed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Chapter one focuses on the life and writings of Emily Pauline Johnson (*Tekahionwake*) and her impact on her home of Vancouver, Canada. Johnson, like Kimmerer, presented Indigenous Knowledge and stories to a wide audience. These stories, in turn, allowed her readers to become more connected with the ground beneath their feet, intending that they might consider their actions in relation to the natural world. Although Johnson's name is rarely placed among the names of environmentalists at the turn of the twentieth century, her poetry positions her otherwise. Johnson's poetry demonstrates a deep reciprocal respect for the earth that brought readers to hopefully question their place in a settler-colonial society. She had a foot in both camps, showing support for the British Crown in the middle of her career while also criticizing White settlers for their brutality in some of her earlier/later works. She was in many ways a product of the forces surrounding her, gaining readers throughout England and Canada. However, in her later career, she uses this space she has claimed to her advantage, advocating for and uplifting the voices of her Indigenous friends. In this way, she navigates a public space that is not commonly occupied by Mohawk women, reaching wider audiences of people and prompting them to care for the land their ancestors likely stole from Native people. While there is no undoing the tragic effects of colonialism and stolen land, Johnson acts as a voice for her

homelands, encouraging non-Native people to make space for their own relationships with the environment.

Chapter two focuses on the writings of Robin Wall Kimmerer, primarily her book, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. Through her essays in the book, Kimmerer advocates for reciprocal relationships with the environment that Western culture continuously leaves behind as collateral damage. Kimmerer is an important comparison to Johnson because she is navigating a similarly public space in a contemporary world where more and more people are attempting to think outside of a colonized mindset. However, Kimmerer is also tasked with moving through the academic world as a Potawatomi woman, incorporating her own Indigenous Knowledge along the way. Therefore, this thesis attempts to acknowledge and honor both academic spaces and personal relationships to place. It is my hope that it gives thanks not only to Johnson and Kimmerer but to my home as well. I am increasingly grateful for the ways in which these women's words have brought me closer to the home I have spent two decades learning to deeply appreciate.

As I present an analysis of Johnson and Kimmerer's work in tandem with one another, I want to acknowledge that they did not have to offer the writing and Indigenous Knowledge that they do. And yet, they choose to give their words to the world. It is the hope that readers and academics alike approach these texts through a lens of appreciation and not appropriation. This means understanding that in order for Kimmerer and Johnson's stories to exist today as they do, Native communities have had to persevere through mass genocide and displacement from their lands. Despite this history, their words are presented through a language of love. So while reading these texts, I am not only grateful to the writers themselves but also to Native

communities and unnamed people who have preserved knowledge and story so that they might be shared today.

Tekahionwake and Kimmerer serve as just two examples of Indigenous women who have historically done the work to help others and themselves maintain a conscientious reciprocal relationship with place. Their works not only aptly criticize larger hegemonic powers—racism, capitalism, patriarchy, the list goes on—but they serve as a love letter to those in our world who wish to do better. It is my hope to present these women with the same love that I feel they have given me.

“Gentile Spirit Sorrow-Fed”: Emily Pauline Johnson’s Environmental Writing

It is March 1913 in Vancouver, Canada. Mourners step out to line the streets. Public offices close for the civic holiday and flags fly at half-mast. The beloved Emily Pauline Johnson, *Tekahionwake*, has passed away leaving behind her poetry and prose in the hearts of all Canadians—Indigenous or not. While the atmosphere of this day can only be imagined, it serves as a testament to the power behind her words, leaving her etched into the history of Canadian literature. She was an avid canoeist and Johnson’s poetry poses an intimate consideration of her relationship to the natural world; but, her words dig deeper than a general fondness for the land, addressing her friends who have settled on stolen Canadian land. Thus, her words serve as an example of how one deepens a complex relationship with the environment through writing in order to build a more enhanced sense of self.

Through her performance, poetry, and prose, Emily Pauline Johnson (1861-1913) validates her complex Indigenous relationship with the Canadian landscape. Her writing pulls her reader through her multiplicity of identities: Mohawk, British, Woman, and Canadian. As her writing ebbs and flows through various aspects of her intersectionality, much of the scholarship on her work delves into how her relationship with the Canadian land shaped her identity and writings (Brown, Gerson, Keller). However, it has little been considered how her reciprocal relationship with the landscape molded her into an environmentalist who afforded a large portion of her love to the natural world, advocating for its protection and respect.

As she made her living as a touring performer, she presented herself to primarily White audiences through a dualistic identity, taking the stage in bear claw jewelry and a buckskin dress and returning later in a silk gown. Therefore, her audiences were more likely to see her identities as operating on a binary rather than together in a single person. Johnson presented a multiplicity

of identities while reading her poetry and stories about her relationship to the colonized land of Canada. As Betty Keller explains in *Pauline Johnson: First Aboriginal Voice of Canada*, Johnson spent much of her time in European circles but kept strong ties to her father's Mohawk side of the family. In 1886 Johnson assumed her great grandfather's Native name, *Tekahionwake*, assuming an allegiance to the Mohawk people (Keller 15-16). Therefore, Johnson's dual modes of identity operate not only in her attire but in her choice of name. Her complex and oftentimes conflicting relationship with identity and self exists in most of her art, but more explicitly mid-career in *Canadian Born* (1903). Later in her career, works like *Legends of Vancouver* (1911) present her stronger Indigenous relationship with herself and the land. Especially in later volumes, her poetry reconfigures her relationship with the environment, bringing her readers into a space where they can cherish their homes while questioning their place within them.

Carole Gerson, who has published extensively on Johnson, acknowledges that Johnson's work is typically seen as an act of resistance against colonialism by critics. However, her audience was composed mainly of Euro-Canadian readers who valued her stories about Indigenous homelands, bringing them closer to their new home. As Gerson states, Johnson fulfilled Vancouver's "need for historical grounding and cultural legitimization" by writing texts that "enabled White Canadians to feel at home by giving them Aboriginal stories that they could appropriate into their desire to belong to the places to which they or their families had immigrated" (Gerson 46-47). For Johnson, storytelling is an act of relationship with the land that she willingly shares in her writing. Her words are offered as a gift to those who share entirely different identities than her own, providing a space for connection and understanding. Gerson presents an important dilemma when it comes to Johnson's choice to share Indigenous

Knowledge: *What happens when White Canadians find solace in knowledge that is not their own?*

Johnson was confined by her time and its lack of intersectional understanding; it is technically anachronistic to refer to her experiences and thoughts as intersectionality because the term did not show up until it was presented by Black feminist theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw, but in a contemporary sense it is important to afford her identities this space for overlap. Just because her audience likely did not view her through an intersectional lens does not mean that Johnson herself should remain confined to separate identities.

It is not just Johnson's ethnic identity that challenges a colonized perspective of the world, but also her feminine relationship with nature. Her canoe challenged normative European masculinity as a symbol of agency, independence, and interconnectedness with wilderness primarily granted to men. As Kristen Brown points out in "Queering the Waters: The Subversive Potential in E. Pauline Johnson's Canoe," Johnson's canoe has been interpreted by critics as "a feminist tool of destabilization...as means to an imperial end" (Brown 141-122). The canoe opens a space for existing beyond settler colonial structures. With the rise of Canadian nationalism during the nineteenth century (associated with the domination of nature and women), Johnson's existence as both a female writer and canoeist destabilized patriarchal interpretations of the world imposed by the British Crown. The image of a woman navigating vast spaces in her canoe presents an image of feminine agency and strength. Her poetry about canoeing brings a sense of intimacy and love that highlights a certain interconnectedness between human beings and the environment that breaks down the man-made hierarchy between the two. Johnson claims her home through storytelling without establishing ownership over it; in this way, she affords as much agency to the land as she does herself. In addition to the peaceful ambiance of Johnson's

canoe, there is a lurking sadness underneath much of her writing representing the loss of Native territory contradictory to her support of the British Flag that is presented in some of her mid-career poetry. This contradiction, however, should not be viewed as a mistake but is rather representative of the environment Johnson was raised in with her father, a Mohawk chief, and her mother, an English immigrant.

Johnson is no stranger to obscure writing and performance. Her poetry embodies more ambiguity than her prose, but both connect to her intersectional identity (Gerson and Strong-Boag 137). As Steve Dickinson points out in “‘To Hear the Call of the Singing Firs’: (Re)Reading E. Pauline Johnson’s *Lost Lagoon* as Eco Elegy,” the time of the poem, the place, and “the narrator’s very existence are all obscured in Johnson’s poem” (3). Even the mourning that the speaker, arguably Johnson, is experiencing in the poem is obfuscated; whether it is for a person or a place doesn’t seem to matter (although I would argue it is both), this state of perpetual mourning brings to light the question: *Why does the poem matter if nothing can change?* But, underneath the surface, Pauline dips her paddle into her reader’s sense of motivation. The poem’s temporal complexity—it is set at dusk—reminds readers that the past exists with a recollection of the present (Dickinson 19). While the moment remains still, the space is liminal and will not last.

The majority of scholarship focuses on Johnson’s tours and early-mid poetry, but when contemplating the person she became and the legacy she left, it seems important that we consider some of the final words she left for interpretation. Her poem “The Lost Lagoon” is proposed by Steve Dickinson as an eco-elegy in which Johnson mourns the changing of the Canadian landscape; however, Dickinson fails to consider how the Mohawk woman might find motivation in mourning. I argue that Johnson seems to eschew the static state of sadness as embodied by an

entire community and rather presents it as a space for exploration and healing. Many of Johnson's poems—such as “Fire-Flowers” (1903)—tell a story of resilience and rebirth. When reading “The Lost Lagoon” in the context of Johnson's other poetry and the tale of “Deadman's Island” (the story in which the poem was originally published), it presents itself as rather beautiful—a place of war and fighting transformed into one of peace and contemplation. For Johnson, the Lost Lagoon in Stanley Park becomes a place of rest, both physically and metaphorically.

We know that Johnson felt a significant kinship with Stanley Park because she fought until the day she died to be buried there; with this decision, her identity rests as Indigenous Canadian as she chooses to remain forever in a place she associates with her canoe and her dear friend, Joe Capilano, who tells the stories in *Legends of Vancouver*. Johnson met Capilano in London; in 1906 he arrived to place grievances before the King as new game laws denied Native people the right to hunt deer in the spring and summer and there were new restrictions on fishing that would negatively affect Native populations. Johnson traveled from Berkshire to London in order to spend time with Capilano and the others in his group as the King was delayed and she could mitigate the language barrier between Capilano's group and those attempting to understand their grievances. This would be the beginning of a long and impactful friendship for Johnson and Capilano based upon the group's understanding that “when she leaves, they know at least that they have one person on their side in this vast city” (Keller 102). Their friendship would play a role not only in Johnson's poetry, writing, and publishing but also in her relationship with the land and Deadman's Island where she wished to one day be buried.

However, Johnson's final days are tainted with pushback from the admiralty as no one had been buried in Stanley Park since the area was colonized (Keller 135). With the agreement

that Johnson was cremated, Johnson's ashes were buried in Stanley Park along with a copy of *Legends of Vancouver* and *Flint and Feather* (a complete collection of her poetry); the jingoistic *Canadian Born* is left out. It can be inferred that upon her death, her loved ones did not find the book to hold as much significance as her later work. Her impact on Canadian literature can not be overstated. Her legacy is reinforced by the consistent republishing of her work in the years that follow her death, showing that Canadians and other pursuers of poetry alike continue to return to her work to find a sense of comfort in the environment.

Relevant Ecocriticism of Johnson's Time

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a deep love for nature (through a primarily Eurocentric lens) did not come without a sense of concern. While Emily Pauline Johnson falls into the category of a revolutionary and groundbreaking Indigenous Canadian writer, it is important to consider that her commentary on a changing environment did not stand alone for its time. While scientific claims surrounding human-caused environmental degradation were still highly questioned, there was writing that supported Johnson's critiques on environmental harm—she would have known about the environmental susceptibility to degradation in areas other than Canada. And, while her works are primarily autobiographical as she writes about the places she lives, breathes, and paddles in, she was not alone in her eco-sadness.

John Ruskin contemplates in "The Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century" (1884) how the lake district in England is no longer the home that it once was. Speaking on the trees being whipped by the wind: "I watch them this moment as I write—an expression of anger as well as of fear and distress" (Ruskin 50). For Ruskin, the clouds and wind have changed from the rather

comforting presence that many Romantic poets wrote about to one that is “panic-struck” and “feverish” (50). Clouds, which were once considered one of nature’s most perfect masterpieces, become associated with ugliness and gloom. With the lengthy description of clouds and sky, Ruskin acknowledges that his assertions are radical, and will therefore receive resistance from the public. However, he persists with the urgency and fear for what could be lost if the storm cloud is not stopped for it is “guardedly and absolutely true” (iv). Although “The Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century” is commonly interpreted as a metaphor for the plethora of wrongdoing that plagues society, it remains clear that the piece serves as a warning for what may ensue along with the rise of industrialization (Virdis 629). As Jesse Oak Taylor notes in *The Sky of Our Manufacture*, London at the end of the nineteenth century was a “novel ecosystem, a manufactured environment in which every scrap of ground and breath of air bore traces of human action” (1-2). London serves as a microcosm for what the world might become; it is evidence that people’s modes of living have the ability to make the places they live less hospitable. Taylor mentions the thoughts of George Perkins Marsh who “compared the observer of ecological change to the poet, the painter, and the sculptor” (2). Art was, and still is, a primary way people developed relationships with the natural world and contributed to spaces of ecocritical discussion. Johnson was contributing knowledge at a pivotal time for environmental writing in which the environment was changing in Europe at an increasingly rapid rate.

Pauline Johnson takes Ruskin’s call to recognize the changing environment a step further in her poetry. Beneath the surface of her words lies the very same warning: be wary of industrialization and the humans who dare to gain power over Nature. But rather than viewing the natural world as an Other, Johnson considers Nature as a friend and a piece of herself. Therefore, Johnson’s words complete Ruskin’s circle of thought as she works to build a

reciprocal relationship with nature rather than a separatist one; it is not something to save just for its physical beauty. Through the domination of Nature, we not only harm the natural world's beauty and the places we call home, but we harm our souls, limiting our ability to flourish in the world that created us. Johnson's poetry provides space for concepts that are even more radical—they consider our environment as another being that embodies a certain humanness that if lost, will leave us without passion and purpose in life. When we lose parts of our environment due to industry, due to selfishness, we destroy ourselves in the process.

As seen in “The Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century,” the British were the primary drivers behind industrialization, and yet, Johnson does not critique these choices as one might expect. Johnson traveled to London twice during her career, in 1894 and 1906, and was received well by her audiences. In between her two trips, Johnson published *Canadian Born* (1903), a collection of her poems that show her grappling with the complexity of her identity as Mohawk, British, and Canadian. Although Johnson often performed in Mohawk dress, Kate Flint notes in her essay “Transatlantic Modernity and Native Performance” that “many London reviewers did not seem to have any clue as to her ethnic background, assuming that to be Canadian was automatically to be white” (192). Johnson spent much of her time in White British circles and it is likely that Johnson knew the implications of who was assumed to be Canadian and who was not. Therefore, her choice of various attire representing the various cultures she grew up in demonstrates a push and pull between identities that coexist within Pauline Johnson, *Tekahionwake*.

Canadian Born: Contradiction in Tekahionwake

Although Johnson aims to unify her identities, we still find contradictions in her poetry. *Canadian Born*, which contains the poem of post-fire regeneration “Fire-flowers,” also displays adamant support for the British flag, and yet, Johnson acknowledges her separateness from the Crown at the same time. Johnson’s inscription to *Canadian Born* is as follows:

Let him who is Canadian Born regard these poems as written to
himself—whether he may be my paleface compatriot who has given to me
his right hand of good fellowship, in the years I have appealed to him by
pen and platform, or whether he be that dear Red brother of whatsoever
tribe or Province, it matters not—White race and Red are one if they are
not but Canadian born. (Johnson v)

Johnson provides a certain openness, warranted or not, to the colonizer in her inscription; her definition of “Canadian” casts a wide net through these words. She addresses the “paleface compatriot” who has given a right hand, demonstrating that she feels supported by her Anglo-Canadian counterparts. However, the restrictive clause is important as only some “palefaces” are included in her regard. Her words also remain strictly gendered, addressing “himself” which implicates herself as a Native woman contributing to the knowledge of Canadian identity. Through both her writing and her performance, Johnson appealed to a White audience; both are united under this shared experience of attempting to connect to a more-than-human space. However, Johnson ends her note with the message that the people are not unified by blood, but rather by the land they were born on—interesting considering her mother was an immigrant. This statement is heavily contradictory to much of her poetry

published both before and after *Canadian Born* which turns strongly towards Indigenous ways of knowing rather than the all-inclusive Canadian ones.

Various poems published in her earlier work *The White Wampum* (1895) display a strong distaste for the White settler as they recount the terrors Native people have experienced at the hands of the colonizer. For example, “As Red Men Die” notes the bravery of Johnson’s ancestors and those who persisted while held captive by the Huron torturers; “The Cattle Thief,” one of Johnson’s more popularly analyzed poems, hosts a woman’s words on how Native people have been destroyed by their White counterparts and tries to convince the White colonizers to respect the body of the Indigenous man they have recently killed. Lastly, in “A Cry from an Indian Wife” a wife grieves knowing her husband will die fighting against the colonizer, but at the same time understands the importance of resisting the power against her people. The poem ends with the sadness that is caused by the “greed of white men’s hands” and the lack of acknowledgment that “Indians own these lands” (lines 21, 59). “A Cry from an Indian Wife” also practices empathy for the White women whose husbands and sons will die fighting too; however, this is an empathy that they do not extend to Johnson herself. Unlike the introduction and various poems within *Canadian Born*, these poems convey a strong separation between the Native people of Canada and the British colonizer. However, the poems are written with her White audience in mind as she consciously functions as a kind of “translator” on topics of Native tragedy.

Johnson takes many aspects of British colonization into her own identity as she grapples with the tragedy of the past and the reality of the present world she is writing in—and writing for. The poem “Canadian Born” is emblematic of the book’s inscription; it praises not only the Canadian nation and land but the Canada that is controlled by the British Crown. The poem takes on a rather boastful tone as it states, “And all have one credential that entitles us / to brag— /

That we were born in Canada beneath the / British flag.” (lines 13-16). Johnson goes as far here to say that a British-Canadian identity is not merely a unifier between all people born in Canada, but something to be proud of, something that sets them apart from the rest of the world and provides a sense of entitlement. The majority of the poem continues affording bragging rights to those born in Canada beneath the British crown; it is the third stanza that presents the most contradictions to the poems mentioned from *The White Wampum*:

We’ve yet to make our money, we’ve yet
to make our fame,
But we have gold and glory in our clean
colonial name;
And every man’s a millionaire if only he can
brag
That he was born in Canada beneath the
British flag. (lines 17-24)

After reading “Canadian Born” one can not help but beg the question: *Is this merely a part of the performance? Or is this evidence of the true duality of her identity?* She not only embraces the British flag, but a “clean colonial name,” implying that there are benefits to the colonization of her people. As someone who grew up white in the United States, I do not feel that it is my right to make this call because I do not know what it is like to grapple with the contradictions of my ethnic identity; but, the writing of this thesis has made me question my belonging in place. That is to say, I think that there is importance in leaving some of these questions unresolved—to embrace the conflict between Johnson’s identity and the conflict that is felt between the polarity of her poetry might just very well be the point of it all. It is clear that Johnson, in both her poetry

and her presentation, made a point to embody an Indigenous identity and a British one, making her true opinions on the colonized state of Canada rather convoluted. To claim her support of the British Crown as merely performative is to disregard the conflict that survives within her physical body.

That being said, she made a financial living off of her time in England as well as Anglo-Canadians themselves which is important to keep in mind as we read what was presented to these audiences. As her writing does not exist in one direction, neither does her person. However, it seems that this was something that Johnson learned to embrace rather than struggle with. As Johnson purportedly said in an interview, “Oh consistency! How can one be consistent until the world ceases to change with the changing days?” (Mackay 2). Pauline Johnson herself is a product of change and the movement and colonization of people across the globe—the world she grew up in was far from consistent and her person embodies the history that raised her.

However, Johnson has poetry in *Canadian Born* that addresses the pain she feels for the land that has been claimed wrongfully by the White man. For Johnson, the land does not embody the same beauty that it once did; “The Legend of Qu’Appelle Valley” embodies a distaste for not only how the land has been changed, but how it has been owned— “I listen heartsick, while the hunters tell / Why the white men named the valley The Qu’Appelle” (lines 125-126). These lines embody what it means to be an observer of how colonization interacts with land. It is clear to Johnson that while White people enjoy the Canadian lands, she is left heartsick as they name the places that were not theirs in the first place.

Contradictions aside, *Canadian Born* was not received well by critics; it was said to have been a disappointing book as it contained many poems that had already been published (Keller 86). In a contemporary sense, *Legends of Vancouver* hosts new readers every year whereas

Canadian Born seems to be largely forgotten by casual readers. After its reception, Johnson turned herself towards adventure writing that embodied Indigenous Knowledge and it would be some time before she released new poetry to the public. The poetry that she releases in the future indulges in a more personal relationship with land and the memories that it holds.

“Fire-Flowers”: Finding Consolation in Destruction

“Fire-flowers,” comes before “The Lost Lagoon” in Johnson’s work. Published originally in *Canadian Born*, the poem portrays a complex relationship between humans and nature that takes into account the harm and healing that occurs between both communities. Neither humans nor nature takes a passive role in the poem; both are active in their intention and interaction with each other. While the human impact by White settlers on the Lost Lagoon is primarily negative, “Fire-Flowers” displays a relationship of mutual healing between humans and Nature that is often overlooked in the discussion of mending humankind’s relationship with the earth. The poem describes a forest fire and the events that soon follow after the flames ruthlessly demolish everything in its path. First, the flames sweep the land for all it is worth, feeding off the fuel that has spent years, or even generations, growing. Second, the fire provides a vast opportunity for regrowth; with a newly cleared landscape, delicate plants take root. While the cause of the fire in the poem is unknown, as forest fires become increasingly destructive in the western United States and Canada, it becomes harder to accept fire as a natural, cleansing process. However, when looking at fire from a purely ecological perspective, it too serves a purpose and holds an important role regarding the life and death of all things. In fact, controlled burns have long been practiced in Native societies demonstrating that they hold an understanding as to how fire is

necessary in supporting a healthy ecosystem. In this sense, fire acts in reciprocity too as it lends a hand to the flowers and the prosperity of the land itself.

The flowers that come to replenish the land with growth and color are anthropomorphized as they participate in the human characteristic of healing (or perhaps it is the other way around, and we are in fact capable of acting, thinking, and healing like the plants themselves). As Robin Wall Kimmerer explains in *Braiding Sweetgrass*, plants are our greatest teachers and therefore, healing is a quality that we can learn from them. As “Fire-Flowers” in *Canadian Born* reads:

And only where forest fires have sped,
 Scorching relentlessly the cool north lands,
 A sweet wild flower lifts its purple head,
 And, like some gentle spirit sorrow-fed,
 It hides the scars with almost human
 hands.

And only to the heart that knows of grief,
 Of desolating fire, of human pain,
 There comes some purifying sweet belief,
 Some fellow-feeling beautiful, if brief. (Johnson 54)

Oftentimes, flowers are the first to arise from the dirt after a fire; they spring up from the ash and finely left soil before anything else even begins to sprout. Thus, an enchanted world is created—a blackened and burnt forest blanketed with delicate petals. As Johnson writes, the flowers arise “only where the forest fires have spread”; they are special to a certain type of

mourning and healing that can only be prompted with such an intense conflagration (line 1). In this sense, the flowers emulate healing for both human and non-human subjects. In this poem, their identities are interlaced into one earthly being. Even when the landscape is harmed, we are connected through a physical embodiment of our human pain, the flowers come back for us and give us a place to rest—the fire cannot burn forever. The flowers demonstrate time and time again a resounding resilience that a person can only hope to embody. The poem is a celebration of the revival of life itself not only in the natural environment but within ourselves as well.

Much like “The Lost Lagoon,” “Fire-Flowers” employs a sense of duality between the speaker and the natural world they are inherently a part of—therefore, healing is a cyclical process, meaning that one can not heal while the other perishes. The poem focuses primarily on the impact of grief and its translation into beauty and a continuation of life. Although the landscape is undoubtedly forever changed, the blackened trees and gray soil are made beautiful in an eerie flowery forest. Reflective of the emotions one might experience when their home is destroyed and then rebuilt over time, the fire-flowers sweep through the burnt landscape, replenishing the sense of home that has been lost to the flame. And although a home lost can never be replenished in its identical form, a new sense of home is created, one that is both reminiscent of the past and hopeful for the future.

Here the flower is an example of human presence in Nature that is comforting, just as Nature is comforting to humans. Representative of a relationship based on reciprocity, the human flower provides solace for the land just as the blossoms provide solace for the speaker. The reader is reminded of a certain commonality between themselves and nature as “lands” rhymes with “hands”; both serve to present intentional care for the other. Although the fire serves a crucial purpose in the health of forests, it is not kind, and it takes the land “relentlessly,”

destroying the calm, cool lands that Johnson knows all too well. That being said, while the fire-flowers represent the very antithesis of the fire (prosperity, life, hope, etc.), they need the fire in order to flourish. So, after the fire burns and the land cools, the fire-flowers lift their purple heads. Just as people are encouraged to lift their heads after tragedy, the flowers arise from the ash. As the stanza comes to a close, the scars of the earth are covered with “almost human hands,” portraying the fact that while the scars never fully disappear themselves, they find ways to fade over time. While the flowers will grow and the trees and animals will eventually return, there is a sense that the land does not forget the fire—it holds a sense of collective memory similar to the souls of people. It is possible to read the fire in this poem as parallel to colonization. Just as *Tekahionwake* has watched her home suffer at the hands of White colonizers, she is aware of the land’s resilience, but it seems that her heart will forever ache for a certain image of home that exists now only as a memory.

Returning to the concept of mourning, the spirit is “sorrow-fed” and yet finds a sense of healing after the fire. It is crucial to mention that the flowers come together here not as individual beings on separate stems, but rather a collective whole sustained from the same piece of land. The second and final stanza focuses more on the flowers that may persist after grief has been processed. The fire becomes less literal as it is coupled with “human pain.” However, when considering Johnson’s other poetry, Johnson writes about the pain of Native people compared to humanity as a whole. The poem exists as an entire system of ideas that considers how Native people’s relationship with the environment has caused them to feel intense pain for an increasingly hurting world. The line between flower and human is blurred as they share a single heart that is familiar with unifying grief. Just as the fire helps to purify the forest, there comes a time when one finds moments of clarity in an ever-changing world. The relief that soon follows

is brief; like mourning, relief can not be a perpetual state, but rather one to be grateful for when the time comes.

As Johnson writes, beauty is a temporary concept; the flowers can not last forever. But, this is far from a bleak statement; Johnson recognizes the cyclical nature of all living things. The flowers will one day perish, just as we will one day die, but that is not to say that they will not return again one day after the fire sweeps the land. The return of the fire is presented as an uncomfortable reminder through the slant rhyme, “pain” and “again.” The slant rhyme parallels that although pain returns, it is not perfectly cyclical and is different with each resurgence. While it is comforting to be reminded that we have a natural inclination for healing, it is a constant reminder that pain can never exist solely in the past; it will come again and again with the fire, and it exists every day in the scars we eventually learn to conceal.

In the poem, grief is beautiful, concealing the ugly hurt and burned soil that lies underneath. Johnson brings her reader to consider innately human qualities that can be helpful to our environment, as well as qualities that exist within the environment that live within ourselves—we are all mere creatures after all. She draws away from the anthropocentric lens that often presents the environment as an Other for people to interact with rather than something that humans are inherently a part of. On top of this, she surrenders the idea that grief and emotion are not concepts that can be claimed as entirely human; the relationship goes both ways. She mentions that the fire is “of human pain,” and yet, it is not clear that humans are the only ones to feel said pain. In order to truly grieve, one is brought to contemplate their place within all things; this contemplation is essential in understanding a relationship of reciprocity where we do our best to aid a grieving world—and in turn aid our grieving selves. It is in this place of mourning

that we find a sense of motivation, a sense that we can do better for our homes and in that, we can do better for ourselves.

“Fire-flowers” presents an inkling of many ideas Johnson would put forth more explicitly in her later works; Johnson presents the power of Indigenous storytelling to Vancouverites longing to connect with the ground they live on. Arguably one of Johnson’s most notable works, *Legends of Vancouver* (1911), was released much later in her career and marked some of her final thoughts on the environment and places she spent her entire career writing about. The complex ways Johnson thinks about the land in relation to settler colonialism marks her as an environmentalist of her time, something critics have long neglected to acknowledge. The book takes on significant personal importance for Johnson. It not only holds the legends of the place she called home, but it connects her to her late friend, Joe Capilano.

Johnson’s *Legends of Vancouver*

After her death on March 7, 1913, *Legends of Vancouver* would take on a life of its own; it would be reprinted and reread by many, propelling Johnson’s career as a writer long after her death. To this day, it remains one of her most popular works; the reviews by both scholars and casual readers are numerous, marking the book as well-received today. *Canadian Born*, on the other hand, has received very little contemporary feedback, marking it as a collection of the past that does not resonate with modern readers. Therefore, it should be noted that the contemporary image of Emily Pauline Johnson may be somewhat distorted from her historical figure. Without a reading of *Canadian Born* in contrast to *Legends of Vancouver*, *The White Wampum*, and her other works, readers lack the capacity to see her in all of her complexity.

Many of the publications after her death provide a lens into Johnson's public reception. Editions from 1913 and later provide a biographical notice that talks about her life concerning the land she spent her life building a relationship with. Her ashes themselves, which upon Johnson's wishes were buried in Stanley Park after much pushback, represent Johnson's identity not primarily as Indigenous or British, but as an environmentalist who considered her relationship with the Canadian landscape to be of top priority (Keller 135). The editorial referenced in *Legends of Vancouver* from the "Vancouver Daily Province" describes Johnson not through her relationships with people, although they are noted, but through her enjoyment of the natural world. Reminiscent of her poem "The Lost Lagoon" the editorial states, "The wind in the great firs and the roaring of the mountain torrents were music in her ears" (*Legends of Vancouver* xiv). Although it is heavily present in *Canadian Born*, there is no note of her support of the British Crown. That being said, the colonialistic mindset she may have taken up at some point during her life (or had imposed upon her) has seemingly faded to allow space for her relationship with Nature to grow.

In *Legends of Vancouver*, she presents land as Nature instead of as nation. Her later writings act in contradiction to the earlier ones that applaud the Canada that exists under the British flag. The legends draw upon Indigenous Knowledge that existed long before the country was impacted by settler colonialism and therefore do the work of supporting Indigenous cultures that have persisted in a postcolonial world. The legend entitled "The Lions" takes note that these stories have remained largely unknown by White Canadians who therefore lack the knowledge and understanding necessary to fully appreciate the landscape in which they live. This legend about the peaks, as told by Joe Capilano, is introduced by Johnson:

But the “call of the blood” was stronger, and presently he referred to the Indian legend of those peaks—a legend that I have reason to believe is absolutely unknown to thousands of Pale-faces who look upon “The Lions” daily, without the love for them that is in the Indian heart, without the knowledge of the secret of “The Two Sisters.” The legend was intensely fascinating as it left his lips in the quaint broken English that is never so dulcet as when it slips from an Indian tongue. (*Legends of Vancouver* 3)

Here, Johnson acknowledges that the legends are widely unknown by White Canadians, providing a window into land appreciation. Native populations of the area do not refer to the peaks as “The Lions” but rather know them as “The Two Sisters.” For Johnson, there is a certain love that exists within the “Indian heart” that enhances her relationship with the world as well as her relationship with her Native identity. However, the publication of *Legends of Vancouver* is proof that Johnson believed that her White counterparts have much to learn from her history and story. In this sense, the stories are not gate-kept.

Johnson values the tales when spoken as they were first told in their original Squamish language, but they exist here in “quaint broken English” so that the tales might be shared with those people whose ancestors colonized the very land they seek to appreciate. Through the act of writing down oral tales, Johnson provides the opportunity for White Canadians to learn about the land they live on. As noted by Carole Gerson, in *Legends of Vancouver*, Johnson “attracted a national audience by granting access to a new imaginative landscape without asking Canadians to confront the difficult questions about land ownership and displacement that animate Johnson's most outspoken poems” (Gerson 47). It is important to note here that *Tekahionwake* did not have to do this; she did not have to provide this gift. But, she considered that the land, and therefore the people as well, might be better off with this knowledge.

It is my hope that Johnson's readers take these stories with an abundance of gratitude; their telling not only works to maintain an Indigenous relationship with the environment but strengthens and creates a positive relationship for White Canadians, working in contrast to British industrialization. Once people become aware of their relationship with the environment, their lives become less anthropocentric and colonized, creating a space in which the natural world is not an Other but rather an equal living being.

Whether she was fully aware of this during the early 1900s or not, the building of the Nature-human relationship is, in many ways, the foundation of Johnson's legacy. While *Legends of Vancouver* was originally supposed to be titled *Legends of the Capilanos*, the title was decided because it was thought that the book would sell better with Vancouver in the title (Keller 132). Capitalistic intentions aside, this consideration proves Johnson knew her readers were longing to connect with the place they lived; in this sense, they were missing a part of their identities that Johnson knew how to fill. In contrast to *Canadian Born*, *Legends of Vancouver* was received exceptionally well—the first thousand copies sold out quickly and later autographed copies sold for a whopping two dollars (Keller 133).

It is clear that Johnson knew the importance of publishing the book before her death; she was sick with cancer during most of her time writing and her friends supported her financially so that she could complete her book. Her prose left a significant mark on the definition of her later career and reestablished her identity as a female writer during the time; she joined the Canadian Womens' Press Club in 1910 as the fight for Canadian women's suffrage began (Keller 160). While she wowed audiences during her time performing, her writing left a lasting impression on the minds of readers. Just as *Legends of Vancouver* has been published and republished over and

over again, Johnson's identity towards the public has been ever-evolving, even over a century past her death.

It is in *Legends of Vancouver* where "The Lost Lagoon" is originally published as a preface to the tale "Deadman's Island" (which is the original title of the poem). The island was originally a place of fighting between Indigenous groups, but for Johnson, it is a place of peace and contentment in her canoe; it is marked by time spent well with her friend. It makes sense that Johnson changed the name of the poem considering that her relationship with the place does not parallel the brutal fighting between different Native groups that once occurred there. However, the end of the tale does pay some ode to her British heritage as Capilano notes that Deadman's Island is the name given to the place by the colonizers; the original name given by the Squamish is The Island of Dead Men (*Legends of Vancouver* 123). Upon original inscription, Johnson does not honor the place's Native title, but she later turns away from both names entirely with "The Lost Lagoon" showing how she grappled with ownership and the renaming of places over time. The tale works to honor the Native men who died there pre-colonization. This tale not only creates a relationship between Johnson's Lost Lagoon and the reader, but it deepens their Indigenous Knowledge of place.

The fact that *Legends of Vancouver* was consistently republished after Johnson's death means that the knowledge not only continued to spread but was valued by her Canadian audience. Although Johnson dies and can no longer serve as a protector of the Lost Lagoon and the land that she wrote about, her writing steps in and fills this role for her; new readers continue to consume her words as though they were written yesterday.

“The Lost Lagoon”: Caring For a Hurting World

Much of Emily Pauline Johnson’s poetry focuses on the celebration of the harmonious relationship between nature and humanity. However, many of her later poems discuss the relationship with more complexity. “The Lost Lagoon” (1911) and “Fire-Flowers” portray the often painful yet healing reciprocal relationship between Nature and humanity; nestled in an abundance of reciprocity, people and nature work to heal each other in Pauline Johnson’s poetry. Yet, a sense of sadness and a solemn disposition arises when people fail to participate in this reciprocal relationship. The complexity of E. Pauline Johnson’s poems displays the ache one feels for a hurting world long before the anthropogenic climate crisis was brought to the forefront of public consciousness. Her poetry exists almost an entire century ahead of its time with the ability to pull on the heartstrings of readers who ponder their place on an increasingly threatened planet.

“The Lost Lagoon” emphasizes a valuable connection between all beings: humans, plants, and water alike. The poem takes place during dusk. In this liminal space, there is an opportunity for change in the speakers’ mourning; there is a certain anxiety that comes along with change, particularly the alteration of home. The first two stanzas of the poem paint the lagoon as the sun sets:

It is dusk on the Lost Lagoon,
And we two dreaming the dusk away,
Beneath the drift of a twilight grey—
Beneath the drowse of an ending day
And the curve of a golden moon.

It is dark on the Lost Lagoon
 And gone are the depths of haunting blue
 The grouping gulls, and the old canoe,
 The singing firs, and the dusk and—you,
 And gone is the golden moon. (“The Lost Lagoon” lines 1-10)

Much like the fading of light during dusk, the poem moves swiftly yet gradually, and by the second stanza, “It is dark on the Lost Lagoon,” (“The Lost Lagoon” line 5). Just as the Lost Lagoon turns dark and is seemingly lost from view, an unknown “you” appears, reconfiguring the reader’s line between people and the environment as rather indistinct: “Imagining them together involves closeness between humanity and nature; it also implicitly involves understanding nature” (Dickinson 21). As the presumed speaker of the poem, Johnson wants to see herself as a part of her surroundings, as part of the Lost Lagoon herself. Rather than placing an Indigenous person in the foreground, everything becomes rested in place and emphasis remains on the Lost Lagoon. As darkness falls on the water, “the narrator’s very existence are all obscured in Johnson’s poem” as she mourns for a place, and perhaps person, that can no longer be reached (Dickinson 3). However, while lost in her environment, the poem does not disregard the separateness that people have created between themselves and the environment; without such a boundary, natural places like the Lost Lagoon would never be lost. However, what is made most important is the speaker’s longing to strive for that connection.

By the third and final stanza, and as implied by the title, readers come to understand that the lagoon is merely a dream. The poetess longs to plunge her paddle into the lagoon and to hear the wind in the trees. The color of the water changes from deep and haunting blue to purple; red is added into the mix signifying the canoeist’s fire that still exists within:

O! Lure of the Lost Lagoon,—
 I dream to-night that my paddle blurs
 The purple shade where the seaweed stirs—
 I hear the call of the singing firs

In the hush of the golden moon. (“The Lost Lagoon” lines 11-15)

Although the poem embodies the essence of an elegy, the canoe must move forward. At this moment, the moon is gone, but it can still be heard and, unlike the lagoon, it can not be lost because it cannot be touched by people. In this stanza, the speaker becomes one with Nature as the “paddle blurs” and enters a dream-like state. Additionally, “seaweed stirs,” the firs sing, all in the presence of “the hush of the golden moon,” anthropomorphizing the speaker’s surroundings and drawing them towards a sense of humanness. For Dickinson, “erasing the difference between subject and object, or between consciousness and the ‘other’ of nature, runs the risk of reducing everything to sameness” (23). However, who is to say that sameness holds a negative connotation? As the individual and nature blur into one being the reader is reminded that, in its purest form, the difference between humans and Nature is slim—or perhaps, nonexistent. Without the focus solely on the speaker, the poem retains the important message that the oneness between Nature, the canoe, and its paddler is of the highest value.

The end of the poem blurs the past, present, and future, creating a tone that is solemnly comforting. As the speaker enters this dream state, a new concept of time emerges. While everything has turned dark, the speaker turns to rely on their sense of sound. The singing firs are still there, producing sound as the wind whips through their living bodies. Just like all other things that rise and set, the moon, while it can not be seen, still exists (and in the poem, can

be heard), implying that while our hearts may break for the land the poetess has lost, it is in a way, still there—leaving space for us to connect with a hurting world.

Steve Dickinson analyzes “The Lost Lagoon” as an elegy. He argues that the poem conveys a mourning for something that is not completely lost, and yet, the temporal disruptions create a sense that the Lost Lagoon has been lost in time; therefore, the poem functions as an elegy (Dickinson 25). Furthermore, Dickinson poses the question: “By who[m] or what is it an elegy for?”—Dickinson fails to consider writing as an act of reciprocity towards the world, as well as a way of taking care of ourselves (6). The writing is not *for* someone or something but serves as a space for Johnson to connect with the land that she knows well. The ambiguity in the poem carries over into its purpose of being with something rather than serving it. As Dickinson mentions, “it remains unclear, at least initially, if the lagoon is the subject of the elegy or the source of consolation” (6). I believe that it is both; Johnson’s memory of the lost lagoon is consoling as it reminds her of her oneness with the water that she navigates with her paddle. When it comes to an analysis of mourning in “The Lost Lagoon” it is crucial to remember that relationships are never a one-way street, meaning that the Lost Lagoon is mourning its human friends too.

However, there are complications when it comes to the perpetual state of mourning. It is concerning to imagine how eco-elegies can work both for and against ecological awareness in their readers. In this sense, perpetual mourning is considered a barrier to the future that is yet to come. It seems forgotten that the perpetual state of mourning (one that causes suspense that is) is a privilege that is only afforded to few. People are forced, each and every day, to find motivation in their loss, to find motivation in the state of mourning; it is possible for the two to coexist. Native people have always lived in a state of action; their existence is evidence of this. Mourning

is all too commonly discussed as a static state, one which embodies a sense of perpetuity that does not allow room for change. As “The Lost Lagoon” continues “to dip its paddle into the heart of humanity” it stirs the very type of mourning that is valuable to the sustenance of humanity (Dickinson 25).

Emily Pauline Johnson’s writing continues to lend a hand to those seeking a connection with the natural world. The desperate, or possibly innate, need to feel at peace with the world is forever continuous in our minds. And, while it is often best to turn to the trees and the soil and the rivers themselves, writing seems to answer the questions we never thought to ask. That is to say, the type of environmental writing that sought to cause its reader to ponder non-anthropomorphic relationships is still immensely popular—no matter the drastic scales of pain that exist in the world, humans continue to search for ways to connect to the world that loves them back. In this, *Tekahionwake* uses her writing to imagine new spaces of being that we, over a century later, might look back and learn from in order to support the imaginative future in which our reciprocal relationship with the environment is balanced.

Chapter 2: “Reciprocity With the Living Land”: Robin Wall Kimmerer’s Self-reflective Writing in *Braiding Sweetgrass*

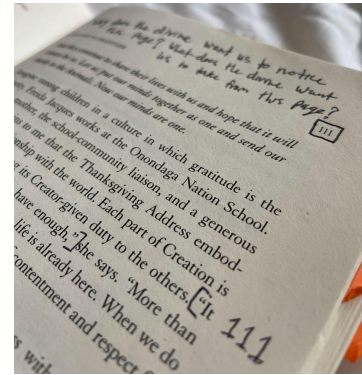
I finished Robin Wall Kimmerer’s *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* on a plane coming home from my grandparents’ house in Western Massachusetts. It was April. The air was cold. I wanted to remain forever at their home in the woods surrounded by maple trees and newly bloomed daffodils. I am from the desert so the Massachusetts earth has always felt forgiving. The desert is relentless—the frigid dry wind gives no mercy this time of year. Walking through these woods, my feet do not crunch the rock underneath but rather sink into the decomposing soil—it is soft here. I understand why Thoreau fled to this place just as I have.

It is not that I do not love my home any less than I do the Massachusetts wood; I’ve read the words of many people in order to love more deeply. They help me to understand how the dry and windy mountains have loved me into the person typing this sentence. So, when I returned home, I gave my *Braiding Sweetgrass* away. The book traveled to California, Mexico, and Chicago with various friends and is now marked by the people I love. Books, I believe, are meant to be lost, given away. The stories remain ours as their physical existences travel to share knowledge with others. But, in the summer of 2022 I decided I wanted to include *Braiding Sweetgrass* in my Honors Thesis; longing for my copy with everything I had annotated back in Massachusetts, I began to put out feelers. After much pleading and asking around, it came back to me as an entirely new work of art.

It is important that I thank and acknowledge *my* book before I take the time to talk about *the* book. The pages are curled from being shoved in packs, taken on hikes, and from my arid home herself. The cover, discolored with the dirt of many well-loved places, is soft to the touch

like old denim. These pages have earned their place in my heart, so I choose to write about them in order to show that I love them as they have loved me all these years.

My friends' writing provides a lens into the minds of the people I miss most—the words of my childhood friends exist alongside mine reminding me that their souls reside at home just as mine does. I can read them by their handwriting; my friend Ruby left delicate drawings of mushrooms and hearts alongside Kimmerer's words. The phrase "Joy is not a trick," is scribbled in between lines (*Braiding Sweetgrass* 37). Other notes make me laugh; circled is page number 111 with the question, "Why does the divine want us to notice this page?" As I reread, I push into the sentences more. Underlined in the epigraph: "It thrives along disturbed edges" (*Braiding Sweetgrass* 111). I spent my entire childhood on the river with Ruby. Here, we learned about the ways of life and death. We learned how to roll in soft mud and listen for our voices' echo off canyon walls; we learned here that the earth loved us back. In this way, *Braiding Sweetgrass* ties me to my past and, hopefully, my future too.



Although it may be seen as unconventional to take seriously the marks my friends made in my copy of *Braiding Sweetgrass*, this is exactly how Kimmerer meant for the story to be interpreted and shared. My love for Kimmerer's words is a communal one. Not only has it drawn me closer to my land and home, but to my people, for they are products and beings of Earth too. Throughout the chapter, I will refer to Ruby's words not only because they have drawn me closer to the text, but also because they serve as evidence of what the casual reader may think and feel while reading Kimmerer's words.

My experience with my book emulates a larger web of connection; this is how well-loved ideas are shared. In a talk at the Boulder Theater in December of 2022, Kimmerer addressed the popularity of her book. *Braiding Sweetgrass* is published by Milkweed Editions, a not-for-profit press, meaning that the book had a limited marketing budget. Therefore, the public's love can be attributed to the book being shared between friends and family—people were sharing the book just as I did. Kimmerer noted that this means we are not alone in this work of cultural regeneration that her writing calls for. The circulation of the book itself mimicked an organic process; as Kimmerer notes, this is “the brilliance of Indigenous storytelling,” it invites you in (Kimmerer 2 Dec. 22). Kimmerer's words speak for themselves as they have moved hand to hand, given as an act of love between people; it provides people with the opportunity to give the gift of language, the gift of good writing.

Robin Wall Kimmerer, a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, brings together Indigenous wisdom and scientific knowledge through her stories and personal anecdotes. Kimmerer has a BS in Botany from the State University of New York (SUNY) College of Environmental Science and Forestry and earned her MS and Ph.D. in Botany from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Currently, Kimmerer is a Distinguished Teaching Professor of Environmental Biology at SUNY where she is the founder and director of the Center for Native Peoples and the Environment. She was named a MacArthur Fellow in 2022 for her work as a plant ecologist, educator, and writer. In addition to *Braiding Sweetgrass* Kimmerer's first book, *Gathering Moss: A Natural and Cultural History of Mosses*, has also earned her acclaim for outstanding nature writing. Today, she lives on an old farm in upstate New York where she acts as a mother to the land she lives on.

Much like Emily Pauline Johnson, Kimmerer speaks on what it is like to hold ties to Indigenous Knowledge as well as Western modes of thought. In Kimmerer's words, to bear the "burden of two cultures in opposition" is actually a gift because it lends one to "speak both languages" (Kimmerer 2 Dec. 2022). She uses her wealth of scientific and cultural knowledge to share her gift of writing with a wide audience. Therefore, it is important while reading Kimmerer's stories to understand them as the gifts they are rather than a commodity in a book that we purchase with our own dollars. While where we spend our money is demonstrative of our personal values (the book itself is still a commodity), it is not where our intention ends. Kimmerer did not have to offer her knowledge to us as the reader, but she chose to do so with Earth in mind. I am not only eternally grateful to my copy of *Braiding Sweetgrass* and the trees that grew its pages, but also to the giver of the stories herself. By the time you are reading this, I hope that my copy exists again in one of my friend's hands so that they may grow from Kimmerer's words too. I hope that one day it may come to me for a third time bursting at the binding with the ideas of the people I love.

In this chapter, I have chosen to shift the genre of my own writing to pay homage to how I believe Kimmerer's work deserves—and was perhaps intended—to be read by a wide variety of audiences. To examine *Braiding Sweetgrass* through an academically removed lens would be to misunderstand Kimmerer's words. As Kimmerer teaches, academic writing should be inclusive of personal experience and textual practice. Being a scientist and teacher, Kimmerer has established herself in the world of academia; here, she makes her writing easily readable and accessible because the understanding of complex environmental relationships is not reserved for a small, privileged group of academics. Instead, it serves a larger audience of curious and often casual readers, therefore aiding in the larger societal shift away from anthropocentric ways of

thinking. Here, I take the position of both the academic student and the casual reader, implying that they may exist as one and the same when it comes to contemplating our responsibility to the world and ourselves—because it is crucial that we do not see them as separate.

This is my experience not only as a reader but as a writer; I do not believe I rest alone. Rather, I believe that this is the experience of Kimmerer's readers everywhere. She has taken care of us, held our hands with her careful, strong words. For writers, she has led us to trail gently behind, learning the language of love in every sentence. Kimmer becomes another mother to her reader. To reduce her to the very academically removed language that she warns us about in "*Mishkos Kenomagwen: The Teachings of Grass*" would not only be a disservice but to miss her message entirely (*Braiding Sweetgrass* 158-159). In her book, *As We Have Always Done*, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson suggests that we might stretch the confines of academic literature:

Western education does not produce in us the kinds of effects we like to think it does when we say things like *education is the new buffalo*. We learn how to type and how to write. We learn how to think within the confines of Western thought. We learn to pass tests and get jobs within the city of capitalism. If we're lucky and we fall into the right programs, we might learn to think critically about colonialism... Postsecondary education provides very few skill sets to those who want to learn to think in the most complex ways possible within the networked system of Indigenous intelligence. (Simpson 13-14)

Simpson suggests that there is a layer of complexity that is disregarded in standard Western education. She points out that very few people learn to think about their position in the post-colonial world in which we live. Therefore, Kimmerer and Simpson pose the idea that we

might prop open the door wider, let in the fresh air, and consider what our world might look like if we prioritized Indigenous modes of thinking and learning.

Kimmerer rests not in our minds as a historical figure to be studied like Emily Pauline Johnson, but as a contemporary force with the ability to speak, both literally and figuratively, to her current audience, as Johnson was in her time. With over a century between these women's lives, it is important to understand the vastly different space that Kimmerer occupies in the canon of Native American literature. While Kimmerer has sparked some trace amounts of controversy that will be addressed later, her book aligns well with the contemporary definition of Native literature. As Sean Teuton notes in *Native American Literature: A Very Short Introduction*, Native literature often brings the reader to a process of coming to understand the world, and more specifically, human relationships with a more-than-human world (Teuton, preface). This reading process, hopefully, leads the reader to some sort of transformation by the end of the story. Kimmerer urges her reader to alter their understanding of the natural world through a transformation of their relationships and understanding of Indigenous Knowledge. Additionally, this change is not individual but rather necessitates conversation with both people and the environment of which they are a part. I believe that the embodiment of Kimmerer's words flourishes best beyond the page—for her writing to be understood, her reader must weave themselves in with their environments.

Traditional Ecological Knowledge & Concepts of Indigeneity

Kimmerer comes at concepts of Indigeneity and teaching through Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK). She presents this knowledge as an offering through her writing. But, it is important to understand that TEK has faced the effects of colonization and that the world of

academia has often failed to understand the breadth of TEK. Deborah McGregor, a Canadian environmentalist, suggests in “Coming Full Circle: Indigenous Knowledge, Environment, and Our Future” that Indigenous Knowledge is more than something that is obtained, existing merely in our heads as words. For McGregor, Indigenous Knowledge comes from a combination of “person, place, product, and process. This means *who you are* matters!” (McGregor 391). To understand Indigenous Knowledge and take it in as a part of our living intention, it must exist in more than just the words we read. Kimmerer’s writing is important, but it matters only as people begin to act on the knowledge she shares. McGregor models this in her writing as she aptly weaves together personal experiences and academic argument to address her audience.

McGregor notes the effects of a Eurocentric definition of Indigenous Knowledge; she states that it is all too commonly perceived as a noun. “It is more than knowledge,” and it can not “be separated from the people who hold and practice it, nor can it be separated from land/environment/Creation” (McGregor 390). Although Kimmerer does not call out the direct brutality of the colonization of the Americas, it is clear that her words are based in loss. Teuton brings up the colonization and forced removal of Native peoples that percolate into Native American literature. Beneath the surface of Kimmerer’s words is a deep structure of loss and a reach for return to fading forms of knowledge. For example, Kimmerer talks about the alienation she felt in relearning Potawatomi, her native language:

So now my house is spangled with Post-it notes in another language, as if I were studying for a trip abroad. But I’m not going away, I’m coming home.

Ni pi je exhyayaen? Asks the little yellow sticky note on my back door. My hands are full and the car is running, but I switch my bag to the other hip and pause long enough to respond. *Odanek nde zhya*, I’m going to town. (*Braiding Sweetgrass* 51)

Kimmerer interacts with a dying language through Post-it notes so as to heal herself from settler colonial society. She notes the sadness in understanding that this language is dying with only a handful of speakers left; she chooses to learn the language in opposition to a settler colonial world, healing herself from colonizer-inflicted tragedy. In learning, Kimmerer imagines a future for herself where the Potawatomi language is not a distant unknown but rather a familiar way of interpreting the world.

It is in this notion of returning that Kimmerer aligns herself and her storytelling with Indigenous literature. Through their writing, many Native authors are working “better to interpret a colonized world and to offer this new knowledge to empower people” (Teuton 68). Here, Teuton suggests that literature may act as a form of decolonization. While Kimmerer does not suggest this about her writing bluntly, this is one of the goals that her work has achieved. Kimmerer encourages her readers to work their way out of what she calls an “immigrant mindset” (even if they may not be an immigrant themselves, chances are they are descendants of immigrants). Kimmerer’s definition here is different from what one might assume the phrase to mean; rather than an association with the American dream, she suggests that people might work themselves away from the thoughts and teachings of those responsible for stealing the land that Kimmerer encourages connection to. Recognizing that TEK is not another body of knowledge to “discover” but rather a way of living brings the reader out of the immigrant mindset that Kimmerer warns them of. In this way, Kimmerer provides an opportunity for her readers, Indigenous by birthright or not, to naturalize themselves to their environments. This idea is not Kimmerer’s alone; it comes from a long line of Indigenous thought and story.

Kimmerer’s ideas about connection and return are reminiscent of the Red Power novel that originated in response to Native American movements of the 1960s and 1970s, including the

Occupation of Alcatraz. In contrast to the standard narrative of the American novel which is associated with “leaving home to develop one’s character, the Red Power novel often relies on the opposite movement” (Teuton 93). These stories are based on a strong sense of cultural regeneration and return. Discovery does not exist as a light upon the horizon, but rather beneath our feet. Through her sharing of stories, Kimmerer participates in this return and brings her reader to consider that the return might be more universal than Teuton suggests. Kimmerer details her experience returning to her native language as a way of coming home (*Braiding Sweetgrass* 51). Although the words scattering her home seem foreign, they are the farthest from it. As she notes these experiences, Kimmerer writes to not only return herself to Indigenous ways of knowing but to offer them to her reader as well.

And yet, Kimmerer is eloquent enough to understand and communicate the irony of it all. Potawatomi did not merely disappear, but rather was “washed from the mouths of Indian children in government boarding schools” (*Braiding Sweetgrass* 49). Kimmerer mentions the three hundred and fifty Indigenous languages that the United States government placed under threat by cruel design. There is a reason that Kimmerer is now in a position of relearning the language that connects her to traditional ways of knowing. She notes that her grandfather was taken from his family at nine years old to the Carlisle boarding school; as I read, I am curious as to why she does not place more emphasis on his story. However, Kimmerer does note the scattering effect this had on herself; after all, her book is written in English. Kimmerer calls out her reader in this passage— “I speak the language you read”—causing one to ponder the colonizing effects of the English language (*Braiding Sweetgrass* 49). In this moment, the reader becomes a pawn in the colonized language system alongside Kimmerer.

Kimmerer's words are evidence of the history she and her ancestors come from. Although at times Kimmerer alludes more to a collective struggle over a personal one, the essays included are heavily anecdotal. She shows her readers what it means to develop a personal loving relationship with the earth. According to Theresa Howe, who writes on the impact of autobiographical writing, this type of personal account serves as "independent public verification of the author's actual existence" (Howe 3). As Kimmerer shares intimate details of her life with her readers, she encourages her reader to contemplate how their life might parallel hers. The impact of personal experience is revealed through reviews of the book. In his review, James Hatley describes her writing as "nested in story" and various forms of knowledge; together, they "bear significant fruit" (Hatley 143). Kimmerer's stories come together to not only keep her reader reading but make Kimmerer a speaker the reader trusts.

Kimmerer is the living embodiment of the history that came before her—it is not her job to explain that history to us, and yet she makes the conscious decision to do so. However, the stories that Kimmerer gifts to her reader are quite personal. In "Epiphany in the Beans" Kimmerer speaks about her experience as a teacher. Here, she serves us the secrets to happiness by posing the essential question to her students: "Do you think that the earth loves you back?" (*Braiding Sweetgrass* 124). She calls out to her readers here. In the margins of my book Ruby has written in all capital letters, "YES." Ruby's response demonstrates how Kimmerer has held her reader's hand to come to this conclusion. Just under halfway through the book, her readers are geared to answer the question as Kimmerer intends. She has led her readers to believe that they are loved by the earth. Through this questioning, Kimmerer offers Indigenous thinking to her immigrant readers. There are endless ways one might come to this conclusion depending on where they come from; Kimmerer's understanding comes through gardening. Not only is

gardening a personal act and demonstration of truly knowing the land you live on, but it is a learned skill. People who know their homes can grow food out of the driest of soil—even arid land has an abundance to give.

Kimmerer gives her reader this knowledge through writing. While the relational benefits of gardening and spending time in open spaces cannot be overstated, it is important to acknowledge that they are inaccessible to many people. Accessing land requires time, money, and knowledge that is often gatekept by the outdoor community. While the opportunity to access these spaces should be increased, Kimmerer’s writing provides an accessible way for people to mend their relationships with the earth, no matter where they may exist in the world.

It’s a common notion that good mothers prepare their children to one day flourish alone in the world. Kimmerer poses this idea differently—*If the earth is our mother how could we ever truly be alone?* Through gardening, we might achieve the naturalization that Kimmerer poses. We can pass this knowledge on so that naturalization might not have to be sought after, but rather inherited. “This is really why I made my daughters learn to garden—so they would always have a mother to love them, long after I am gone” (*Braiding Sweetgrass* 122). Kimmerer notes that *this* is what will allow her to die happy one day. It is not her love that she prides herself on, but rather the love for Mother Earth that she has stoked within her own children. Reading Kimmerer’s words, we might be persuaded to churn the soil that exists within ourselves.

In order to cultivate our gardens, Kimmerer suggests that we might examine our definitions of love, and broaden them, so that we might mend our broken hearts. The garden plays both a physical and metaphorical role in Kimmerer’s writing. On one hand, it symbolizes a relationship with something more than ourselves. The garden shows that we are capable of caring for and understanding plants, soil, and weather. Those who grow magnificent gardens

have not only taken the time to water and weed, to harvest and plant, but they have developed a deeper understanding of where they live. They understand the soil, if large rocks need to be wedged out, and how often moisture should be added. They know the date of the last frost (in the mountains of Colorado, it is around June 8th). Knowing how the seasons pass where we live keeps us connected to the spaces we inhabit, leading us to feel at home.

Before Kimmerer offers various definitions of Indigeneity in *Braiding Sweetgrass*, she centers the earth and takes time to give agency to plant relationships with the land, suggesting that we have something to learn from their interactions—the positive and the negative. For Kimmerer, the various models plants use to carve out a space in the world are not necessarily ours for the taking, but rather are offered to us by the plants as teachers. Kimmerer closes her chapter “In the Footsteps of Nanabozho: Becoming Indigenous to Place” by setting her reader up to understand that plants are the ones participating in the teaching; it is our responsibility to listen. Through Nanabozho’s story, she alludes to the idea that plant life was here first, suggesting that plants are the primary Indigenous life. But it is not just native plants that people should listen to; she suggests that our “immigrant plant teachers offer” knowledge to us too—Kimmerer encourages her readers to take this offer (*Braiding Sweetgrass* 214). However, I would argue that if you have made it this far in the book, you are taking the plants’ offerings through careful and intentional reading. Through reading, we accept the offering; with that, we take on the responsibility of caring for a more-than-human world.

Kimmerer provides examples of how plants have made themselves unwelcome in contrast to those that have. Garlic mustard is invasive in the Northeastern United States where it kills other native species in the process. “Garlic mustard poisons the soil,” and “tamarisk uses up all the water” (*Braiding Sweetgrass* 214). Kimmerer barely differentiates between the actions of

plants and human people here; the garlic mustard's damage is analogous to the diseases that settlers brought to the Americas. Similarly to people, there are times when plants survive at the cost of other living beings. Likewise, Kimmerer mentions tamarisk's excessive water consumption. Growing up in drought-ridden Western Colorado, I can recall lectures on the dangers of tamarisk as it sucked water straight from the headwaters of the Arkansas River. Come springtime, the plant is quite beautiful as its strong roots suck water from the already dry ground, leaving none for the willows responsible for holding the river banks together.

However, Kimmerer deemphasizes that in the case of both the garlic mustard and the tamarisk, people brought these species over to the United States. She leaves this question unclear: Should we hold responsibility for the acts of these invaders? Rather than noting this, Kimmerer mentions instances where we might learn from past immigrants. Nanabozho, the last of all beings to be created, is the Anishnaabe of how to be human; he was once an immigrant too. He went in search of teachers; for "he understood, as some did not, that this was not the 'New World,' but one that was ancient before he came" (*Braiding Sweetgrass* 206). Rather than addressing invasive plants, Kimmerer turns towards plants originally brought over by settlers that have integrated themselves into the environment. For example, White Man's Footstep arrived with the first settlers; rather than stealing space from the native species of the area like one might expect, White Man's Footstep came to be a "wise and generous plant...It's a foreigner, an immigrant, but after five hundred years of living as a good neighbor, people forget that kind of thing" (*Braiding Sweetgrass* 214). Here, Kimmerer offers her concept of Indigenous to once-foreign beings, lending an understanding that both people and plants can find permanent homes on new soil. This is the model Kimmerer urges her readers to follow. Kimmerer suggests that plant life might be the only truly Indigenous life, and this is true when it comes to

Indigenous Knowledge as Kimmerer believes it comes from the plants themselves. As McGregor acknowledges, Indigenous Knowledge “is not an invention of non-Indigenous people; it is regarded as a gift from the Creator” (McGregor 389).

Kimmer’s use of personification—or perhaps something else—is worth noting. Personification implies that the traits Kimmerer attributes to the plants are purely human, but I do not believe that Kimmerer understands them this way. Rather than positive characteristics attributed to plants, these characteristics belong to neither plants nor humans; they are a part of being alive and flourishing on Earth. Personification implies that the characteristics of intelligence, generosity, and kindness are implicated in a metaphor. I think that it is important to read Kimmerer’s descriptions as literal. Kimmerer has found ways to beautifully skirt the boundaries of metaphorical writing. In doing so, Kimmerer justly serves as a botanist for the plants by affording them both agency and strategy in the natural world.

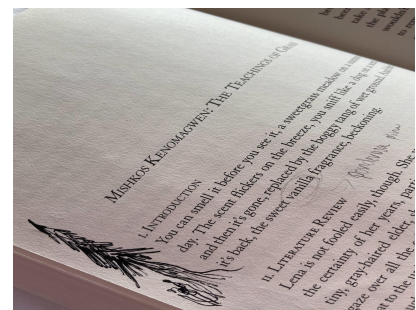
“In the Footsteps of Nanabozho: Becoming Indigenous to Place” focuses on what it means to be of a place—to understand the places we live as a part of ourselves. Here, Kimmerer opens the definition of “Indigenous” through an explanation of what it means to become naturalized to a place. Similar to how Emily Pauline Johnson understood Canadian identity beyond her fellow Mohawk people, Kimmerer states that “by honoring the knowledge in the land...we start to become Indigenous to place” (Kimmerer 210). Because Indigenous is a birthright word, Kimmerer explains that plants non-Indigenous and non-invasive to a place fall under the category of naturalized (Kimmerer 213). Essentially, they have been adopted into the ecosystem and live amongst native plant communities. For example, the daffodils that find themselves growing all around my grandparents’ Massachusetts home are native to Europe but

are naturalized to the Eastern coast of the United States, meaning that they live in harmony with the surrounding Native vegetation.

For Kimmerer it is not a matter of where we are born, but rather how we choose to live. She poses a crucial question: “But can Americans, as a nation of immigrants, learn to live as if we are staying?” (Kimmerer 207). Naturalization seems to be the answer to this question, which means adopting an entirely new mindset. This is a complicated and difficult-to-achieve concept considering that the families of many non-Native Americans have lived here for generations. Although my ancestors come from a myriad of different countries (the exact ones I cannot even say for sure), the ancestors I do know, the ones I hear stories about, “lie in this ground” (Kimmerer 215). Her understanding and explanation of naturalization present a certain level of forgiveness toward those who operate in an immigrant mindset. With this, comes an opportunity to move into a space where people can greet the earth as an old friend rather than a foreign entity. Considering the reception of Kimmerer’s book, this space is well on its way to being created and established. However, Kimmerer ends her chapter with a note of urgency “to become naturalized is to live as if your children’s future matters, to take care of the land as if our lives and the lives of all our relatives depend on it. Because they do” (215). What is at stake here is not mere whimsical relationships with Nature, but rather our lives and the lives of all living beings.

Learning from Plants: Merging Scientific & Narrative Process

Kimmerer structures her chapter “*Mishkos Kenomagwen: The Teachings of Grass*” by noting the smell of sweetgrass—vanilla. It is interesting how we associate the best parts of our homes with the sweetest flavors of childhood. For



me, the smell of vanilla is always associated with the Ponderosa Pine; straight and tall with trunks exposed at the base, their rust-like bark welcomes you in. In my book, I drew the tree. The sappy, vanilla scent always finds a way to bring me home; I can imagine this is what Kimmerer feels in the presence of her beloved sweetgrass.

So, when Kimmerer is asked to study sweetgrass' declining population, I understand why she felt hesitant:

Sweetgrass is not an experimental unit for me; it's a gift. There is a barrier of language and meaning between science and traditional knowledge, different ways of knowing, different ways of communicating. I'm not sure I want to force the teachings of grass into the tight uniform of scientific thinking and technical writing that is required for the academy. (*Braiding Sweetgrass* 158)

Western science supports the idea that we must remain removed from our subjects, to stay neutral. When it comes to what we love, this becomes nearly impossible. Nonetheless, Kimmerer and her graduate student mentee at the time, Laurie, took up the task, proving that care and human interaction do indeed promote the plants' flourishing. Through their research, they found that the plots where sweetgrass was being harvested were thriving, whereas the control plots left without human interaction were failing. This is the outcome that Kimmerer predicted; and yet, the experiment had to take place in order to convince skeptical scientists (*Braiding Sweetgrass* 163). Kimmerer laments "the condescension, the verbal smackdown from academic authorities" as a right of passage for women in scientific fields (*Braiding Sweetgrass* 160). In this case, Indigenous Knowledge is validated to Western scientists through their scientific method. In order for Western science to determine validity, different ways of knowing must jump through the hoops of the Western scientific method rather than providing this validity in their own right.

Kimmerer models this experience in her writing; each section of “*Mishkos Kenomagwen: The Teachings of Grass*” is laid out as though it is a part of the standard scientific method we learn in school—Literature Review, Hypothesis, Methods, Results, Discussion, Conclusions, Acknowledgements, and References Cited. This is the “tight uniform of scientific thinking” that Kimmerer is weary of. In Kimmerer’s field, botany, this is how peer-reviewed articles are typically organized. However, her writing is deeply personal and sensitive toward the sweetgrass. As a scientist, Kimmerer affords a great deal of care to her subjects. She remains not an omnipotent narrator of her experiment but rather a character within it. I say character because her report-formatted chapter acts more like a story than it does a scientific discovery. Kimmerer turns the scientific method into a narrative. In doing so, she is bringing people back into a story that cannot exist without them. “*Mishkos Kenomagwen: The Teachings of Grass*” demonstrates how Kimmerer intertwines narrative techniques, accessible language, and the scientific method. She hybridizes her writing in order to show that these techniques typically reserved separately from each other can, and should, be used together. Stories are not just for entertainment. Simple language is not just for children. And the scientific method is not just for scientists.

In this final section, she cites *Wiingaashk* (the sweetgrass), Buffalo, Lena, and the Ancestors as this information was learned from them. There is no lengthy bibliography because this information does not exist hidden in archives or databases but rather in cultural knowledge. Each section hosts not something to be discovered but rather learned. Laurie’s report may have surprised academic ecologists, but it is not new knowledge. It supports what Traditional Ecological Knowledge has proposed for a long time, that “for sweetgrass, human beings are part of the system, a vital part” (*Braiding Sweetgrass* 163). Kimmerer presents the notion that plants need us too. This truth is something that more people should be immersed in—people deserve to

know that they are needed. In the face of the anthropogenic climate crisis, it is comforting to remember that we belong here too. Western science sets us up with the anthropocentric idea that set humans as outside of “nature,” presenting our interaction with it as largely negative.

However, Laurie’s research demonstrates quite the opposite. The people in the experiment, their actions, and their involvement lead to the conclusion that sweetgrass prospers alongside human life.

Kimmerer’s conclusion gives voice to the grass: “our people say to the Sweetgrass, ‘I need you.’ By its renewal after picking, the grass says to the people, ‘I need you, too’” (*Braiding Sweetgrass* 166). While it may be interpreted here that the grass is representative of broader natural systems in which humans play a role, it is important to take Kimmerer’s words at face value. These words are as real as the grass itself. Sweetgrass populations are helped by harvest; careful gathering promotes new growth. But, it is important to understand that this is not the case for all plants. Some are more delicate, harmed by harvest. Here, “the key is to know them well enough to respect the difference” (*Braiding Sweetgrass* 166). Kimmerer urges that there is a fine line where we must rest between treading too lightly on the earth and tearing it up. In walking this line, we find the true meaning of reciprocity that Kimmer brings up throughout the book. For Kimmerer, this reciprocity rests not only in gardening but in the words she shares with the world.

Kimmerer addresses writing as a powerful reciprocal tool. She states that when sweetgrass is used respectfully, it will flourish. Maybe writing is like sweetgrass—when we use our words respectfully, and intentionally, we provide resources for people and plants alike to thrive. In turn, Kimmerer’s stories act like the braided sweetgrass that gives the book its name. Writers carefully piece words together. They rewrite sentences. Paragraphs, like the pieces of grass, are plucked away and placed elsewhere. The roots are left alone so that they might

continue to grow. These stories not only provide an opportunity for regrowth and regeneration within ourselves, but they prompt us to learn in ways outside of standard modes of Western thinking. Kimmerer's appropriated academic format demonstrates this, showing that standard scientific presentation can be stretched to include various ways of knowing, personalized to the writer and gatherer of knowledge.

For the majority of *Braiding Sweetgrass*, as it goes with most books in the form of the Western codex, Kimmerer remains in the position of writer, author, and teacher, and we remain in the position of the passive reader. However, Kimmerer suggests that storytelling should not be this way. When we read good stories, we embody their words, we take care of them so that they might live beyond ourselves. She calls her reader in as a writer themselves, and if not a writer, then an active reader who is engaged in the message of the story beyond its telling. For Kimmerer, storytelling goes beyond entertainment and is a mode of understanding the world (*Braiding Sweetgrass* 343). In the chapter "People of Corn, People of Light," Kimmerer suggests that stories are agents in the world with the power to sprout culturally regenerative movements that encourage the mending of ecological relationships. Stories, like the ones Kimmerer has gifted us, "are among our most potent tools for restoring the land as well as our relationship to land" (*Braiding Sweetgrass* 341). In this way, Kimmerer's book becomes not only a work of elegantly written art, but a tool. It is as though she is saying, "Here, take this, use it to build a better life for us all!" And I do my best. Part of my intention in writing is not only to give voice to Kimmerer's words but to imagine a future where we care for the earth like we do the people we love. The first step is discovering our strengths as people—language is one. Kimmerer addresses language's power:

We may not have wings or leaves, but we humans do have words. Language is our gift and our responsibility. I've come to think of writing as an act of reciprocity with the living land. (*Braiding Sweetgrass* 347)

I must say, as a writer, there is nothing more comforting to hear. Kimmerer presents writing as a tool, a way to pay the earth back for all that she has given us.

By thinking of language as responsibility, Kimmerer implicates her reader not only as a consumer of story but as a producer of it. Cultures can never revert to a previous state; we can not go back to a precolonial world. Kimmerer addresses her readers as immigrants, asking them to reflect on their experiences on the land that they are still getting to know. This means that Kimmerer's stories do not hold all the answers. Kimmerer urges her readers to think of new stories. "As the world changes, an immigrant culture must write its own new stories of relationship to place" (*Braiding Sweetgrass* 344). In this way, Kimmerer proposes a network of healing—new stories can be written that demonstrate how our immigrant culture can live knowledgeably connected to the ground beneath our feet. Kimmerer's chapter on the teachings of sweetgrass shows that we can take part in regenerative healing networks with grass.

From a young age, stories are how we understand our world. Kimmerer says, "The very facts of the world *are* a poem" (*Braiding Sweetgrass* 345). Poems are stories, concepts, or ideas that are asking to be unraveled by people; they exist only in connection to the person reading them. Kimmerer presents a powerful metaphor here drawing a comparison between art and the stories of the world. Her statement goes beyond the powerful words we read on the page. She suggests that there is a certain indescribable beauty in how the natural world functions. The operations of the world are not merely facts to be studied and realized but rather known and understood. Instead, Kimmerer notes that these stories belong to the land rather than

ourselves—we are lucky to live in proximity to them (*Braiding Sweetgrass* 345). Scientists act as translators; their job is to share these stories with the world. Sadly, they often fail to follow an inclusive ethics of translation, meaning that the world is interpreted through a narrowed scientific lens. The reading of scientific papers is no simple task, making public discussion about the environment difficult. Kimmerer notes the consequences that this inaccessibility has on humanity:

Scientists mostly convey these stories in a language that excludes readers... This has serious consequences for public dialogue about the environment and therefore real democracy, especially the democracy of all species. For what good is knowing unless it is coupled with caring? Science can give us knowing, but caring comes from someplace else. (*Braiding Sweetgrass* 245)

Care is essential in conveying scientific information. Kimmerer is looking to dismantle the hegemony of scientific thinking that demands people remain removed from their work. In the midst of a climate crisis where those most affected have less access to information and the power information lends, important life-changing science is not available to communities who need it the most. Here Kimmerer does not necessarily shun academic science, but as an academic herself she acknowledges that it is incomplete, left unable to accomplish all that it could in the world. She turns to a true defense of the humanities as there is a certain level of caring, of wholehearted investment, that has been left behind in Western science that limits our scope of knowledge.

The stories that Kimmerer writes are not only beautiful and interesting, but accessible to the general reader. Although the book was actually recommended to me by a professor, I read it easily on my own time. It is what my friends back home would call a “mac and cheese” book; it goes down easy and it tastes like home. The book itself is written at an eighth-grade reading

level, the same level that the average American reads at (Johns 434). For reference, the average news article in the U.S. is written at an eleventh-grade level, bringing to light questions about the importance of readability and access to information (Johns 432). However, Kimmerer does not stop there. There is even a version of the book published for young adults called *Braiding Sweetgrass for Young Adults: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. Adapted by Monique Gray Smith, this version contains illustrations and reflective questions that target a younger audience. Kimmerer has cast a wide net for her readers, hoping that it might reach a large demographic of people, creating a book that acts as a gift to the land itself.

It is easy to argue that simple writing is too much so, that it does not give justice to complex ideas. But, Kimmerer's words present a certain clarity that provides space for critical action and personal reflection. In *As We Have Always Done*, Simpson states that "standing at the foot of a map of loss is clarity" (Simpson 15). Simpson writes on Indigenous political resurgence and views storytelling as decolonial praxis. The scholarship on Kimmerer's book is close to nonexistent, but Simpson's ideas of marking down and recording story support Kimmerer's concept of power in simple stories. From her casual audience, Kimmerer's book has received much praise. However, on Goodreads (essentially the social media of the book world) those who dislike *Braiding Sweetgrass* claim that it is slow, repetitive, and boring (*Goodreads*). However, people often mix up simple with unintelligent, uninteresting, and undeveloped. The essays in the book rather support and convey similar lessons; but, that is often the point of reading. We go back into the text to relearn the essential lessons of life. Although the book is considered an "easy read" it is not a fast one. In reading communities we often hear the phrase: *It was so good I read it in a day*. In a culture that praises quick consumption, we often forget the importance of a

slow burn. *Braiding Sweetgrass* is meant to be returned to over time; we are meant to enjoy each story gradually so that we might digest it fully. Good books do not exist merely for capitalistic consumption but rather to enrich our souls, minds, and bodies. These things take time, and it is my hope that readers approach this book only when they feel they have made the space to participate in the lesson.

This lesson is more about love than destruction. Kimmerer takes note of the devastating effects of the climate crisis as they go hand-in-hand with the health of the world. But, she does not center the crisis itself. We are currently in the midst of a giant political crisis that keeps people from living in the ways Kimmerer encourages—outdoor spaces are not easily accessible. I grew up with a deep connection to the environment and place only because my parents had the privilege to make it a priority. And twenty years after my parents began raising me in Salida, Colorado, my hometown has become increasingly inaccessible to the point where if I wanted to live there again one day, I'm not sure that I would be able to.

To place climate crisis-imposed disasters on top of financial accessibility means that Kimmerer's stories of connection to land are likely unfathomable to many people. It's possible that Kimmerer does not address this crisis in depth because chances are her targeted readers are already aware of the severity of the situation; and, as an individual the amount of power they have is slim. Kimmerer's goal in writing is not to increase climate anxiety. Speaking from the perspective of a young person, we already know. We are aware of the path we are headed down, and we vote like it. In the 2020 election, roughly half of the people aged 18-29 voted, an eleven-point increase from 2016 ("Half of Youth Voted in 2020..."). We are aware that this can be changed by policy that holds governments and corporations accountable. That being said, *Braiding Sweetgrass* serves a different purpose than educating people about our dying earth.

Kimmerer creates a space for people to feel more connected with the earth that the climate crisis has distanced them from. It presents a space for learning and healing, one where we might not feel as helpless. When people feel empowered, strong, and connected they are more likely to fight for better policy.

We might source such empowerment through words and stories of love. Kimmerer's writing allows her reader to touch spaces that are not entirely tangible to everyone. She gives her reader the opportunity to imagine a radically different future in which our relationship with the earth is just as potent as our relationship with the people we love. Her words are a message of hope, a love letter to the people who strive to maintain a positive relationship with the earth—in this way, we might just have a chance. Kimmerer's words do not fail to acknowledge the effects of a warming world, but rather act in opposition to it, aiding the minds of those who feel defeated by those in power.

It is important to remind Kimmerer's readers that they might approach the text without suspicion and rather accept the love she gives at face value. I will remind you of the phrase Ruby has written, "Joy is not a trick" (*Braiding Sweetgrass* 37). There are times when writing a thesis on *Braiding Sweetgrass* makes me feel guilty, that it means that I have to find something wrong, to pick it apart and reduce it to text when I believe that it is so much more. But it does not have to be this way. In "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You," Eve Sedgwick proposes the idea that paranoid readers approach works assuming that there is something wrong with every text. Instead, we might approach texts through what Sedgwick calls reparative reading. The "vocabulary for articulating any reader's reparative motive toward a text or culture has long been so sappy, aestheticizing, defensive, anti-intellectual" rather than a space for opportunity in approaching the positive of a

work (Sedgwick 150). Paranoid reading places faith in the problematic aspects of a work, in exposure. I'd like to suggest that we might approach Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* curious about what the book has to offer rather than what it is missing. We might be thankful for her sharing of the sweetgrass and hold it close to our hearts so that we too can give back to the earth in the ways Kimmerer has proposed, whether that be in writing, poetry, activism, or something else.

Kimmerer's Salamanders: Finding Peace in Sadness

Robin Wall Kimmerer begins her chapter, "Collateral Damage" with the image of headlights on a wet and winding road. She is in her kitchen, making soup for the night ahead while the television plays reports of bombings in Baghdad. She defines collateral damage as "shielding words to keep us from naming the consequences of a missile gone astray" (*Braiding Sweetgrass* 349). After hearing the reports and making the soup, she heads out into the rain to protect the salamanders crossing the road from collateral damage. Unlike frogs, toads, and other amphibians, salamanders take significantly more time to cross the road, leaving them at risk from swiftly passing cars. The night is wet and cold, and Kimmerer is grateful to be there as a witness to the salamanders.

Kimmerer suggests that this experience, of helping the slimy amphibians, of helping those different from us, has the potential to make us less lonely in the world:

It's tempting to call it altruism, but it's not. There is nothing selfless about it. This night heaps rewards on the givers as well as the recipients. We get to be there, to witness this amazing rite, and, for an evening, to enter into relationships with

other beings, as different from ourselves as one can imagine. (*Braiding Sweetgrass* 358).

Kimmerer understands that it is a privilege to be on the road with the salamanders, to get to know them in their hardship. Kimmerer frames this story, one of sadness and potential death, as an opportunity to heal our relationships with a more-than-human world. Under the dark veil of night, the world continues in its struggle. Rather than resent the sadness such an event causes, Kimmerer chooses to sit in it. She understands that in the sadness we might find the desire to heal our relationship with the world. The relationship she and her children build with the salamanders is priceless; in moving their bodies, the salamanders not only gain a better chance at life but the movers themselves gain a better understanding of its value. Here, Kimmerer participates in the “constellation of coresistance” that Simpson mentions (Simpson 211). The salamanders resist the structure of the road, they cross because they must in order to live. On the other side rests the vernal pools where they may lay their eggs safe from the predatory fish that live in deeper more permanent waters (*Braiding Sweetgrass* 352). Those who move the salamanders resist the very structures people have created; they choose to sacrifice their time, and their warmth, to show the salamanders an act of love. Together, the salamanders and the people work together to build a space that blurs the edges of human exceptionalism, suggesting that our struggles are more unified than one might think.

However, a deeper understanding of this unified struggle can often be rather bleak, defeating one’s hope for the future. Kimmerer mentions James Gibbs, a conservationist working in Labrador Hollow where the salamanders cross. Gibbs explains to Kimmerer the sadness he often feels as a result of working in his field. He notes that he can’t sleep when he knows the salamanders are crossing, so he ventures out to help them. “Aldo Leopold had it right: naturalists

live in a world of wounds that only they can see” (*Braiding Sweetgrass* 357). In understanding the world, there comes a deep sadness in watching it hurt. Kimmerer admits that she is guilty, she too drives the road that the salamanders cross. And yet, she encourages that our sadness is not a stagnant force, but rather evidence that we still find the time and space to care about worlds outside of our own.

These sad moments act as a motivator for writers and environmentalists alike. Returning to Emily Pauline Johnson, in “The Lost Lagoon” she maneuvers her canoe as she mourns the man-made eradication of the lagoon. Her sadness is in many ways a motivating force slicing through the purple waters. Even if the lagoon no longer exists today in Stanley Park, it lives on in Johnson’s writing. In some sense, she has been able to keep it alive. Johnson’s mourning of the lagoon in many ways is what keeps her connected to it, just as Kimmerer’s mourning of the salamanders keeps her motivated to return to the road time and time again. Hope must be found in our sadness so that we might create a future where lagoons are not lost and salamanders do not have to cross dangerous roads.

Kimmerer takes the time in “Collateral Damage” to acknowledge the powerlessness of the individual:

I can’t stop bombs from falling and I can’t stop cars from speeding down this road. It is beyond my power. But I can pick up salamanders. For one night I want to clear my name. What is it that draws us to this lonely hollow? Maybe it is love, the same thing that draws the salamanders from under their logs. Or maybe we walked this road tonight in search of absolution. (*Braiding Sweetgrass* 359).

Kimmerer writes to draw a parallel between people and salamanders; she suggests that love is what should motivate us all. It is what draws us out of our homes, and brings us to action. We

must do our best to protect the collateral while learning to live in our grief. Through this story, Kimmerer suggests that through small actions, we can push back against structures of destruction.

At the beginning of this year, The New York Times published an interview with Kimmerer titled “You Don’t Have to Be Complicit in Our Culture of Destruction.” Conducted by David Marchese, Kimmerer suggests that we might refuse to be complicit in dominant paradigms and find joy in doing so (Marchese par. 8). When people take charge of environmental catastrophes where they can, they find joy. As Kimmerer notes in the interview, “So much of what we think about in environmentalism is finger-wagging and gloom-and-doom, but when you look at a lot of those examples where people are taking things into their hands, they’re joyful” (Marchese par. 8). This is healing for both our land and our culture. To find satisfaction in relationship building pushes back against not only anthropocentric modes of thought but a capitalistic society that suggests the majority of our satisfaction comes from consumption. We do not have to view ourselves as a destructive force, and in finding this knowledge we have the potential to discover windows into happiness.

And still, Kimmerer does not play the role of the blind optimist. Love and sadness do not exist on separate planes. Coming home from the rainy road, Kimmerer thinks of her sweetgrass and its healing abilities:

I want to light a sweetgrass smudge, to wash away the sadness in a cloud of smoke. But the fog is too heavy and the matches just bleed a red streak on the box. As it should be. There should be no washing away tonight; better to wear the grief like a sodden coat.

“Weep! Weep!” calls a toad from the water’s edge. And I do. If grief can be a doorway to love, then let us all weep for the world we are breaking apart so we can love it back to wholeness again. (*Braiding Sweetgrass* 359)

There is a consolation found in the sadness of Kimmerer’s words—a soft reminder that sadness provides us the confidence we might need to care again. The acceptance she presents in the cold, damp East Coast air allows us all to feel less alone in the world. Kimmerer’s optimism reaches a certain validity at this moment; it is far from blinding, but rather strings from deep understandings. There is a mutual settling here between Kimmerer and the land that she lives on in New York. While filled with so much joy for the land, Kimmerer urges her reader to feel their sadnesses as well, for without them we would not be human. Her deep contemplation at the end of “Collateral Damage” brings her closer to her environment—one might call it empathy.

In her interactions with the salamanders, Kimmerer demonstrates a practice of living that takes its knowledge from an ecology of place. When the non-human beings around her ache, Kimmerer aches for and with them. She demonstrates how one might approach a direct relationship to land without appropriating the Indigenous culture she comes from. She shares her knowledge, and offers it as a gift, knowing that it has the potential to save us all. In this way, Kimmerer takes part in a revolution, prompting her readers to rethink how they are nestled in with the world. She reclaims attention not in a space of panic, but in a world of reciprocal love that acts as a solid foundation for progressive action.

Conclusion: “Imagining Regenerative Futures”

Borrowing from Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s *As We Have Always Done*, Kimmerer and Johnson’s writing provides an opportunity for readers to imagine futures drastically different from the present. However, when considering time as cyclical, it is important to acknowledge the pasts that are braided with the futures we desire. The position that Robin Wall Kimmerer now occupies was in many ways ready-made by Emily Pauline Johnson (*Takahionwake*) and writers like her. She helped to transform some members of a settler colonialist culture into citizens who not only acknowledge the history of the land they occupy but wish to do better in regard to it. Over a century after Johnson’s death, people are still actively approaching place-based knowledge with an eager mindset; they are willing to learn, and more importantly, to change their thinking about the land that gives them *everything*.

While their lives seem drastically different in both time and space, they exist quite close to each other. This is most obvious through their words that I have already highlighted in detail. But the land that Kimmerer occupies is actually close geographically to most of Canada’s population. While Vancouver itself is over two thousand miles from Kimmerer’s home of Syracuse, New York, it is less than a day’s drive (in a contemporary sense) to many of Canada’s largest cities including Quebec and Toronto. This means that the audiences that they captivate have more in common than one might think. So, while I have not explored their geographic and national contexts with a resounding depth, their physical closeness provides insight into their similar approach to Indigenous environmentalism and the audiences they target.

Johnson and Kimmerer both attracted large audiences for their time and therefore have made an impact on how primarily non-Indigenous communities shape their environmentally conscious minds. As humans, we must not see ourselves as separate from the world we occupy.

The works of these two women serve as gentle reminders to love the earth as it loves us. They encourage us to dig our heels in—become consumed in the dirt—so that we might reach a space where Nature is not a vast wild space but rather our dearest friend. I think it is important to lend some sympathy to their readers too, for it is not always so easy. When we constantly bear witness to the actions of those whose vote with a greedy mind, to the killing of our oceans, to the pollution of our air, and to the threat of mass extinction it feels only right that we pull away. When the majority of the human touch we witness on the earth is destructive, we begin to believe that we too are the destroyer. When we think this way, we pull away from Mother Earth when she needs us the most; in turn, we pull away from ourselves. Reading “Fire-Flowers,” “The Lost Lagoon,” and Kimmerer’s stories of sweetgrass encourage us to treat ourselves with grace because they remind us that we are supposed to exist in this world.

Kimmerer brings home this message at the end of *Braiding Sweetgrass*. She encourages us to question what we have to offer to the world, how we understand our connections with it, and in turn resist a culture of destruction. The last lines of Kimmerer’s book are as follows: “Whatever our gift, we are called to give it and to dance for the renewal of the world. In return for the privilege of breath” (*Braiding Sweetgrass* 384). She suggests that we might take her words with us into our lives so that we might carry on living deeply; our breath will not be shallow because we understand how it connects us to place. Kimmerer stirs us into action that is not fueled by anger but rather a joy that can only come from love. She asks us to dance, which is not only a joy-filled act, but usually a communal one, suggesting that we are not responsible for sourcing our environmental relationships alone. Kimmerer suggests that we might find a sense of place not only in land but within the people we love and also within ourselves.

Kimmerer's finding of peace and belonging is a continuation of the process that Johnson began long ago. In that way, Kimmerer is fighting many of the same settler colonial forces Johnson did. There is always progress existing on our horizon. On clear days, we might see it brightly, reach out our arms and grasp at its warmth. But, it is also crucial that we seek the light that exists now, underneath our feet, because it is what supports us, it is what makes movements move. When we choose to cherish phenomenal writing and thinking, we give it power. Therefore, the writing itself becomes real as it exists inside our living bodies. We might continue to read Johnson and Kimmerer because their power is a reciprocal one; they have fed their writing back into the earth, allowing us all to imagine what our lives might look like when we choose to flourish alongside Nature.

While Johnson and Kimmerer's work allows readers to know that they are loved. They both draw elegantly from their own pain, understanding that it is what keeps them alive and in tune with the world. It reminds me of Wendell Berry's poem "In the Peace of Wild Things." He explains a fear for the future but ends his poem grounded with the earth. He writes, "I come into the peace of wild things / who do not tax their lives with forethought / of grief" ending by saying, "I rest in the grace of the world, and am free" (Berry lines 6-11). There is power in finding freedom from our sadness. While it can and should never leave us entirely, we might do our best to find time to "rest in the grace of the world." While I do not have the space or the time to pay a proper ode to this poem, I think it sums up my reaction to Johnson and Kimmerer's work. Powerful environmental writings keep us grounded so that we might live to fight again.

I am not the first to admit that this is not easy. Imagining regenerative futures is not as simple as lying in the dirt and accepting ignorant happiness. As I sit safely in my writing zone, I look down at my phone to learn that the Biden administration has just approved the Willow

Project, a massive oil drilling project in the Alaskan arctic. I hold back tears knowing that this betrayal will disproportionately affect Indigenous populations; once again politicians—and politicians I voted for nonetheless—place economic gain over environmental preservation. I feel guilty as I write about joy in the midst of a hurting world. As I write this conclusion on a beautiful Colorado day, my friends surround me in a pocket of joy. My good friend, Taylor, has just completed her first trail marathon in the mountains of my hometown. I know that she is in pain. She had a classic Colorado race... rain, snow, wind, topped off with a sunburn. But as she describes her experience at the two-mile mark she says, “I’m just so happy to live here, to be able to run.” She had twenty-four miles and significant elevation gain to go and she was simply happy to be here. Watching the hurting world further exploited contrasted with watching your friend fall deeper in love with your backyard is a polarizing experience. And yet, I think that Johnson and Kimmerer would claim that these moments are necessary to life. The joy we feel from building a relationship with our homelands is part of what keeps us human. It lights a burning fire deep within our chests that allows us to keep running. Without intense moments of connection in the face of catastrophe, we might be lost altogether. I suggest that we soak moments like these in, let them leach into our skin, and become a part of ourselves so that we might have the energy, time, and space to imagine a regenerative future.

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