

NATIONAL BESTSELLER

A hymn of love to the world.
—ELIZABETH GILBERT

BRAIDING SWEETGRASS



Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge,
and the Teachings of Plants

ROBIN WALL KIMMERER

Imagine seeing your grandmother standing at the stove in her apron and then saying of her, “Look, it is making soup. It has gray hair.” We might snicker at such a mistake, but we also recoil from it. In English, we never refer to a member of our family, or indeed to any person, as *it*. That would be a profound act of disrespect. *It* robs a person of selfhood and kinship, reducing a person to a mere thing. So it is that in Potawatomi and most other indigenous languages, we use the same words to address the living world as we use for our family. Because they are our family.

To whom does our language extend the grammar of animacy? Naturally, plants and animals are animate, but as I learn, I am discovering that the Potawatomi understanding of what it means to be animate diverges from the list of attributes of living beings we all learned in Biology 101. In Potawatomi 101, rocks are animate, as are mountains and water and fire and places. Beings that are imbued with spirit, our sacred medicines, our songs, drums, and even stories, are all animate. The list of the inanimate seems to be smaller, filled with objects that are made by people. Of an inanimate being, like a table, we say, “*What is it?*” And we answer *Dopwen yawe*. Table it is.

But of apple, we must say, “*Who is that being?*” And reply *Mshimin yawe*. Apple that being is.

Yawe—the animate *to be*. I am, you are, s/he is. To speak of those possessed with life and spirit we must say yawe. By what linguistic confluence do Yahweh of the Old Testament and yawe of the New World both fall from the mouths of the reverent? Isn’t this just what it means, to be, to have the breath of life within, to be the offspring of Creation? The language reminds us, in every sentence, of our kinship with all the animate world. English doesn’t give us many tools for incorporating respect for animacy. In English, you are either human or a thing. Our grammar boxes us in by the choice of reducing a nonhuman being to *it*, or it must be gendered, inappropriately, as a *he* or a *she*. Where are our words for the simple existence of another living being? Where is our yawe? My friend Michael Nelson, an ethicist who thinks a great deal about moral inclusion, told me about a woman he knows, a field biologist whose work is among-other-than-humans. Most of her companions are not two-legged, and so her language has shifted to accommodate her relationships. She kneels along the trail to inspect a set of moose tracks, saying, “Someone’s already been this way this morning.” “Someone is in my hat,” she says, shaking out a deerfly. Someone, not something.

When I am in the woods with my students, teaching them the gifts of plants and how to call them by name, I try to be mindful of my language, to be bilingual between the lexicon of science and the grammar of animacy. Although they still have to learn scientific roles and Latin names, I hope I am also teaching them to know the world as a neighborhood of nonhuman residents, to know that, as ecotheologian Thomas Berry has written, “we must say of the universe that it is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects.”

....The animacy of the world is something we already know, but the language of animacy teeters on extinction—not just for Native peoples, but for everyone. Our toddlers speak of plants and animals as if they were people, extending to them self and intention and compassion—until we teach them not to. We quickly retrain them and make them forget. When we tell them that the tree is not a *who*, but an *it*, we make that maple an object; we put a barrier between us, absolving ourselves of moral responsibility and opening the door to exploitation. Saying *it* makes a living land into “natural resources.” If a maple is an *it*, we can take up the chain saw. If a maple is a *her*, we think twice.

—Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Milkweed Editions, 2015), 55-57.

From *Hungry Listening*, by Dylan Robinson
Excerpt from a 1985 Canadian trial about land rights

Mr. Grant (Plaintiff's Counsel): The song is part of the history, and I am asking the witness to sing the song as part of the history, because I think in the song itself, invokes the history of the-of the particular adaawk to which she is referring.

Justice McEachern: How long is it?

Grant: It's not very long, it's very short.

McEachern: Could it not be written out and asked if this is the wording? Really, we are on the verge of getting way off track here, Mr. Grant. Again, I don't want to be skeptical, but to have to witness singing songs in court is in my respectful view not the proper way to approach this problem.

Grant: My Lord, Mr. Jackson will make a submission to you with respect-

McEachern: No, no, that isn't necessary. If this has to be done, if you say as counsel this has to be done, I'm going to listen to it. I just say, with respect, I've never heard it happen before, I never thought it necessary, and I don't think it necessary now. But I'll be glad to hear what the witness says if you say this is what she has to do. It doesn't seem to me she has to sing it.

Grant: Well, My Lord, with respect, the song is—is what one may refer to as a death song. It's a song which itself invokes the history and the depth of the history of what she is telling. And as counsel, it is—it is my submission that it is necessary for you to appreciate—

McEachern: I have a tin ear, Mr. Grant, so it's not going to do any good to sing to me.

Following Mary Johnson's singing of the limx oo'y, McEachern continued to demand explanation and justification of it:

McEachern: All right Mr. Grant, would you explain to me, because this may happen again, why you think it was necessary to sing the song? This is a trial, not a performance....It is not necessary in a matter of this kind for that song to have been sung, and I think that I must say now that I ought not to have been exposed to it. I don't think it should happen again. I think I'm being imposed upon and I don't think that should happen in a trial like this ..

Throughout the trial, Justice McEachern refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the limx oo'y as evidence, let alone as the equivalent documentation of law as upheld by the Gitxsan people. He conflates the song with " performance" that can have no effect on pleasing his "tin ear." McEachern treats Johnson's singing as an attempt to win him over, either through the song's aesthetic beauty or the affective appeal of her voice. McEachern cannot hear what Mary Johnson shares as anything other than a song in the Western context of what songs are; or rather, he asserts willful ignorance that it can function as anything other than a song that might penetrate the armor of his "tin ear."

In contrast, it is useful to consider from a Gitxsan perspective what this song is, and the function it holds as an Indigenous legal order. As described by James Morrison (Txaaxwok) during the same trial, the limx oo'y has far more than an aesthetic function; it is far more than a song with the aesthetic powers to please the ear:

Well when, while they ever singing that song, that's memorial, that's today, when they are singing it and rattle, when they are singing it in a quiet way, while they are singing that song, I can feel it today that you can feel something in your life, it memories back to the past what's happened in the territory. This is why this song, this memorial song. While the chief is sitting there I can still feel it today while I am sitting here, I can hear the brook, I can hear the river runs. This is what the song is all about. You can feel the air of the mountain. This is what the memorial song is. To bring your memory back into that territory. This is why the song is sung, the song. And it goes on for many thousands of years ago. And that's why we are still doing it today. I can feel it. That's how they know the law of Indian people, as this goes on for many years. (Napoleon 2001, 169)

"I can feel it, says Morrison, "I can hear the brook, I can hear the river runs... the air of the mountain." Songs at their best serve this function of memory, they capture a time in our lives, they produce nostalgia. want to refrain from categorizing Morrison's word here as a kind of nostalgia, however, given the way that songs, again, as law have a function.