



Mark Houston

Riding Out of Abstraction:
Robin Wall Kimmerer's Re-materialization of
Social Justice Rhetoric in
"The Sacred and the Superfund"

Robin Wall Kimmerer's 2015 *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* has been received with much critical acclaim. Much of this praise has focused on the book's multi-genre qualities, like the way it "masterfully blends a smooth mixture of stories, technical jargon, botany, and life lessons" while advancing "a much-needed synthesis between indigenous and Western understandings of the environment and ecology" (Barnd 439-440). Nancy J. Turner praises the book's controlling metaphor—braiding sweetgrass—for how it "symbolizes the intertwining of Indigenous and scientific knowledge systems in creative and mutually supporting ways, through the medium of plants as teachers and generous relatives" (161). Likewise, Jen Soriano includes Kimmerer in her list of authors who practice an "intersectional form" and "[break] away from the confines of traditional narrative arc and instead move through fragments and strands and strips, conveying multiple viewpoints to reject homogenous truth in favor of a more complex reality." In so doing, she argues, such writing can be a means of "conveying and even modeling new ways of being in the world" (Soriano).

Among these "new ways of being in the world," the book advocates for recognizing "our enmeshment in the green world" and that the principle of reciprocity should govern humans' relationships with each other and the earth (Sullivan 425, 427). For Kimmerer, a citizen of the Potawatomi Nation and professor of environmental biology, seeing this enmeshment and living with reciprocity are things we can

learn by looking to the more-than-human world right in front of us. Jennifer Case points out that within environmental non-fiction there remain tensions about promoting local place attachment vs. more global perspectives (Case). Kimmerer seems intent on doing both, seeking to shift readers' sense of relationship with the larger world by finding ways to better understand and dwell with their localities. Her essay, "The Sacred and the Superfund," which concerns rehabilitating humanity's relationship with the environs around New York's Onondaga Lake, is a prime example of this, as Kimmerer takes readers through seven different possible conceptions of relating to land.

One angle on Kimmerer's work that has been little explored is to undertake an interdisciplinary rhetorical analysis, highlighting how Kimmerer's essay not only "braids together" diverse ways of knowing and offers alternative ways of relating to place, but also offers a rhetorical example of how to communicate across difference. In a time of deep partisan divides, Kimmerer provides a rich and beautiful example of how to communicate across difference, primarily through the use of embodied rhetoric to "rematerialize" her discussion of social justice issues. As David A. Greenwood notes, Kimmerer, while "insist[ing] that settler culture confront its colonizing relationship with land and its first peoples," somehow manages to do so in a book that is ultimately about "braiding connections" between Western science and Indigenous ways of knowing, between settlers and Indigenous people. Indeed, "she does so," Greenwood writes, "in a style and tone that also invites the healing possibility of newly braided and newly configured relationships based on reciprocity.... [and] avoids any discourse that neatly divides parts from wholes, us from them" (210-211). Viewed through this lens, *Braiding Sweetgrass* does work similar to Lauret Savoy's *Trace: Memory, History, Race, and the American Landscape*; or to Michael W. Twitty's *The Cooking Gene: A Journey Through African American Culinary History in the Old South* which also narratively blend together diverse ways of knowing to explore issues of race, history, culture, sovereignty, and our relationship to place in an attempt to bring disparate readers to the table together.

Rematerializing the Rhetoric of Social Justice

Public rhetoric around problems like racism—with complex intersectional, historical, social, and material facets—is all too often reduced to a set of “-isms” without material referents. According to Robin DiAngelo, questions of racial justice, for instance, are often examined by looking inward not outward—reduced to a simple “am I a good or bad person?” binary obscuring systemic issues (71-74). The answer becomes a revised Cartesian dualism: I do not think I am a racist; therefore, systemic racism doesn’t exist. Historian Ibram X. Kendi argues such cart-before-horse thinking often characterizes popular conceptions of racism. The assumed formula is “Ignorance/hateracist ideasdiscrimination.” The reality, he contends, is that powerful people find discrimination a useful tool whose continued existence must then be justified: “Racial discriminationracist ideassignorance/hate” (9).

The ordering makes a big difference—do public discussions of racism begin by talking about individual character or by examining concrete realities? Without that concrete, historical dimension, there is the perpetuation of what Inoue Asao calls white racial *habitus*, in which racialized structures are seen as “unconnected to the bodies and histories that create them. They are set up as apolitical, and often deny difference by focusing on the individual or making larger claims to abstract liberal principles” (Asao 48). This tendency toward abstraction can prevent diverse viewpoints from engaging in productive dialog because dominant groups often operate out of the assumptions of the universalized western subject, a disembodied “rational” perspective focused on universalizing principles that can exclude the particular experiences of individuals and groups (Roberts-Miller *Deliberate Conflict* 40). In short, to have productive exchanges across difference we need rhetorical methods of bypassing the individualized, abstracted, universal western subject. We need rhetorical practices that re-materialize discussions of social justice, centralizing material conditions and embodied experiences as key elements of the available means of persuasion. Like so much good creative nonfiction, Kimmerer’s work is particularly powerful in this regard. She makes arguments that are firmly planted in the material world and that cannot be abstracted.

Kimmerer's writing makes it hard for arguments to remain in an abstract and deadlocked state. Her combination of attunement to material realities, rhetorical listening, and embodied experience works to persuade *in situ*. Readers are placed in an altered state of cognition where thinking happens as part of material relations, not as an abstract overlay that obscures concrete realities. People are, of course, always thinking *in situ*, but it can be easy to forget this when the norm is arguing from abstract principles. These abstract propositional arguments can undercut "the unique function of rhetoric in a democracy [which] is to express and advance minority viewpoints in exigent circumstances" (Crick 12) in order to make space for generative dialogue (Roberts-Miller *Deliberate* 193). Yet, that dialog requires "a cultural milieu that values listening" without pushing minorities and others to flatten their differences to make "universal" arguments (111, 186). What is needed, and what Kimmerer models, are not universalist and rationalist forms of argument but what Flower calls "hybrid discourse[s]" that attempt to speak with others outside our own "enclaves" at least partly through "narrative, personal experience, and impassioned argument" (32-34). What I call Kimmerer's "intra-active embodied rhetoric" does just that, using the rhetorical agency of the material world to inform what she says and how she says it, enabling readers to reconnect to each other by reconnecting to the concrete world around them.

Kimmerer's essay "The Sacred and the Superfund," is a standout example of this rhetoric. In it, her immediate argument is for New York State's now-polluted Onondaga Lake to be restored, but her larger goal is advancing a vision of sustainable and just living based on the restoration of Indigenous sovereignty and a shift from viewing the material world as a resource to viewing it as home for all. She also provides a rhetorical model for how to move from agonistic rhetoric against others toward what Shari Stenberg calls "productive argument" (*Repurposing* 83). In productive arguments, participants don't rush to prove their side right, but "[delay] judgement to make time for listening to complexity," and shift from zero-sum "dualistic thinking to multiplicity" (83). Interlocutors still make a "strong argument" but traverse "a different pathway to that argument," so that by viewing ideas "in a weblike relation to one another, ...

[they create] a more expansive network for understanding” in order to eventually “come to a thoughtful contribution in the context of listening” (84, 88).

Kimmerer’s essay employs these ideas by practicing rhetorical listening (Ratcliffe) and by listening to and working with the rhetorical agency of the material world around the lake’s environs (Rickert, Cooper). Her argument works through a brief retelling of the history of what Karen Barad would term the lake’s and humans’ “intra-actions”¹—a term that refers to how material existence is always already entangled, a shared happening of irreducible relationships (Barad 208). In doing so, Kimmerer enacts Stenberg’s movement into weblike multiplicity and creates a productive argument that rematerializes calls for social justice. To do this, she first “attunes” herself and readers to the lake and the issues at hand (Rickert). Then, she crafts an immersive embodied experience that first reveals and then creates with the rhetorical agency (Cooper) of the lake and its environs, bringing Indigenous ways of knowing into conversation with ecology, history, politics, and personal memoir.

Kimmerer’s essay thus helpfully builds on place-consciousness composition scholarship about how awareness of one’s embodied experiences in a particular place is rhetorically powerful and can affect the writing process. Much of this scholarship has placed greater (though by no means exclusive) emphasis on place as a source of content more than as an active agent in discovering and creating persuasive appeals (Owens; Brooke, *Rural Voices*; Brooke, *Writing Suburban*; Brooke and McIntosh; Dobrin and Weisser). Mayer and Woodward do emphasize how developing a sense of *felt geography*, “the physical and emotional impact of space on the body,” can furnish deeper local understandings, ideas for rhetorical invention, and perhaps enable writers to better “debate theoretical concepts (such as race and class) in particular, grounded, and relevant ways” (110, 113, 116). Reynolds’s work borrowing from cultural geography, argues that the idea of dwelling in a place can inform compositionists’ metaphorical conceptions of writing and

¹ For helpful summaries of Barad and other scholarship on materiality, entanglement, and intra-action see Gries; Cooper; Rickert; Tallbear; Grant; and Houston.

help them begin to attend more to the material practices of writing (163-66). She argues that studying where and with what tools writing occurs could be fruitful “not to determine a cause and effect relationship between the writing’s quality or success and the site of its production, but to trace the threads or remnants of literacy practices” (167).

Tracing the threads of Kimmerer’s literacy practices reveals how her surroundings led her to rhetorical moves that create a non-antagonistic social justice argument that combines practices of anti-racist and decolonial storytelling, rhetorical listening, and embodied rhetoric to shape the content and form of her writing. In particular, Kimmerer creates embodied rhetorical appeals by placing her readers vicariously within what Cooper calls the “cognitive ecology” of Onondaga Lake, a concept in which “cognition as behavior is immanent in [material] systems” and human thought is always already part of the environment (Cooper 64). In other words, Kimmerer situates her readers so that they are thinking within and as a part of the environment of the lake as she vicariously places them at the lakeside (323-340). The result is that Kimmerer’s argument re-concretizes social and environmental issues as readers are positioned within a rhetorical space where appeals for justice cannot be discussed in individualized and abstracted terms but must be evaluated as part of complex material relationships.

There are three overall rhetorical moves that Kimmerer makes to rematerialize her arguments.

1. Offering historical context to develop a baseline critical consciousness.
2. Enabling embodied knowledge from vicarious experience in a “cognitive ecology” (Cooper 64).
3. Practicing rhetorical and material listening to co-create embodied rhetoric (Knoblauch 52) with the rhetorical agency of the environs, especially through analogies, narratives, or invitations to physical actions.

Preparation: Attuning Oneself to Thinking with the Surroundings

To prepare for the three writing moves, a rhetor begins with what Thomas Rickert calls “attuning” to the “ambient rhetoric” of the surroundings. In Rickert’s view, rhetorical agency is non-hierarchically diffused throughout the entire more-than-human world (10,16). For Rickert, “the local environment is not just a passive stage for human activity but an integral active element in its own right. A mind needs a body, and a body needs a world” (10). Rhetors attune to this ambience and reveal its rhetorical agency to their audiences (34, 67). For example, Kimmerer begins her essay by drinking from and tracing the path of a spring behind her home that eventually runs to Onondaga Lake. She reveals the ambient rhetorical effect the spring has on her, as she “[worries] about the journey these drops will soon take” to the polluted lake, joining with the flow of other springs along the way (310). Here, it is the drops of water and the spring itself that have persuaded Kimmerer, and she reveals their rhetoric to the audience.

Other textual clues in “The Sacred and the Superfund” demonstrate the work Kimmerer has done both academically and through immersion in her surroundings in order to “attune” to the lake and the issues of justice around it. For instance, she has studied myths and historical accounts, to better understand the history and culture of the area’s Indigenous inhabitants, the Haudenosaunee (311-312, 318-319). She has learned the origins of and political struggles over the polluting of the lake by American industry, so that after “more than a century of industrial development, the lake known as one of North America’s most sacred sites is now known as one of the most polluted lakes in the United States (312-313). Kimmerer learns there are “beds of industrial waste sixty feet deep” (313), elevated pH levels from run-off from those beds (314), a dearth of aquatic plants, and “one hundred and sixty-five thousand pounds of mercury” in the lake to name just a few of the biggest problems (316). She spends time on the lakeshore, including visiting another professor’s class that is performing habitat restoration (323-325, 335). This includes studying the interactions of pollutants, soil, fauna and flora. For instance, she observes ants “Grain by grain, in their tiny mandibles ... carrying up waste from below [the soil] and carrying seeds and bits of leaves down into the soil,” and notices that birches and fruit-bearing shrubs are slowly returning to

the lakeshores (332-333). By doing all this, I would contend that Kimmerer's thinking about what justice looks like at Onondaga Lake develops through embodied material experience of its ambient rhetoric, not just a set of abstract principles.

Moreover, this preparatory work allows her to form her rhetoric through something akin to what Cooper calls a "correspondence" (as in carrying on a correspondence by exchanging letters with someone) with the environs (92-93) and opens up the page for deeper embodied rhetoric. A. Abby Knoblauch distinguishes three types of embodied writing: "embodied language [is] the use of terms, metaphors, and analogies that reference, intentionally or not, the body itself. Embodied knowledge is that sense of knowing something through the body and is often sparked by what might be called a 'gut reaction'. Finally, embodied rhetoric is a purposeful decision to include embodied knowledge and social positionalities as forms of meaning making within a text itself" (Knoblauch 52). Embodied knowledge becomes something that includes hearing the rhetorical agency of one's surroundings. Readers are invited to think intra-actively (co-shaping with/by the material) by the juxtaposition of a human mind/body with a haunted maze (discussed below) and polluted shores to shift their thinking about the intersecting injustices surrounding Onondaga Lake. It is this correspondence that ultimately guides the shape of the essay as a whole as Kimmerer co-creates it with Onondaga Lake's cognitive ecology.

Move 1: Offering Historical Context to Develop Critical Consciousness

The essay's rhetoric works by immersing readers in the materiality of the lake and its environs. However, merely encountering the lake through the senses is not enough. Attunement includes both seeing the present material conditions of the lake and perceiving them within what Brian Eno calls, "The Long Now...the recognition that the precise moment you're in grows out of the past and is a seed for the future" (qtd. in Condon 124-126). For Kimmerer, this means braiding the causal links between the attempted extermination of the Haudenosaunee by the American army during the Revolutionary War;

the later forced removal of Haudenonsaunee children to the Carlisle Indian School; and the banning of “Longhouse ceremonies of thanksgiving ... meant to keep the world in balance, so that “The people have endured the pain of being bystanders to the degradation of their lands” (318-319). Now, the lake—once a welcoming habitat for diverse life—is a superfund site, polluted with industrial waste as well as sewage from nearby Syracuse, New York (312-313). To understand the issues of Onondaga Lake, then, readers need to be aware of both current material realities and the history that has led to them.

Kimmerer contrasts this history with pre-Columbian Haudenonsaunee stories of how their own ancestors once forgot to honor the land and to live in peace with each other, so that the five Haudenonsaunee nations “became greedy and jealous and began fighting amongst themselves” (312). This conflict persisted until one man, the Peacemaker, brought together the leaders of the five Haudenonsaunee nations at Onondaga Lake where they agreed to “the Great Law of Peace which sets out right relations among peoples and with the natural world” (312). The importance of these right relations is maintained with material reminders. The Great Tree of Peace is a white pine whose branches consist of “five long green needles joined in one bundle, representing the unity of the five nations” (311). As the Haudenonsaunee looked for ways to end their civic strife, the pine needles became an important reminder of unity, a part of the cognitive ecology by which they made sense of their situation. If someone understands this history, an argument for peace is made every time they look at a pine and recognize the ambient rhetoric at play through the needles. This story primes readers to look for similar concrete thinking aids that might present themselves by listening to the area’s ambient rhetoric. It also foreshadows Kimmerer’s overall method of braiding the material with the conceptual to create an embodied rhetoric that works for understanding across difference.

In these passages, rematerializing social issues is not just a matter of “listening to nature” instead of appealing to abstract beliefs. Rather, it is the joining of critical consciousness with attunement to materiality’s rhetorical agency. In contrast, more commonly voiced abstract “American” values like equality,

justice, and personal responsibility are usually defended as universalized principles practiced individually in an ahistorical “now.” Kimmerer demonstrates that the issue is not individual abstract beliefs but the historical-material relations that cause environmental degradation and perpetuate racist colonialism. Racism and colonialism are not intellectual constructs one either “believes in” or not but are material systems that intersect with and shape beliefs, actions, and living conditions. In short, this re-coupling of critical historical consciousness with attunement to the material teaches readers how to read the rest of the essay: participate in the area’s cognitive ecology—not just abstract principles—when considering social justice issues.

Move 2: Enable Embodied Knowledge through Vicarious Experience

Kimmerer’s materially focused rhetoric also aligns with feminist and other rhetoricians who value drawing on embodied experience, narrative, and emotion as sources of knowing (Royster and Kirsch 94-95; Glenn 52-57; Stenberg “Making Room” 139, 143). In her next section, Kimmerer’s writing takes on a more narrative focus, directly relating events from her time at the lakeside. Inserting her own embodied experiences rather than staying at the level of narrated historical events (which make up most of the first half of the essay) is important for several reasons. First, there is a need, as Frankie Condon argues, for developing rhetorical skills that use “narratives that braid affect with critical engagement in and through, with and against the materiality of lived experience” to make anti-racist arguments (44, 83). Aja Martinez makes similar arguments about the importance of counter-story for recognizing “that the experiential and embodied knowledge of people of color is legitimate and critical to understanding racism that is often well disguised” in typical language practices (37). Kimmerer’s essay can be seen working as an anti-racist counter-story, offering an embodied alternative to settler colonial viewpoints of the area in which “the captains of industry brought their innovations to Onondaga territory” and treated the land as “just private property, a mine of ‘resources,’ ... [that] you can do whatever you want with” (313, 329). Second, such

embodied awareness and story-telling are also important because, as Villaneuva argues, academic knowledge is incomplete without “knowledge known through mind and body, even if vicariously” (573). Kimmerer wants to give her readers something more than academic knowledge of the need for social and environmental justice at Onondaga Lake, so she employs embodied knowledge through vicarious experience.

Because thinking is a material act that occurs in a concrete context, Kimmerer invites her readers to vicariously participate in the cognitive ecology of Onondaga Lake. Continuing to attune readers to the area’s ambient rhetoric, she connects critical consciousness to embodied ways of knowing. Specifically, she draws readers bodily into the place through a narrative use of embodied rhetoric. Recently returned to the Syracuse area, Kimmerer narrates her encounters with the lake one October. She drives to the fairgrounds on the lakeshore and finds the back gate open. She has come to see for herself the Solvay waste beds, “fifteen hundred acres of wasteland along this [particular] shore” (324). Her writing becomes rich in sensory details, inviting readers to vicariously experience the lakeshore, especially the bodily response of horror at an unexpected discovery.

Even the sound of the highway, usually a good direction finder was lost in the swishing sound of the reeds. A niggling suspicion that this was not a good place to be alone crept up the back of my neck, but I talked myself out of being afraid. . . . I followed the track as it twisted and turned until I caught a glimpse of the top of a cottonwood. I could hear it’s leaves in the distance, an unmistakable sound. . . . From the lowest branch hung a human body. . . . I screamed and ran, taking any path I could find, panicked and walled in by reeds. With pounding heart I ran blindly on and on. (324)

Kimmerer runs through a maze of trails seemingly containing the sites of several grisly murders, one complete with “an executioner with a black hood [and] . . . dripping ax” (324). After her first shock passes, she realizes with relief it is only a series of tableaux for the fairground’s Haunted Hayrides. “Relief

poured off me in a cold sweat,” she recalls, and “I laughed myself silly. But then I had to cry” (324-325). Kimmerer recounts the embodied experience of feeling lost, shocked, and terrified. She then uses the power of those experiences to drive home that the environmental, social, and political injustice of the lake’s condition has become divorced from any such embodied feelings of horror or danger:

The Solvay waste beds: how very fitting a venue for our fears. What we ought to be afraid of isn’t in the haunts, but under them. Land buried under sixty feet of industrial waste, trickling toxins into the sacred waters of the Onondaga and the home of half a million people—death may be slower than the fall of an ax, but it is just as gruesome.... [Yet,] More frightening to me than the act of execution is the mind-set that allowed it to happen....[J]ust business as usual. 325.

She then quotes psychologist R. J. Clifton, who argues that society is plagued by a “dangerous splitting.... [of] our mental calculations from our intuitive, emotional, and biological embeddedness in the matrix of life” (qtd. in 326). In short, it takes a certain kind of mental attitude toward the land to not see the injustice of what has happened, an attitude that has ceased to ground its mental processes in the concrete.

Kimmerer’s move demonstrates a practical application of Rickert’s notion that rhetorical agency is non-hierarchically diffused throughout the entire more-than-human world, so that rhetoric comes into being as “the emergent result of many complexly interacting agents dynamically attuned and exposed to one another” (34, 67). For Rickert, persuasion works by revealing that ambient rhetoric to an audience. Rickert uses the example of the debate over introducing automobiles to Toronto Island to discuss how a rhetorician might attune an audience to a specific place and situation (254-261). Rickert’s example, while helpful, tends to hover at the 30,000 foot level, discussing in general terms the way cars would change the island’s infrastructure and the way people dwell there. Kimmerer enacts a more concrete revealing through her use of embodied language and knowledge, seeking to engage readers’ bodily responses. These material

experiences, rather than preconceived abstract beliefs, become the lens for viewing her coming complex political, racial, economic, and environmental arguments.

Kimmerer thus extends the function of embodied rhetoric, inviting readers to attend to their bodily reactions with the rhetoric of this cognitive ecology. Kimmerer's invitation to bodily horror demonstrates one way that such embodied knowledge can be woven into social justice arguments. By doing so, she circumvents the problems of the abstract, universal western subject as she argues for what justice looks like for the lake and its denizens. In the face of the Solvay waste beds, one cannot simply retreat into the comfort of being "a good person" with the "right beliefs." Kimmerer's rhetoric moves readers to examine their own embodied responses to the polluted landscape. Do they feel the same gut level reactions she does, or is it "just business as usual?" If readers are not persuaded by Kimmerer's arguments, they are faced with the prospect that it is not because they are bad or lack the right convictions, but because their "mental calculations" are divided from their "intuitive, emotional, and biological embeddedness in the matrix of life" (Clifton qtd. in Kimmerer 326).

Move 3: Practice Rhetorical and Material Listening to Co-Create Embodied Rhetoric with the Environments

Finally, Kimmerer uses the rhetorical agency of Onondaga Lake itself to co-create a rhetorical performance via an imagined hayride. Kimmerer's vicarious hayride takes readers through seven new tableaux depicting possible conceptions of humans' relationship to the land, a different set of "scenes every bit as evocative as the tableaux of the Haunted Hayride" (329). These include Land as: Capital, Property, Machine, Teacher/Healer, Responsibility, Sacred/Community, and Land as Home. Each stop uses Kimmerer's experience of walking the actual Haunted Hayride's grisly scenes—coupled with "Indigenous wisdom and scientific knowledge"—to craft an embodied argument for readers that seeks to produce a different set of "gut reactions." These tableaux begin with revulsion and gradually become more

positive. Land as Capital, for example, features “white industrial sludge...[and an industrial] laborer placing the outfall pipe” from a factory into the lake while “the man in the suit” looms behind (329). Land as Property has “a dense monoculture of invasive reeds” feeding on the sludge and “exclud[ing] all other forms of life” (329). Land as Machine is peopled with engineers and foresters carefully managing inputs and outputs of natural resources, trying “to reestablish structure, and especially function, to a very specific purpose” (330). Readers are implicitly invited to think about their own bodily reactions to such scenes.

Kimmerer’s hayride is not just a series of interconnected propositions but a performative experience of intra-active relationships. The imagined hayride moves readers into thinking about habitat restoration in relation to Onondaga Lake’s cognitive ecology rather than in the abstract. Kimmerer’s embodied rhetoric reaches out to (re)create a particular set of material relationships that invite the reader to participate in thinking in and with them. We see here how Kimmerer moves readers into the weblike multiplicity, the act of listening to multiple complex points of view that Stenberg argues for (83). Each stop on the tour, each point of view and its internal logic, has a chance to be considered. Seeing Land as Capital is “doing it right” if you take the view that “land is only a means to make money”; and if Land is Property it makes sense that “you can do whatever you want with it and move on (329). Land as Machine does better, seeking to “to utilize the plants as an engineering solution to water pollution,” but Kimmerer also insists that this view “however well-meaning, does not quite meet the standard for true restoration (331). Through moments like these, Kimmerer is practicing Stenberg’s productive argument that listens to and explores more than one viewpoint, even those she is ultimately going to disagree with.

But the hayride is more than an analogy to communicate the content of these various arguments; the form is the argument. This merging of form and argument is important because in response to Land as Machine, Kimmerer argues that from an “indigenous [sic] worldview.... The ecosystem is not a machine, but a community of sovereign beings” who might take the driver’s seat themselves and work in partnership with humans for ecological restoration (331). Kimmerer’s rhetoric employs a similar

partnership between the material-ecological community of Onondaga Lake and herself as writer. The rhetorical agency of the lake merges with her own as she blends the real and the imagined, creating the last four tableaux from a combination of her subsequent trips to the lake, her knowledge of “the teachings of plants” and her own spin on the haunted hayride. During later trips to the lake, Kimmerer finds places where trees and grass are growing on the waste beds. Digging beneath the grass she finds “The waste below is no longer pure white and slippery, but dark gray and crumbly between my fingers. There are roots all through it. The darkening of the soil is humus mixed in; the waste is being changed” (332). Such images form the Land as Teacher / Healer tableau, which for Kimmerer “is a testament to the ingenuity and wisdom of plants more than to any action of people” (333).

But the plants’ activities are no excuse for humans to abrogate their own responsibilities because “Restoration is [also] an opportunity for partnership, for us to help” (333). Her tableau of Land as Responsibility is a real life “nascent native meadow” inspired by observing such a partnership in the work of a college professor and his class replanting native species along the lake (335). A similar blending of real and imaginary informs the tableau for Land as Sacred / Community, inspired when Kimmerer observes a lakeside gathering of activists for “a ceremonial dance to honor the water” (339). Finally, Kimmerer envisions a final stop, Land as Home, that “hasn’t been finished yet, but the scene is planned.” It will include “kids swimming, families picnicking,” fishing, and birds in trees looking down on a restored habitat where “The Haudenosaunee flag flies alongside the Stars and Stripes” (340).

Susan Martens’s description of how writing marathons² are connected to activist rhetorics comes to mind at this point. As participants move through and write about a place, they engage in “the physical and sensory actions of *walking, sensing, noticing, writing, and telling* [along] with the intellectual actions of

² For those who are unfamiliar, writing marathons “[involve] small groups of writers moving together through a landscape, writing and sharing along the way” for a set period to time (Martens 42). For a fuller description and brief history of writing marathons, see Martens “Move the Writer...” and Assay’s [Spotlight in our Spring 2015 issue](#).

mapping and *connecting*” (44). Based on this blend of physical and intellectual activity, Martens argues that writers can take “mundane details” and interpret them in ways that align with Flower’s four forms of rhetorical agency—speaking up, against, for, with—and “help writers draw connections between personal experiences and political issues” (49, 52, 66). Kimmerer’s essay demonstrates all four of these and gives readers another sense of what it can mean to write *with* a place (or other material relationship) through embodied rhetoric. Kimmerer’s rhetorical performance contributes to our understanding of how place- and materially-based writing can aid communication across difference. In short, writers can move through cognitive ecologies as both cultural critics *and* rhetorical performers who connect with their readers through embodied rhetoric to re-concretize issues.

Writing with the Material: Intra-active Embodied Rhetoric

This combination of material listening with rhetorical listening allows Kimmerer to create a kind of *intra-active embodied rhetoric*. By interactive embodied rhetoric I mean (1) That rhetorical invention occurs as part of the interaction of a writer with the rhetorical agency of one’s surroundings; and (2) The rhetoric produced appeals to the audience at least partially through embodied rhetoric that also seeks to bring readers into interaction with those material and/or embodied relationships. Rickert and Cooper both argue similar points to the first part of this definition: rhetorical invention occurs not just through the rational mind but when a rhetor “attend[s] to memory, networks, technologies, intuitions, and environments (places)” (Rickert 67). Both Cooper and Rickert argue that writers co-create rhetoric by working with the rhetorical agency of the material world. As in basket weaving, one doesn’t simply impose a predetermined form on what is made; form emerges from the maker’s interaction with the materials (Cooper 83). Rickert makes a similar point using the example of American painter Jasper Johns, whose creative choices emerge from intra-action with the paint and canvas themselves (123). Similarly, Kimmerer’s writing is an act of making *with* the cognitive ecology of Onondaga Lake that combines Ratcliffe’s rhetorical listening with

Cooper's "polite persuasion," in which one listens to the material relationships of a situation and then comes to an audience to "offer and entertain possibilities...[.] propositions, tales that might be told, that may suggest new paths" (Cooper 203). For Cooper, such listening happens when rhetors first assume there are more-than-human Others to listen to and are "open to new styles of listening... [through] emotional, physical, and cognitive attunement," which allow them to "attend to the other as a specific instance of a specific individual in a specific time and place" (207-208).

But what Kimmerer does takes things a step further, seeking to induce the same kind of intra-active thinking in readers: Kimmerer uses the fact that one's thinking is always already embedded in one's surroundings to create rhetoric that invites readers to think in embodied and materially aware ways that mirror her own co-creative acts with Onondaga Lake. Kimmerer imaginatively places readers into intra-action with Onondaga Lake so they might "entertain possibilities" and hear "tales that might be told" in a way that abstract argument doesn't provide. Persuasion happens not through identification or rational propositions of the "everyone should agree that" variety, but by fashioning an embodied experience that creates a sense of "belonging that imposes obligations that must be addressed" even if stakeholders' motivations and viewpoints do not all align (Cooper 217). The effect is to keep the issues surrounding Onondaga Lake concrete and contextualized as Kimmerer works with her surroundings to discover/co-create the available means of persuasion. This rhetorical agency comes from both the "natural" environs and the "unnatural" haunted hayride tableaux. I stress this point, because Kimmerer's rhetorical moves are more than just "nature writing" for social justice. They are rhetorical practices in which both form and content are shaped by the rhetorical agency of whatever material situation thinking takes place in.

Based on this analysis of Kimmerer's three rhetorical moves, there are at least three more general rhetorical principles that can be practice based on a rhetor's intra-actions with a cognitive ecology. Appeals can be made through:

1. Analogies based on the material relations.

2. Experiential narratives (fictional and non-fictional) that create embodied rhetoric.
3. Invitations into actual embodied actions that have a performative rhetorical quality.

The first two principles have a direct influence on writing features. To use Kimmerer's example, she could have 1. Used the haunted hayride (or another similar hypothetical concrete situation) as an analogy to illustrate her argument. 2. She could do what she did and create the embodied rhetoric of her hayride through the seven tableaux. 3. Or she could actually stage the tableaux in real life and invite audiences to a real embodied experience.

Kimmerer's essay thus contributes to knowledge of place-conscious writing by showing the role of place in rhetorical *delivery* as well as in rhetorical *invention*. Indeed, Kimmerer's essay is a powerful example of writing *about* and *for* one's place in the finest tradition of place-conscious writing. It is also a powerful example of writing *with* one's place. While I agree with Reynolds that simply connecting writing to places doesn't necessarily equate to "writing's quality or success," I would suggest that Kimmerer's essay demonstrates how powerful place and materiality can be when used to co-create writing that engages readers through what I am calling intra-active embodied rhetoric (167). In this conception, place and materiality become important partners in shaping rhetoric that connects with readers' bodily responses while reminding them that social justice issues are not abstractions one simply takes a philosophical stance toward. They are entangled with our very bodies and ways of being in the world—and those of the planet's more-than-human inhabitants as well.

Works Cited

- Barad, Karen Michelle. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Duke University Press, 2007.
- Barnd, Natchee Blu. "Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants." *American Indian Quarterly*, vol. 39, no. 4, 2015, pp. 439–41. *unl.primo.exlibrisgroup.com*, <https://doi.org/10.5250/amerindiquar.39.4.0439>.
- Brooke, Robert E., editor. *Rural Voices: Place-Conscious Education and the Teaching of Writing*. Teacher's College P and Berkley, 2003.
- . *Writing Suburban Citizenship: Place-Conscious Education and the Conundrum of Suburbia*. Syracuse University Press, 2015.
- Brooke, Robert, and Jason McIntosh. "Deep Maps: Teaching Rhetorical Engagement through Place-Conscious Education." *The Locations of Composition*, edited by Christopher J. Keller and Christian R. Weisser, SUNY P, 2007, pp. 131–49.
- Case, Jennifer. "Place Studies: Theory and Practice in Environmental Nonfiction." *Assay: A Journal of Nonfiction Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1. <https://www.assayjournal.com/jennifer-case-place-studies-theory-and-practice-in-environmental-nonfiction.html>
- Condon, Frankie. *I Hope I Join the Band: Narrative, Affiliation, and Antiracist Rhetoric*. Utah State University Press, 2012.
- Cooper, Marilyn Marie. *The Animal Who Writes: A Posthumanist Composition*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019.
- Crick, Nathan. *Democracy and Rhetoric: John Dewey on the Arts of Becoming*. U of South Carolina P, 2010.
- Dobrin, Sidney I., and Christian R. Weisser. *Natural Discourse: Toward Ecocomposition*. SUNY P, 2002.
- Flower, Linda. *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement*. Southern Illinois University Press, 2008.

-
- Glenn, Cheryl. *Rhetorical Feminism and This Thing Called Hope*. Southern Illinois University Press, 2018.
- Grant, David M. "Writing 'Wakan': The Lakota Pipe as Rhetorical Object." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 69, no. 1, National Council of Teachers of English, 2017, pp. 61–86.
- Greenwood, David A. "Mushrooms and Sweetgrass: A Biotic Harvest of Culture and Place-Based Learning." *The Journal of Environmental Education*, vol. 48, no. 3, 2017, pp. 205–12.
unl.primo.exlibrisgroup.com, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00958964.2017.1299675>.
- Gries, Lauri. "Agential Matters: Tumbleweed, Women-Pens, Citizens-Hope, and Rhetorical Actancy." *Ecology, Writing, Theory, and New Media*, edited by Sidney I. Dobrin, 2012, pp. 67–91.
- Houston, Mark. "Writing Things: What's the (Performative) Matter in Composition?" *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 73, no. 2, 2022. pp. 338-364.
- Inoue, Asao B. *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies: Teaching and Assessing Writing for a Socially Just Future*. Parlor Press, 2015.
- Kendi, Ibram X. *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*. Nation Books, 2016.
- Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed, 2015.
- Knoblauch, A. Abby. "Bodies of Knowledge: Definitions, Delineations, and Implications of Embodied Writing in the Academy." *Composition Studies*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2012, pp. 50–65.
- Martens, Susan. "Move the Writer, Move the Pen, Move the Mind, Change the World." *Writing Suburban Citizenship: Place-Conscious Education and the Conundrum of Suburbia*, edited by Robert E. Brooke, Syracuse UP, 2015, pp. 42–69.
- Martinez, Aja Y. "A Plea for Critical Race Theory Counterstory: Stock Story versus Counterstory Dialogues Concerning Alejandra's 'Fit' in the Academy." *Composition Studies*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2014, pp. 33–55.

-
- Mayer, Danny, and Keith Woodward. "Composition and Felt Geographics." *Composing Other Spaces*, edited by Douglas Reichert Powell and John Paul Tassoni, Hampton Press, 2008, pp. 103–20.
- Owens, Derek. *Composition and Sustainability: Teaching for a Threatened Generation*. NCTE, 2001.
- Ratcliffe, Krista. *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness*. Southern Illinois University Press, 2005.
- Reynolds, Nedra. *Geographies of Writing: Inhabiting Places and Encountering Difference*. 2004.
- Rickert, Thomas J. *Ambient Rhetoric: The Attunements of Rhetorical Being*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013.
- Roberts-Miller, Patricia. *Deliberate Conflict: Argument, Political Theory, and Composition Classes*. Southern Illinois University Press, 2004.
- Royster, Jacqueline Jones. *Feminist Rhetorical Practices New Horizons for Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy Studies*. Southern Illinois University Press, 2012.
- Savoy, Lauret. *Trace: Memory, History, Race, and the American Landscape*. Counterpoint, 2016.
- Soriano, Jen. "Multiplicity from the Margins: The Expansive Truth of Intersectional Form." *Assay: A Journal of Nonfiction Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1. <https://www.assayjournal.com/jen-soriano-multiplicity-from-the-margins-the-expansive-truth-of-intersectional-form-51.html>
- Stenberg, Shari. "Making Room for New Subjects: Feminist Interruptions of Critical Pedagogy Rhetorics." *Teaching Rhetorica: Theory, Pedagogy, Practice*, edited by Kate Ronald and Joy Ritchie, Heinemann/Boynton Cook Publishers, 2006, pp. 131–46.
- . *Repurposing Composition: Feminist Interventions for a Neoliberal Age*. Utah State University Press, 2015.
- Sullivan, Heather. "Robin Wall Kimmerer. Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants." *Seminar*, vol. 55, no. 4, 2019, pp. 425–27. unl.primo.exlibrisgroup.com, <https://doi.org/10.3138/seminar.55.4.rev005>.
- TallBear, Kimberly. "An Indigenous Reflection on Working Beyond the Human/Not Human." *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2, Duke University Press, 2015, pp. 230–35.

- Turner, Nancy J. "Robin Wall Kimmerer. Braiding Sweetgrass. Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants." *Native Studies Review*, vol. 23, no. 1&2, 2016, pp. 161-164.
- Twitty, Michael W. *The Cooking Gene: A Journey Through African American Culinary History in the Old South*. Amistad, 2018
- Villanueva, Victor. "'Memoria' Is a Friend of Ours: On the Discourse of Color." Rpt. in *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory: A Reader*, edited by Victor Villanueva and Kristin L. Arola, 3rd ed., NCTE, 2004, pp. 567–80.