

Nature as a Mirror of Queerness: Queer Ecology, Reciprocity and Radical Belonging in the More Than Human World

When queerness finds itself in the twisted bends and forks of rivers, the ever shifting changes in identity that the forest undergoes each season, or the albatross birds' choice of companionship and partnership taking form between two female loving birds, there is something felt here beyond metaphors: radical belonging and mirroring. This piece will explore how Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* and selected *High Country News* pieces reveal how humans, land, and the more-than-human world act as embodiments of fluid, queer existence around relation and kin centric ties to the land and one another. Drawing on the Indigenous foundational practice of reciprocity, queer ecology, and storytelling from environmental journalism, I share truths and perspectives to collectively challenge binary beliefs about the natural world, inclusive to the suggestion of queerness being mirrored and reflected in the more than human world. A crucial and heart centric piece of environmentalism as my burning synthesis question that I propose is: How can environmental management incorporate queer ecological truths and narratives to foster more inclusive, and reciprocal relationships with the land and humans? How can the land hold affinity and the embodiment of identity when it comes to queerness and queer kin seeing themselves as part of this greater ecological life force?

Queer ecology undermines normative binaries by viewing nature through lenses of fluidity and queerness– challenging perspectives that uphold strict compartmentalization of the natural world. Indigenous and and melanated worldviews, central to Kimmerer's writing, emphasize relationality: land, plants, and humans exist in a web of kinship, not hierarchy. This current of belief and understanding mirrors queer ecology's ties to deconstructing fixed identities, celebrating fluidity and transition, and connection rather than constraint by the binary.

In *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013), Kimmerer weaves the wisdom from the original stewards of the land to meet the world of scientific insight to thread a mutual ethic between reciprocity rooted in responsibility and gratitude for the land. She explores the "honorable harvest" in which Anishinabe people seed manoomin (wild rice) as a gift of gratitude and recognition for the future abundance to come– an act

of reverence and mutual respect. There is a notion here that is more so important: the practice itself is removed and spaciouly so– from detrimental yet common acts of extraction.

The act of reciprocation continues to thread the perspective Kimmerer shares as it mentioned more than 100 times throughout the entirety of her writings: spanning pecans, strawberries, goldenrod, water lilies as part of this relational kinship to land and humans.

“Each person, human or no, is bound to every other in a reciprocal relationship. Just as all beings have a duty to me, I have a duty to them. If an animal gives its life to feed me, I am in turn bound to support its life. If I receive a stream’s gift of pure water, then I am responsible for returning a gift in kind. An integral part of a human’s education is to know those duties and how to perform them...” (Kimmerer, 2013, p 115)

There’s an invitation proposed here and that is to see ourselves as relatives, ceremonial kin, and co-authors of regeneration. An invitation to feel connected to the greater part of our existence—feeling seen by the ecological web of earth who mirrors our joys with rainbows after a long days grey gloom; our grief like the magpies that hold burials for a fellow bird kin who has crossed over. To be in conversation with the land is to know the land intimately: “In the silence, I hear the rustle of grasses, the slither of a mouse in the dry leaves, the wings of geese. I hear them say, You are not alone” (Kimmerer, 2013, p 272).

The land holds a mirror for our emergences, our deaths, our queerness, our entire happy accident of existence. Nature and human are to live in kin centric relation– as relatives. To hold earth with familial reverence creates space to walk with cautious steps on the ground, share warm embraces with wind, and water the sprouts of care that thread greater notions of “environmentalism” with a connected and familiar relationship to consideration and connection to the natural world. We see our animals as our children and our mountains as mothers because “when we braid sweetgrass, we are braiding the hair of Mother Earth, showing our loving care for the land, and holding the strands together” (Kimmerer, 2013, p 127). Both kin and self are deeply embedded and mirrored by the natural world. This ethic of relational foundations resonates deeply with queer experience, where identity often includes chosen family, community, and

more-than-human kin. Kimmerer's writings on reciprocal relations to the land offers queer folks an affinity space of its own where identity is not fixed but co-created with the earth.

In "Flow like the San Juan" (Griffis, 2025), rivers' queer personhood offers a stunning idea that rivers one are to be granted personhood to ensure their protection. However, more romantically they have the beautiful picturesque essence of a queer trans being:

"At first, I saw buzzed hair and a crown of woven yellow prince's plume flowers. Top surgery scars gave way to arms made of silty rapids and rattlesnake bends. They held a cane made from netleaf hackberry wood. Their fingers were tattooed with hundreds of gnats. If rivers are persons, then surely they are queer and trans persons." (Griffis, 2025).

To see the common thread between queerness and rivers is to see the innate fluidity that mark both what it means to be a queer being and of the river. We see the remarkable roots of river and water essence inspiring many queer folks' language and terms: "According to the Queer Arab Glossary, "qāyiso-l-mā" is a derogatory Moroccan term for effeminate men that means 'one who has been touched by water.' It suggests that queer men are 'swaying as if they are liquid.' (Griffis, 2025). There's a non-conforming, non-binary existence in rivers that overtime have become tainted by the corporate greed and debilitated by climate change, [suggesting] they [rivers] must be queer disabled people, too" (Griffis, 2025). The rivers queer magical flowing freedom is often seen as the same narrow minded threat by significant capitalistic and human characters. There is a process "literally called 'river straightening' that forces them into canals in order to tame them. It leads to habitat loss, erosion and even heightened flood risk. Put simply, it's 'conversion therapy' for waterways." This powerfully showcases river dynamics with queer bodies: both resist normative forms, both endure attempts at forced conformity. Hydrosexuality for instance, is a term that is used to describe water as "a non-binary substance connecting all bodies of water on the planetary scale" (Griffis, 2025). Such a beautiful blend of connection and care across the liminal spaces of earth and earth-kin when it comes to water and river dynamics.

More tangible and stunning examples of queerness in nature show as fluid gender in fish, same-sex pairing in albatrosses or dolphins, and the myriad of mating systems of fungi. These not only support the theoretical link between land and queer identity, but also show the boundless and undefined relationships

the natural world unashamedly and naturally takes part in. These natural happenings emphasize that nature itself refuses binary constraints.

When Kimmerer's reciprocity intersects with queer ecology, it creates a powerful perspective: identity is not fixed, but evolves as a living thing through relational bonds– with other beings, with land, across boundaries. Queer identities and narratives exist on a spectrum of interconnection in both the human and more-than-human world. Change is a life force, and mutual becoming is birthed from this constant evolution and change. Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* teaches us that land calls us into reciprocity; Griffis shows how queer rivers reflect the boundless mirrored experiences of queerness held by both humans and the natural world. To see queer identity in the curves of a river, with the relationality of reciprocity is to locate belonging in a world that too often excludes it. More than that– it is to recognize that identity and ecology are braided, intertwined, and becoming together for humans and non-human existence alike.

References

Kimmerer, R. W. (2013). *Braiding sweetgrass: Indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge, and the teachings of plants*. Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions.

High Country News. (2025, August 1). *Flow Like The San Juan*. *High Country News*.

