When Mosses Speak: Receiving an Animist Theory of Language From Robin W. Kimmerer´s Gathering Moss

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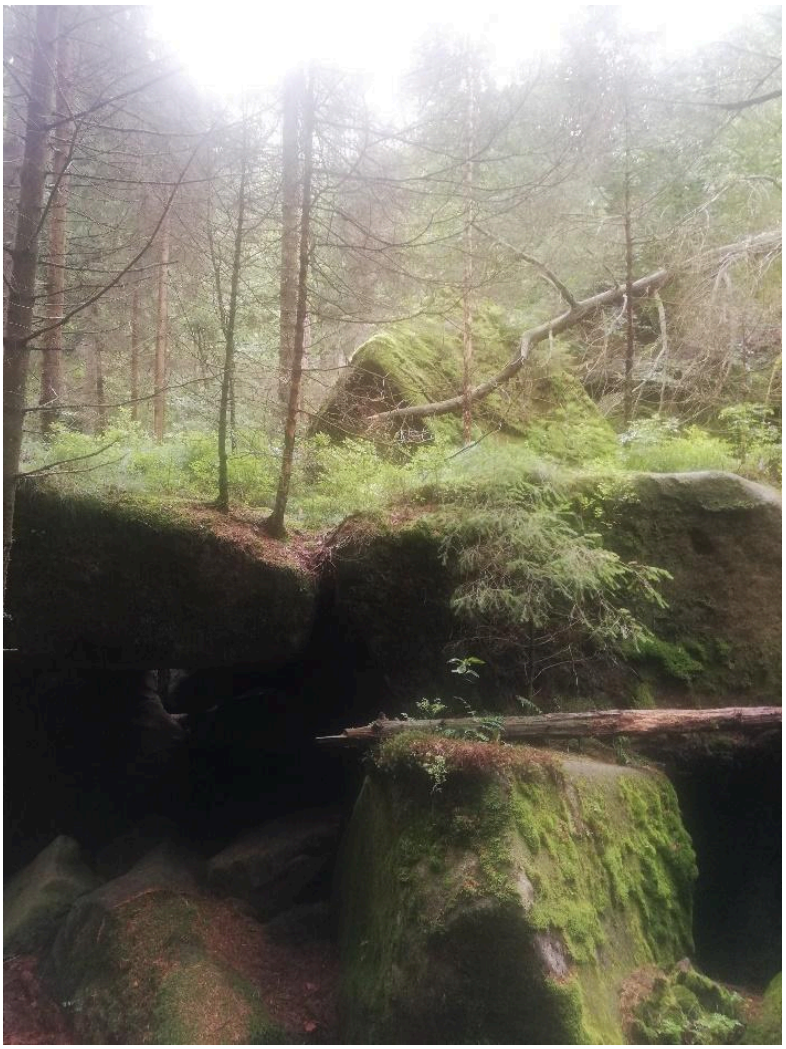

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Master Thesis

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Word Count: 19.090

Date: 01.07.2024

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Introduction

According to scientist Victor Cazalis, the alienation between human beings and nature is growing. For instance, national parks are visited less and less in the United States (Cazalis 86). This means that many people form their opinions about plants and undomesticated animals through media instead of a personal relationship. Rather than going for a walk and hearing the birds, people watch videos on their phones about animals acting funny or cute. Books can help us to restore a personal relation, therefore, analysing how nature is represented in books and media becomes even more urgent. If many human beings construct an image of nature through books, then these books should be evaluated on whether they foster a flourishing (caring) relationship and ideally appeal to humans to step into a real relationship with the more-than-human-world.

A book that invites to step into such a relation is *Gathering Moss: A Natural and Cultural History of Mosses*. In the preface, Robin Wall Kimmerer states the purpose of her book:

> I want to tell the mosses´ story, since their voices are little heard and we have much to learn from them. They have messages of consequence that need to be heard, the perspectives of species other than our own. (Kimmerer, *Gathering Moss* vii)

The purpose of the book seems ambiguous. On the one hand, Kimmerer could imply that the mosses have been actively communicating messages to her. On the other hand, she could be using poetic language to emphasize that humanity can learn something useful for their own lives by researching mosses. This second reading would imply that while mosses do not express meaning themselves, human beings can nonetheless extract something meaningful from them. The idea of listening to the voices of mosses, when they are communicating with us, re-appears several times throughout the book. This means that in order to know how she

characterizes mosses and to be able to analyse her essays with regard to messages from mosses, we need to understand in what sense Kimmerer attributes a language to moss.

A faulty understanding of the mosses' language means that, one might mistake passages about communicating mosses for aesthetic personifications, whereas they might entail claims about mosses' abilities. It matters in what sense mosses are portrayed as communicating, because if the voices of mosses would solely be a metaphor, the appeal to engage with the mosses outside would be smaller (because then reading the book would suffice). By claiming that mosses have messages for us, Kimmerer aims to motivate her readers to go outside and step into a relationship with the living mosses.

In this thesis, I uncover what type of language Kimmerer attributes to mosses. Doing this will not only allow for a deeper understanding of Kimmerer's work, but also analyses how authors can attribute language to nature. My research is guided by the following research question: *In what sense and through which literary means are mosses represented as communicating in Gathering Moss?* In answering the research question, I untangle what Kimmerer means when she asserts that the purpose of *Gathering Moss* is to "tell the mosses´ story, since their voices are little heard" (vii). To assess in what sense plants can be thought of as communicating, I use Kimmerer's own article on animacy and Walter Benjamin's theory of language. I begin my thesis by sketching the literature on nature (writing) to locate where *Gathering Moss* fits in. I then argue that, in *Gathering Moss*, mosses are represented as actively communicating messages through their existence and their way of life. The mosses are characterized as communicators through the use of metaphors and through the intertwining of scientific explanations with life lessons taught by the mosses.

Gathering Moss fits well into 21st century American nature writing. It was first published in 2003 and most of the settings mentioned in the essays are located in the United States, where Kimmerer lives. For example, several essays describe Kimmerer's research in

the Adirondack Park in New York State; other locations are Willamette Valley in Oregon and the Kickapoo river in Wisconsin. Kimmerer is a renowned moss scientist, whose work *Gathering Moss* received the John Burroughs Medal Award for Natural History Writing. In her work she explicitly combines insights from science and indigenous ways of knowing (Kimmerer, *Gathering Moss* vii), as a member of the indigenous Potawatomi nation. Despite Kimmerer's popularity and scientific success, hardly any secondary literature has been published on Kimmerer's two books, *Braiding Sweetgrass* and *Gathering Moss*. A possible explanation is that scientists might perceive *Gathering Moss* as a literary work, and therefore not as a credible scientific paper to respond to, while literary scholars might think of it as mainly scientific and thus not part of their domain.

Nonetheless, I contend that *Gathering Moss* can easily be included in the literary debate due to the presence of a lively debate in literature studies concerned with nature. This debate is held within the field of "ecocriticism" which Cheryll Glotfelty broadly defined as the study of the relationship between the physical world and literature (xviii). Glotfelty explains that eco-critics aim to be part of environmental restoration through their work as literary scholars (xx–xxi). Importantly, ecocriticism is a literary theory concerned with ethics. During the 20st century, literary analysis was focused on aesthetic aspects and excluded ethical aspects. In 1990, philosopher Martha Nussbaum wrote that literary theory *should* join "with ethical theory in pursuit of the question, 'How should one live?'" (168). Today, literary theory includes many branches that are concerned with ethics. According to François Gavillon's study of ecocritical discourses, the various ecocritical branches all have in common that they are concerned with how we ought to relate to nature, thus they all directly concern themselves with ethics (35).

Francois Specq illustrates an important way in which ecocritical analysis is ethical. Specq asserts that "literary texts can question modes of viewing and inhabiting the world" (1).

Thus, we can analyse how literature changes our views on nature. The quality of a literary work should then be measured by whether it can "affect and transform our sense of reality" (Specq 4). Gavillon adds to the debate that the best nature writings call for "responsibility, respect and care" (17). Therefore, ecocritical analysis can be characterized by literary works being analysed with regard to how they represent the environment and whether the representation fosters a caring relationship to the environment.

Throughout this thesis I am joining the ecocritical debate by analysing a work which has the potential to change the reader's views on nature. According to reviewer, Thomas E. Hemmerly, reading *Gathering Moss* is very likely to change the reader's view of mosses, because they will not think of mosses as "superfluous" or "insignificant" anymore (494). By focussing on the perspectives of mosses, Kimmerer portrays the worth and abilities of mosses and appeals to the reader to treat mosses with great respect and care.

There are many different branches of ecocriticism, such as ecofeminism and bioregionalism. I elaborate on two examples of ecocritical branches that have influenced my own view. First, ecodeconstruction entails that how we view nature is shaped by dominant ideas about nature, which are expressed through language (Morton 12). One example for ecodeconstruction is the coining of the "more-than-human world" by David Abram in the title of his book *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*. The more-than-human world expresses the idea that human beings are not the only beings whose perspective matters since there are more beings than us humans. Replacing the term nature with the "more-than-human world" aims to avoid biases associated with the term "nature". An example of such a bias is that nature and culture are separate opposites, which Bruno Latour deconstructed in his lecture series "Facing Gaia" (15). Ecodeconstruction is an important branch of research, because it acknowledges that language is essential to how we view the world. In analysing *Gathering Moss*, ecodeconstruction allows for a commitment to

assessing which normative ideas about mosses are given through words.

The second branch, biosemiotics, is concerned with studying signs in nature. Biosemiotician Serenella Iovino writes that every living being is "capable of communicating and interpreting signs" (376). Iovino provides the example of ants leaving pheromones for other ants as a sign to know where to go to. Other examples of signs are colours, visual patterns, temperature, smells, acidity and sounds (Iovino 377). Iovino uses the biosemiotic framework to interpret literature. My thesis is influenced by the biosemiotic idea that there are nonverbal signs which can be interpreted. For example, according to biosemiotics it is appropriate to view the colour and shape of moss as signs.

Walter Benjamin's theory resembles biosemiotics with respect to the idea that outward appearances carry linguistic meaning. In his article "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," Benjamin argues that a language causes mental images. Since mental images can be caused by perception, the sight of mosses can be understood (following Benjamin's approach) as language. Therefore, in my thesis, I apply Benjamin's theory of language, since his theory can help to unravel the assumption that language essentially includes using words.

Although engaging with ecocriticism is very fruitful, Warren Cariou points out a significant blind spot in Western ecocriticism in his article "Sweetgrass Stories: Listening for Animate Land." The article discusses three books, including Kimmerer's second book *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Cariou describes that Western academia is frequently unaware of indigenous thought. For example, thinking of nature as alive is mistakenly considered a relatively new view arising from new materialism (Cariou 340). Indigenous traditions, however, already entailed this idea for centuries. From Cariou's criticism follows that, indigenous theories, such as Kimmerer's formulation of animacy, should be acknowledged as part of ecocriticism.

Furthermore, Cariou's article is relevant for my thesis with regard to his interpretation of *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Cariou reaches a similar conclusion concerning sweetgrass, as I am reaching with regard to moss. He states that Kimmerer elevates sweetgrass "from the status of object to that of willing participants in the study: active storytellers" (Cariou 347). Thus, we both argue that Kimmerer depicts plants in her novels as actively communicating. Therefore, Cariou's article can be viewed as supporting my thesis. However, Cariou does not provide a detailed explanation concerned with in what sense sweetgrass is represented to be speaking, which is what I am providing for Kimmerer's representation of mosses. My thesis will advance the debate about communicating plants in Kimmerer's work.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I will offer a framework for understanding Kimmerer's theory of language as found in *Gathering Moss*. Her theory of language can explain in what sense mosses can be thought of as communicating. My methodology consists of extracting a theory of language from *Gathering Moss* by close reading passages concerned with language and communication. For example, passages that are about 'listening to' and the 'voices of' moss will be analysed. To explain Kimmerer's theory of language, I will compare it to Walter Benjamin's theory of language. Above that, I will interpret mosses' communication through the angle of animism. In her article "Learning the Grammar of Animacy" Kimmerer builds on the indigenous concept of animism which asserts that all living beings possess personhood. The interpretation that moss wilfully communicates gains credibility, because Kimmerer argues in favour of plants being persons and therefore having agency. To show the relevance of animism for Kimmerer's language theory, I provide evidence for animism from *Gathering Moss*.

In accordance with Kimmerer's theory of language, mosses are presented differently in *Gathering Moss* than in an average bryology book. That is, mosses are portrayed as properly communicating, or stated differently: as *conveying meaning*, and thereby making an appeal on

others. Therefore, mosses are depicted as having a nonverbal voice that tells stories. By analysing passages from *Gathering Moss,* I will show that mosses can be understood to communicate in the sense that their way of being in the world is a form of communication. Thus, their outward appearance, like their changing colour, the unfurling of leaves or their change in gender, are all instances of communication. Moreover, mosses are portrayed as animate beings that purposefully send messages.

In the second chapter, I interpret what the moss plants concretely communicate and how Kimmerer brings this communication across through literary devices. My method consists in applying Kimmerer's theory of language in order to analyse her essays. Thereby, I illustrate that mosses are portrayed as communicators and that understanding this is essential for interpreting the essays in *Gathering Moss*. The guiding question is: what life lessons do mosses teach us, according to Kimmerer? My analysis focusses on three essays. First, the essay "An Affinity for Water" combines personal anecdotes with scientific investigations and is therefore an exemplar of Kimmerer's holistic method of knowledge production. I will analyse how Kimmerer brings across the many messages of mosses in "An Affinity for Water" by intermingling her explanation of mosses with her personal stories. Among others, we will focus on the main lesson to accept change like the mosses. Second, "The Red Sneaker" illustrates that the bog mosses' way of living is a message. Moreover, in this essay mosses also take on another communicative function, which is as a transmitter of messages. Third, in "The Forest Gives Thanks to the Mosses", Kimmerer presents the mosses as providing a straightforward ethical lesson. The message is that everyone should live like moss (with regard to giving much to others while taking little in return). Furthermore, I will show that other animate beings communicate their gratefulness in return. Therefore, mosses are not the only beings who are represented as communicators. These three essays are chosen because

they entail concrete passages about mosses communicating and because they highlight different aspects of Kimmerer's ecocritical writing.

I will conclude that *Gathering Moss* has the potential to transform the readers perception of moss by characterizing moss as a meaning creating plant and, in that sense, as a speaking plant that ought to be listened to. Moss is portrayed as an active being that teaches (moral) lessons to everyone who is paying attention, instead of as a determined object that can be used for anything. Therefore, *Gathering Moss* is, judged by the standards of Specq and Gavillon, an excellent work of nature writing.

1. Kimmerer's Theory of Language

During this first chapter I will argue that *Gathering Moss* stages an inclusive theory of language which includes mosses as partaking in language. Kimmerer's theory of language can be extracted from her essays. Three words connected to communication stand out in *Gathering Moss*, which are "listening," "story" and "voice." To find out how Kimmerer characterizes the mosses' ability to convey meaning, I will interpret the meaning of these words in *Gathering Moss*. Moreover, I will demonstrate that Kimmerer's theory is linked with already existing theories. Her theory overlaps with Benjamin's conception of language. I will explain Benjamin's theory, because his theory helps to explain Kimmerer's theory. Moreover, Kimmerer's theory of language is deeply influenced by animism, which she refers to explicitly in her second book.

If we want to find out whether mosses are represented as communicating in a literal or a metaphorical sense, we need to analyse whether the basics of communication are ascribed to mosses. Two things seem to be essential for communication. First, that there is a speaker who has the ability/agency to communicate something. If mosses were represented as metaphorically communicating, then the messages would be invented by Kimmerer, who observes passive mosses. Thus, the voices of moss would be an anthropomorphism used for aesthetic purposes, but not a claim about mosses' abilities. Kimmerer herself provides an answer to this issue in "Learning the Grammar of Animacy". From Kimmerer's concept of animism follows that she conceives of animate beings (such as mosses) as persons with agency. Second, essential for communication is that a message is transmitted in the first place. Benjamin's concept "language as such" provides an angle to think of moss as expressing messages. The question guiding this chapter is: In what sense does Kimmerer represent mosses as expressing messages?

1.1. Kimmerer and Benjamin on Language

Initially, mosses seem to be unable to speak, because speech and language seem to rely on the use of words. If a language essentially entails words that can be uttered, then mosses do not possess the ability to speak. However, Kimmerer's and Benjamin's theories of language question this assumption.

1.1.1. Listening

In her essay's "Learning to See" and "Choices" Kimmerer reveals what she means by "listening." In order to listen to mosses' stories, Kimmerer describes that we need to use our eyes and literally look at moss. Kimmerer writes: "With patient watching, and no direct questions, year by year, *Tetraphis* [moss] began to tell its own story." (*Gathering Moss* 78). Thus, Kimmerer's method of listening requires one to patiently observe, to have openness for receiving information without a clear question and to have endurance. She contrasts these qualities of listening with the qualities of seeing by stating:

> Learning to see mosses is more like listening than looking. A cursory glance will not do it. Straining to hear a faraway voice or catch a nuance in the quiet subtext of a conversation requires attentiveness, a filtering of all the noise, to catch the music. (Kimmerer, *Gathering Moss* 10-11)

In this quote, seeing is associated with the superficiality of a "cursory glance," while listening is associated with "attentiveness." Ordinary looking is not sufficient to understand mosses, since mosses are tiny and full of details. In her analogy with music, Kimmerer writes that to notice these details is like filtering distracting sounds to be able to hear music. Music, like the mosses, are what is valuable and what can be perceived, but only if distractions are circumvented. Thus, Kimmerer highlights that the attentive focus which is emblematic of listening is necessary for perceiving mosses. However, as the first quote demonstrated, the

mosses “tell” a story (which implies the story can be listened to), but we need to receive the story through our eyes. If we combine these two quotes into a coherent claim, then it follows that Kimmerer uses the term “listening” metaphorically for “seeing.” Moreover, she re-names seeing to listening throughout her essays in order to apply connotations from listening (such as patience and attentiveness) to seeing. Kimmerer is implying that one should observe mosses like one would listen closely to a story that is told. Kimmerer elaborates on this idea: “To me, a good experiment is like a good conversation. Each listener creates an opening for the other’s story to be told.” (*Gathering Moss* 77). To see well, one needs to watch as if one listens. That is to say, one needs to be open to receive the other’s perspective in all its nuances.

1.1.2. Story and Language

In her essay “Choices” Kimmerer claims that: “From *Tetraphis* [moss], I began to understand how to learn differently, to let the mosses tell their story, rather than writing it for them.” (*Gathering Moss* 76-77). While this claim resembles Kimmerer’s goal that she stated in the preface to make the voices of mosses heard, now she underlines that it is the mosses that tell their own story. Thus, she suggests that there is such a thing as an authentic story given by the mosses themselves, in contrast to a story about mosses invented by outsiders (like human beings). Moreover, throughout several essays, Kimmerer is suggesting that a story can be told through a being’s outward appearance and behaviour. Thereby, she characterizes language differently than usually. To understand how a story can be told through outward appearances, I turn to Walter Benjamin’s insights about language in “On the Language as Such and on the Language of Men.” Benjamin contrasts the “bourgeois conception of language” with his own conception. The “bourgeois conception of language” entails a definition of language as human beings communicating with each other through the use of words (Benjamin 235). According to that view, only human beings use language.

Benjamin's own conception of language is more inclusive about what counts as communicating and who communicates. He distinguishes language as such from the language of human beings. With regard to language as such he asserts: "Every expression of human mental life can be understood as a kind of language" (Benjamin 233). Thus, instead of viewing language as a composition of words, he claims that everything we sense is language. Moreover, he elaborates on the effect that this assertion has on a definition of language. Benjamin writes:

> There is no event or thing in either animate or inanimate nature that does not in some way partake of language, for it is in the nature of all to communicate their mental meanings. This use of the word 'language' is in no way metaphorical. (233)

According to Benjamin's own conception of language everything communicates by causing mental meanings. These mental meanings are language because they communicate meaning. Benjamin explains that there is an immediacy in language, because "mental being communicates itself in language and not through language" (234). For instance, grey clouds express that there are grey clouds and imply that it might start to rain soon. The very existence of the grey clouds entails their mental meaning. For someone who sees the clouds it is superfluous to tell them that there is a grey cloud through words, since they already know it. In that way the cloud is language.

What is Kimmerer's conception of language? Willis Jenkins suggests in his chapter "Listening for Coastal Futures" that Kimmerer merely implies that we should listen to plants "*as if* [italics added] they were elements of a language of living intelligence" (149). Thus, according to Jenkins interpretation, Kimmerer does not contend that plants participate in language, but that it is helpful to imagine that they were. However, there is convincing evidence that Kimmerer contends that plants actually communicate. In the preface Kimmerer writes: "So we learn each other´s *stories* [italics added] by looking, by watching each other´s

way of living." (*Gathering Moss* vii). Looking at mosses is enough to receive their story, if one agrees with Benjamin's conception of language. It is the mosses that live out/enact their own stories. This idea of mosses communicating stories re-occurs several times throughout the book. Although Kimmerer does not utter a clear-cut definition of language as Benjamin does, her method in combination with passages about stories of mosses, reveal that her view must be very similar to Benjamin's. Kimmerer portrays mosses as having a language. She does so by claiming that mosses tell stories and by afterwards illustrating how mosses communicate meaning through several aspects of their being. Mosses language is *in* their appearance (as Benjamin would put it). Mosses communicate through their form, colour, growth, function (how they live), smallness, gender, reproduction, location and talents and in all the diversity of the different species and individuals. Benjamin's terminology provides the means to explain that all these aspects in mosses appearances are language because they cause us to have mental meanings.

For example, mosses' growth *is* one component of their language as the following example of the *Tetraphis* moss illustrates. Kimmerer wanted to find out why and when *Tetraphis* switches their reproduction methods (from sexual to creating gemmae clones) and gender. In order to receive an answer, Kimmerer adopted the perspective of mosses: which is slow and small. That is why she observed single stems of moss (viewing moss as individuals) and returning year after year. In the end Kimmerer concludes: "The mosses had answered, in their own way. Low density is a time for gemmae [egg-like with metabolism, for cloning], high density for spores [sexual reproduction]." (*Gathering Moss* 79). Thus, *Tetraphis'* answer is given through growing as clones or growing with spores. Moreover, the answer to the question of gender is provided by switching from female and male to only male shoots if the patch of mosses gets too crowded. Therefore, the answer of moss, in accordance with Benjamin's theory, is communicated through the mental meaning of *Tetraphis* with egg-like

gemmae in cups, or long spores. Kimmerer views these different sexes and reproduction methods as *answers* since she can deduce from them that cloning is helpful when there is low density and sexual reproduction is more promising when there is a high density of moss. This example provides evidence that Benjamin and Kimmerer would agree on (what I would call) growth as language.

In addition to the idea that appearance communicates meaning, there is another commonality between Kimmerer's conception of language (as deduced from *Gathering Moss*) and Benjamin's. Both place importance on the use of words. Kimmerer states: "Finding the words is another step in learning to see." (*Gathering Moss* 11). Kimmerer thinks that knowing the names of different mosses and having words to describe them is essential for building a relationship with them. In order to recognize the different mosses in the first place, it is useful to have a different name for each species. Benjamin also thinks of the words of humanity as very important. The words human beings use are viewed by Benjamin as a second layer of language which he calls "naming" (235).

Above that, Kimmerer and Benjamin both view human beings as the ones who use words to make everything intelligible for themselves. But importantly according to Benjamin and to Kimmerer, human beings neither create nor cause the communication in nature but receive it, thereby receiving messages from outside of themselves. Benjamin puts it the following way: "This knowledge of the thing, however, is not spontaneous creation … the name that man gives to language depends on how language is communicated to him." (239). Since human beings do not create either knowledge or language, the knowledge and language are instead caused by the communication of the being itself. Following this logic, one receives language from beings. Benjamin thereby implies that we can only think in response to something (for instance what someone else wrote or a being that one saw), but not completely from scratch. All the beings that enable us to respond are by themselves already

communicating. Thus, they are providing us with language. Kimmerer echoes Benjamin when she calls "the sound of water flowing over rock" "the first language" (96). Kimmerer's statement resembles Benjamin's idea that human language (which are words) does not come out of nowhere. Instead, there are first of all beings (such as the water and the rock) that express something (create "mental meanings") and thereby *are* the first language. To sum up, every being around us causes mental meanings, thereby communicating the first language and only afterwards can we add words to attempt to describe and evaluate what has been communicated to us. Human language (composed out of words) is a secondary language.

Furthermore, both include a mythical origin story of language in their texts. While Benjamin quotes genesis from the bible, Kimmerer refers to an indigenous creation story. Kimmerer explains that: "Our stories from the oldest days tell about the time when all beings shared a common language – thrushes, tress, mosses, and humans. But that language has been long forgotten." (*Gathering Moss* vii). Thus, by implication there used to be a universal language spoken by every creature, also the mosses. Unfortunately, that language does not exist anymore. Following Benjamin, the fall made it necessary for human beings to invent words, because they did no longer have immediate knowledge of everything around them (241). In accordance with his idea, the first human beings in paradise could understand the language of animals and plants without problems. Due to sinning, a gap opened up which made understanding the more-than-human world more difficult. In this regard both mythical origin stories resemble each other: communication used to be self-evident among every being, whereas now it has become very difficult to understand other species. Both writers imply that we need to return to understanding the beings around us again. Kimmerer does so openly in all of the discussed examples about "listening" and "story." Benjamin does so too, by criticizing that human beings were "turning away from that contemplation of things in which their language passes into [them]" (242). To be fluent in language (which is deeply entangled

with knowledge for Benjamin), humanity needs to contemplate all things again. Therefore, they both agree that an understanding (beyond borders of species) has been lost, which can and ought to be restored again, through attentive contemplation (what Kimmerer calls "listening").

In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Kimmerer elaborates on the origin story and the consequences of forgetting this shared language. This passage is further evidence that Kimmerer shares Benjamin's conception of language. Concerning plants Kimmerer writes:

> What if you were a teacher but had no voice to speak your knowledge? What if you had no language at all and yet there was something you needed to say? Wouldn't you dance it? Wouldn't you act it out? Wouldn't your every movement tell the story? In time you would become so eloquent that just to gaze upon you would reveal it all. And so it is with these silent green lives. (*Braiding Sweetgrass* 128-9)

Plants are characterized as teachers. Due to the universal language being forgotten, plants cannot teach their lessons to humanity with words. Kimmerer captivates the reader's attention by posing rhetorical questions about how to communicate if one urgently wants to share knowledge but lacks the straightforward means to do so. Her answer in *Braiding Sweetgrass*, mirrors Benjamin's theory, since she concludes that the movement and appearance of plants transmits their knowledge. Certainly, Benjamin would disagree with Kimmerer's formulation that plants have "no language at all," however, this bit is not a claim, but part of a rhetorical question. Therefore, it functions as a preparation for the reader, to re-think how to express meaning without words. Thus, the "language" referred to is the language of human beings and not Benjamin's "language as such." The idea that every movement of a plant is telling a story is in line with Benjamin's language as such. Likewise, that Kimmerer calls the lives of plants "silent" does not imply that plants cannot communicate. Instead, being "silent" is in juxtaposition with having "something you needed to say". By suggesting that language can be

expressed in movement, Kimmerer breaks down a strict binary between silence and speech. Plants are silent in the sense that they do not voice sounds like human beings. Nonetheless, plants are characterized as speaking in the sense that their bodily movements function like speech acts. Above that, Kimmerer foregrounds this bodily expression of language as especially "eloquent" since no additions such as spoken words are needed to communicate, which means that plants can be very precise in their communication. The implication of this passage is that mosses, with whom we no longer share a universal language, are nonetheless very eloquent in communicating and we as human beings are capable to understand them.

The following example further strengthens my claim that Kimmerer's conception of language resembles Benjamin's. Although Kimmerer does not define language, she does refer to the "language" of moss, in her essay "The Web of Reciprocity." In that essay she investigates what mosses have traditionally been used for. Kimmerer reads entries of anthropologists and thinks from the premise of indigenous wisdom that contemplating the place where a plant grows tells us something about what the plant should be used for (*Gathering Moss* 106). Thus, in accordance with this logic, location is a way that moss expresses meaning. Since the biggest amount of mosses flourish in very watery places such as next to streams, Kimmerer concludes that mosses use must be connected to their great affinity for water. As an illustration Kimmerer writes: "Watch a moss, dry and crisp, swell with water after a thunderstorm. It's teaching its role, in *language* [italics added] more direct and graceful than anything I've found in the library." (106).[1] A moss transforming through rain from a dried out, dead looking clump into a luscious green plant *is* the mosses language. Mosses swelling from water is a message that moss flourishes with water and a message about mosses great capacity to hold water. *Sphagnum* mosses, for example, can absorb 20-40 times their weight in water (107). There are no words used in the language of mosses, but a change in

[1] This quote about language is a direct application of Benjamin's theory, which even mentions the idea that mosses communicate "in" instead of "through" language.

appearance that can be observed, which is a gradual process of mosses unfolding and colouring. Moreover, she suggests that we can learn more from mosses than from books. The "library" is a symbol for human knowledge that is written down. According to Kimmerer's evaluation, mosses communicate their messages in a more "direct" and "graceful" way than human authors, because mosses illustrate what they teach through their being. Written words usually refer to things in the world, but thereby they only represent something instead of embodying it. Therefore, mosses' knowledge is more appealing and understandable than knowledge that is written down in human words. In line with this conclusion, Kimmerer appeals to the reader to "watch" for themselves. According to Scott Slovic's idea of engagement, in order to learn about plants and to foster environmental protection it is necessary to not only study, but to frequently spend time in nature (29-30). Similarly, Kimmerer seems to imply that ultimately one learns about plants by going outside and looking at the plants in real life. Therefore, she seems to suggest that reading words from human beings is not sufficient to understand mosses. Instead, one needs to learn from the mosses themselves. Thus, she appeals to the reader to leave their books behind and visit the mosses outside.

Using Benjamin's definition of language shows how a non-metaphorical reading of Kimmerer's 'stories of mosses' and 'language of mosses' looks like. Moreover, as the last example illustrated, Kimmerer's use of the word language fits neatly into Benjamin's theory. The idea that mosses absorbing water *is* language, is in accordance with Benjamin's framework and supported by Kimmerer's quote. Therefore, just like in Benjamin's conception, Kimmerer does not use 'language' metaphorically but literally. However, Kimmerer's idea that moss is thereby "teaching its role" includes agency and purpose into the characterization of mosses. This distinguishes her own (implicit) conception of language to some degree from Benjamin's who brackets out the question whether everything

communicating means that everything has agency. He only mentions “the greater or lesser degree of consciousness that is apparently (or really) involved in such communication” (Benjamin 233). Thus, Benjamin is in doubt whether all the beings that communicate do so consciously. To sum up, the last passage from *Gathering Moss* leads us to the consideration of mosses purpose and agency in *Gathering Moss*. This issue cannot properly be answered through Benjamin’s theory, but through the idea of animism.

Lastly, there are two major differences between Benjamin’s and Kimmerer’s ideas on language. First, Benjamin sometimes implies that the human language is superior to the language as such (236-37). Kimmerer does not make such claims. Second, Benjamin holds that everything communicates, lifeless matter and living beings alike, since they all cause mental meanings. Significantly, Kimmerer’s notion of language is tied to animate beings only. Thus, following her, beings need to be alive to be able to communicate. This is significant since Benjamin’s conception of language would equalize the language of mosses with the language of tables. Such an accidental communication without any agency/will/intention, which tables participate in, would imply that the fact that mosses communicate is not extraordinary either. However, by tying language to animism Kimmerer diverges from Benjamin’s conception. We will analyse her divergence in the next chapter. But first, we will look more generally at the third speech-related word, which is “voice.”

1.1.3. Voice

Since "listening" is meant metaphorically, it appears that "voice" (as a related term) is also likely to be a metaphor. However, "voice" seems to have several different meanings throughout *Gathering Moss*. First, "voice" is used to express that one's relationship to mosses should be one of attention. For instance, in "Learning to See" Kimmerer writes: "The soothing sound of a stream has many voices, the soothing green of mosses likewise." (*Gathering Moss* 10-1). The "many voices" of the stream evoke the different sounds of water depending on which surfaces it touches, which are overlapping within a stream. There is the "gurgle of the channel sluicing between rocks" or the "bell-like notes of a drop falling into a pool" (11). By expressing the stream's sounds in onomatopoeias and comparing these sounds to the image of different mosses next to each other, the intricacy of mosses is illustrated. Just like the sound of a stream entails many different sounds that together form a whole, a patch of moss contains many different species of mosses and within the species, single stems of mosses, with tiny leaves and even tinier cells. To illustrate the variety of mosses, I included figure 1.[2] When one looks closely, one can distinguish at least three different moss species in the front, middle and back. To provide an estimation of the variety of mosses, there are about 22.000 moss species worldwide (13). By using "voice," which is related to listening, Kimmerer strongly emphasizes the importance of paying close attention to mosses. To be able to see mosses' differences and to recognize

Figure 1: *A tree trunk covered in mosses at the "Polderpark" in Leiden*

[2] All photos included in this thesis were taken by me.

mosses one needs to look closely and carefully. Otherwise, one misses out on the metaphorical "voices," which means, the individualities/uniqueness of mosses. Just like one can appreciate different sounds of water one can appreciate different mosses.

Second, the term "voice" is employed to draw attention to the marginalization of mosses. One example of this meaning of voice occurs in "The Forest Gives Thanks to the Mosses", concerned with recovering forests after logging. Kimmerer contends: "If [mosses were] given a voice, I think they would advocate for patches large enough to hold moisture, shady enough to nurture their entire community." (*Gathering Moss* 146). Here "voice" signifies the idea to give someone a voice, who has not been listened to. 'Giving someone a voice' is a metaphor for taking the perspective of someone who is marginalized or ignored into account. If mosses were to decide where they would be left standing to revive a forest, then they would ask for proper living conditions for themselves and all the species that rely on them (their "community"), such as waterbears and salamanders (146).

Third, Kimmerer moreover uses "voice" to express the idea that individual mosses are able to communicate meaning. Having one's own voice can signify that one expresses one's own thoughts. In the passage from the preface, Kimmerer seems to imply exactly that. In the preface "voice" is linked to that "we have much to learn from them [mosses]" and that mosses have "messages" and "perspectives" (Kimmerer, *Gathering Moss* vii). By linking these words and phrases to "voice," it is implied that mosses have their own inner life that they can express. If a voice proclaims messages, it follows that the being (moss) which sends the message is presented as able to communicate. If the being has their own perspective, then some form of personhood is implied. Thus, in the preface "voice" stands for mosses' own interests and knowledge that they express themselves. However, they are "little heard" which implies that their messages are not taken into account (this connects with mosses' marginalization). Mosses are frequently marginalized by being regarded as weeds that should

be eradicated. Kimmerer shares an anecdote about a man who wanted her professional advice on how to exterminate the mosses between his stones (136). In an inconsistent manner he regarded the mosses on the ground as weeds, while at the same time asking for advice on how to grow mosses on his wall. Thereby, he reduced mosses to weeds, which should not even exist, and to means of decoration.

The third meaning of "voice" is the most significant for my thesis since it is at the core of the debate about whether Kimmerer represents mosses as communicating. To fully understand what "voice" in this third sense means we will turn to animism, because animism can explain how mosses can be thought of as expressing their own messages.

1.2 Animism

To begin with, the term animism has been given several related but different meanings (Harvey 6). The term itself was coined by Edward Burnett Tylor in 1871 (Park). As an anthropologist, Tylor used the term to group religions together which shared a belief that plants, animals, humans, but also earthly entities such as rivers, have souls. Above that, Tylor ordered religions in a hierarchy and viewed animism as the lowest stage of development towards monotheism (21).

By using the term "animism" Kimmerer is reclaiming the ideas behind it and cutting it off from connotations of inferiority. Today animism is not generally viewed as religiously inferior, but scientifically inferior. In the preface Kimmerer writes: "The way I was taught plant science pushed my traditional knowledge of plants to the margins. Writing this book has been a process of reclaiming that understanding" (*Gathering Moss* vii). At university Kimmerer was taught to disregard her indigenous knowledge of plants and thus also not to view plants as animate. To reclaim indigenous knowledge, Kimmerer incorporates traditional teachings alongside scientific facts in *Gathering Moss*. The concept of "animism" is not

directly mentioned in *Gathering Moss,* but several ideas from animism (which is a part of indigenous knowledge) are referred to. These references to components of animism are evidence that animism plays an important role in Kimmerer's theory of language. Above all, the concept of animism can shed light on how Kimmerer characterizes mosses. That is why in the following I will refer to her conception of animism which she elaborates on in *Braiding Sweetgrass*.

Significantly, Kimmerer deduces animism from the Potawatomi language. Thus, she explains animism through examples from language and thereby again (and this time more explicitly than in *Gathering Moss*) engages in theorizing about language. Therefore, this chapter proves that Kimmerer relates very consciously to language. Throughout "Learning the Grammar of Animacy," Kimmerer illustrates how grammar impacts how we think. She quotes one of the nine last speakers of Potawatomi who said "'The language is the heart of our culture; it holds our thoughts, our way of seeing the world …" (Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass* 50). The implication is that language can transmit worldviews and thus, the words that one uses shape how one views others.

During the following paragraphs I will demonstrate the influence of animism on Kimmerer's theory of language, by showing similarities between passages from *Gathering Moss* and *Braiding Sweetgrass* concerned with the portrayal of plants and their language. The guiding question is: in what sense are mosses represented as expressing their own thoughts (having a voice of their own)? Kimmerer's logic of animism leads to the conclusion that mosses are not communicating by chance, but instead communicate wilfully.

1.2.1. Aliveness

First, the basic distinction in the Potawatomi language is whether someone/something is animate. Almost all beings are viewed as animate in the Potawatomi language. Animals and plants are categorized as animate, but also the natural elements and places. Furthermore,

beings that are "imbued with spirit" are viewed as animate, for example medicines, stories and drums (Kimmerer, "Learning the Grammar of Animacy" 132).

To understand how objects can be thought of as animate, it is useful to turn to *Gathering Moss*. In her essay "The Red Sneaker," Kimmerer compares the Water Drum of the Anishinabe people to *Sphagnum* mosses growing in a bog. She states about the bog that it is like the Water Drum: "The *Sphagnum* is the living membrane stretched between two shores, creating a meeting place for earth and sky, embracing the water within." (Kimmerer, *Gathering Moss* 118). Just like the Water Drum has deer hide which can be drummed on, the bog has a *Sphagnum* mat that Kimmerer can stand and dance on. The shores of the bog function like the wood of the drum that are necessary for the drum to hold together and create a space where the water can be held. By showing the similarities between the Water Drum and *Sphagnum*, Kimmerer illustrates the shared spirituality of both. Both the drum and the bog are a bridge between different elements and species. They hold water and they are the "membrane" between earth and sky. Thereby, they enable other beings (the earth and sky) to come into contact with each other without dissolving into the same being. The earth and the sky remain distinct, but they have a meeting point thanks to the mosses. The water drum, similarly, connects: "The wooden bowl gives honor to the plants, the deerhide honors the animals, and the water within the life of Mother Earth." (111). Thus, each part of a Water Drum honours a different group of animate beings and together the separate parts constitute the Water Drum. Thereby, the bog and the Water Drum are spiritual. They show and celebrate the connectedness and harmony of all animate beings. By connecting the image of the Water Drum to the image of the bog, Kimmerer points out that it is because of their similarities that the Water Drum can be perceived as animate. If objects can be animate, it seems that everything is animate. However, there are inanimate things, that is, objects which are human-made (and without spiritual significance).

The animacy of beings is made explicit in the Potawatomi language, through the word *yawe* (Kimmerer, "Learning the Grammar of Animacy" 132). Kimmerer expresses amazement about the coincidence that *yawe(h)* is used in Potawatomi and Hebrew and points out that in both languaes, "being" seems to entail createdness and aliveness in both languages. Thereby, she suggests that "being" is necessarily animate. "The breath of life" implies that a flow of air is going through beings, which animates them in the sense of bringing them to life and moving them to action.

1.2.2. Will/Agency

Second, having a will is an important part of animism. Kimmerer realizes this when she contemplates why *wiikegama* ("being a bay") is a verb. Kimmerer philosophizes:

> A bay is a noun only if water is dead. When bay is a noun, it is defined by humans, trapped between its shores and contained by the word. But the verb *wiikegama*—to be a bay—releases the water from bondage and lets it live. 'To be a bay' holds the wonder that, for this moment, the living water has decided to shelter itself between these shores, conversing with cedar roots and a flock of baby mergansers. Because it could do otherwise—become a stream or an ocean or a waterfall, and there are verbs for that, too. ("Learning the Grammar of Animacy" 131)

In English, "bay" is a noun, whereas in Potawatomi referring to a bay occurs in verb form. That is the case, because water is viewed as animate in Potawatomi. Being alive entails being able to choose, as phrases such as "the living water has decided" and "because it could do otherwise" prove. Water can choose to form a bay, or a river or a sea. Therefore, water is characterized as an agent with a will. What the English language classifies as different forms of water are ways of existing according to animism. Being a bay is to water what walking is to us. Human beings can choose to sit, walk, swim or do a lot of other things, just like water can

choose to dissolve into the ground or join a puddle. If water is essentialized as a bay (the noun), then that water is discarded as not able to choose otherwise and thus regarded as "dead". Water would be viewed as dead if the water is viewed as essentially being a bay, because this view ignores water's ability to float and change. Without the recognition of water's movement, water is wrongly described as a still (and thus dead) mass. Therefore, being alive and having a will are intrinsically connected in animism. Moreover, the "wonder" of water gathering in a certain place would also be diminished if the water is viewed as unable to do otherwise. Thus, animism is a view that makes human beings receptive for wonder.

The idea of animate beings having a will occurs in *Gathering Moss* as well. In "The Web of Reciprocity" Kimmerer explicitly mentions that according to indigenous wisdom each plant has their own will (*Gathering Moss* 103). The will of mosses is alluded to in several passages. For instance, Kimmerer complains about an owner who wants mosses in his golf yard against all costs: "Mosses have not chosen to be his companion, they have been bound." (139). The owner ordered workers to rip out rocks with ancient mosses out of the forest and to place them in his golf yard. Despite the fact that these mosses are unlikely to survive outside of their habitat, he chose to do so. The mosses, in contrast to him, have been "bound" – which implies imprisonment. Kimmerer explicitly states that the mosses did *not* choose to move (thereby implying that mosses are able to make choices). Therefore, the mosses are portrayed as having a will and that they chose to live in a specific forest, which the owner has acted against.

The notion of "will" adds a layer to Kimmerer's theory of language. In Benjamin's theory everything communicates no matter whether they want to do so or not. Kimmerer, however, characterizes moss as an animate being with a will. Following from that, mosses can choose that they communicate and what they communicate. The notion of will is decisive to understand Kimmerer's theory of language. In light of her commitment to animism, the

following quote can be understood as portraying plants as actively communicating. Kimmerer contends: “Plant knowledge also comes from the plant themselves. To the attentive observer, plants reveal their gifts.” (*Gathering Moss* 101). Without knowing that Kimmerer is committed to animism the quote would be very ambiguous. That “plant knowledge also comes from the plant” could simply mean that plants are a passive medium of knowledge. Scientists would agree that observing plants is important to gain knowledge about plants. However, in accordance with animism, the passage means more than that. That is to say, knowledge *comes* from plants in the sense that plants express knowledge and that they intentionally/actively “reveal their gifts”.

1.2.3. Personhood

Third, according to animism, from being alive and having a will follows that one is a person. An animate being is grammatically engrained as a person in Potawatomi:

> Of an inanimate being, like a table, we say ‘What is it?’ And we answer *Dopwen yewe*. 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*. (“Learning the Grammar of Animacy” 132)

Grammatical rules inform implicit assumptions, that are frequently repeated and thus taken for granted. Throughout this passage it is made explicit that to be animate equals being a “who” – a person, whereas “what” is inanimate, is a thing. Thus, in every question and in every reference in pronouns the distinction between inanimate thing and animate person is grammatically manifested. To call an animate being a thing is (grammatically) wrong.

In *Gathering Moss*, the personhood of plants is pointed out as well: “In indigenous ways of knowing, all beings are recognized as non-human persons, and all have their own

names." (Kimmerer 12). It is clear that one does not need to be human to be a person. Above that, all "beings" are persons, which makes explicit what has been implied in the quotes from *Braiding Sweetgrass*. That is to say, animate persons are beings (who can do things that are expressed in verbs) whereas inanimate things cannot do anything, there is no 'to be' connected to them. The idea that mosses have their own names re-occurs several times and is connected to personhood. In "The Standing Stones" Kimmerer describes an instance of trance during which she felt spiritually connected to mosses and realized her vocation. Kimmerer writes: "I know that mosses have their own names, which were theirs long before Linnaeus, the Latinized namer of plants." (5). Here, the selfhood of mosses is hinted at, who have their own names, which are not bestowed upon them by humans. Thus, the mosses' self-given names express something about how the mosses identify themselves. She adds that it is her task to spread the message that "mosses have their own names" since "Their way of being in the world cannot be told by data alone." (Kimmerer 6). Therefore to 'have one's own name' entails that single mosses have their own story and that there is something personal about mosses that cannot be empirically measured but must be understood more holistically instead. Just like it does not suffice to look at data about human beings who share certain character traits to understand a single person, so it is with mosses as well. To understand a person, one needs to get to know that person's specific story by listening to them.

The idea that mosses are persons is expressed throughout *Gathering Moss* with the help of literary devices. Kimmerer frequently personifies moss. For example, in "The Bystander," the marketization of mosses is criticized. Commercialized mosses are completely dried out and sprayed with paint in order to look green, to then be used as decoration. Kimmerer writes about such mosses: "I saw them in the main concourse at the Portland airport, filling in the spaces under the plastic trees. I breathed their names when I saw them – *Antitrichia, Rhytidiadelphus, Metaneckra* – but they turned their eyes away." (*Gathering*

Moss 154). Plastic trees are the perfect example of inanimate objects. They are a superficial copy of animate trees, but without life. Plastic trees do not form flowers or communicate through their roots. There is no will whatsoever in plastic trees. To be placed under such trees, while being dried out (and thus unable to grow or reproduce), is portrayed by Kimmerer as a horrible way of treating moss persons. Kimmerer breathes the different mosses' names as if she would want to acknowledge and thereby revive them. But the personified mosses "turned their eyes away" – which evokes the image of mosses with a human face looking away in pain and resignation. Moreover, that the mosses do not look back at Kimmerer, also implies that she is ignored for being a passive "bystander" and that she feels guilty in the confrontation with the mosses. This personification has the effect of creating empathy for the mosses that are surviving under terrible conditions. Since they are unnaturally painted green, the people in charge at the airport see no reason for watering the mosses. Thus, they are doomed to remain dried out without any hope for rain.

1.2.4. Kinship

Fourth, since all animate beings are thought of as persons, they are at the same time viewed as family members of human beings. Thus, we have ties of kinship. Kimmerer criticizes referring to animate beings in the 3rd person singular, because that implies that they are "mere things," whereas actually they are "our family" ("Learning the Grammar of Animacy" 131). Kinship is a relationship and Kimmerer pronounces that language expresses how we relate to others. She does so in similar ways in *Braiding Sweetgrass* and *Gathering Moss*:

> It is a sign of respect to call a being by its name … Words and names are the ways we humans build relationship, not only with each other, but also with plants. (Kimmerer, *Gathering Moss* 12-3)

> A language teacher I know explained that grammar is just the way we chart relationships in language. Maybe it also reflects our relationships with each other. Maybe a grammar of animacy could lead us to whole new ways of living in the world, other species a sovereign people, a world with a democracy of species, not a tyranny. (Kimmerer, "Learning the Grammar of Animacy" 133)

In both passages Kimmerer emphasizes that words are essential for how we relate to others. Language can create habitual ways of perceiving others in a certain way. If, like in the Potawatomi language, animate beings are grammatically shown to be animate, it happens automatically that all of these beings are perceived as animate. Moreover, by calling all animate beings persons, a steady implication to relate to all of them as fellow persons is built into the Potawatomi language. Names in the Potawatomi language generate respect since the names already grammatically entails the personal "who" instead of the objectifying "it" of such beings. Thus, in *Braiding Sweetgrass* Kimmerer echoes and makes more explicit the idea from *Gathering Moss* that the grammar of language and our choice of words greatly impacts how we view other beings. Furthermore, she expresses the hope that applying a grammar of animacy in other languages could bring about not only a change of how we view other beings, but also how we treat them. She envisions a future where humanity does not oppress other species anymore but treats them as sovereign people due to recognizing their kinship. Thereby she makes an ethical point, which leads us to the last part of animism.

1.2.5. Sovereignty and Reciprocity

Finally, animism is ethical, this follows from the personhood of animate beings. In *Braiding Sweetgrass* Kimmerer criticizes that calling and perceiving animate beings as objects creates a distance which seems to absolve humanity from moral responsibility ("Learning the Grammar of Animacy" 133). Thus, once mosses are not called persons but things, it becomes thinkable to treat them as if they were not alive. To realize the moral claims

of mosses it is essential to view them as persons. Otherwise, the treatment of mosses appears to be amoral, which leads to ignoring two main moral imperatives connected to animism. *In Gathering Moss,* it is suggested that mosses should, first, be respected with regard to their sovereignty. In "The Owner" Kimmerer reflects on ownership: "But I think you cannot own a thing and love it at the same time. Owning diminishes the innate sovereignty of a thing, enriching the possessor and reducing the possessed." (*Gathering Moss* 139). Interestingly, Kimmerer uses the terminology of amoral exploitation in this passage by using the word "thing." Nevertheless, she follows the logic of animism, according to which animate beings have sovereignty (since they have a will). From that logic follows that by owning an animate being one seeks to undermine the will of that being. That cannot be an act of love, since it selfishly enriches oneself through oppressing another being. To respect the mosses' sovereignty entails paying attention to what the moss wants. Second, reciprocity receives a full chapter in "The Web of Reciprocity." According to indigenous wisdom:

> Every being is endowed with certain gifts, its own intelligence, its own spirit, its own story. … the Creator gave these to us, as original instructions. The foundation of education is to discover that gift within us and learn to use it well. These gifts are also responsibilities, a way of caring for each other. (Kimmerer *Gathering Moss* 100)

The first sentence shows that reciprocity is connected to animism. "Every being" in contrast to inanimate things, have their own "spirit". Thus, they are animated and have an authentic life of their own with "intelligence," "gifts" and a "story." These special talents that every being has are given as instructions to use them for the good of others. When every being fulfils their "responsibility" to use their gifts well, then a web of reciprocity comes into existence to which every being contributes. The title "web of reciprocity" is a metaphor for beings helping another being and thereby creating a structure of connections due to which every being gives and receives support. For example, trees provide shelter and food for birds

and birds spread the seeds of the trees, enabling them to reproduce. However, we do not have an ethical obligation to reciprocate with inanimate things, whereas towards animate persons we do have responsibilities. Thus, from animated kinship follow moral responsibilities to reciprocate and respect another's sovereignty.

To sum up the first chapter, mosses are represented as wilfully communicating through the language of their outward appearance. The implication is that the way mosses live, and grow is not arbitrary, but meaningful. This is the finding that I am basing my interpretation in the second chapter one.

2. Literary Analysis of Three Essays with Regard to Messages from Mosses

This second chapter builds upon the first chapter. In the first chapter I argued that *Gathering Moss* entails a theory of language which describes all animate beings as able to communicate. To provide evidence for this idea I quoted passages from *Gathering Moss*. In this second chapter I will apply Kimmerer's theory of language to analyse three complete essays in depth. Thus, insights that Kimmerer has from observing mosses attentively will be regarded as messages. The observations will be analysed in terms of how mosses communicate their messages through their actions. These three essays are representative for *Gathering Moss* in its totality. In my analysis, I will focus on how the mosses are portrayed as communicating, through the use of literary devices such as metaphor, non-linear plot and onomatopoeia. I will also share what communications Kimmerer has determined from these messages from the mosses.

2.1. An Affinity for Water

Ecofeminist Janine M. DeBaise characterizes Kimmerer's essay as "conversational" in her book review of *Gathering Moss* (244). "An Affinity for Water" exemplifies the conversational character of Kimmerer's essays, because it is conversational in several ways. Therefore, "An

Affinity for Water" is especially significant to analyse in this thesis focussed on the communication/conversation between Kimmerer and the mosses. Every essay in *Gathering Moss* begins with a personal anecdote by Kimmerer, which is a conversational form of expression. But "An Affinity for Water" stands out, since the whole essay is written as an interplay between passages about mosses and stories from Kimmerer's personal life. The personal passages are shown to be different through the use of cursive letters. Thus, the essay is non-linear, because it contains a parallel plot, which embodies the conversation between Kimmerer and the mosses. By the end of the essay the parallel plots are braided together.

In "An Affinity for Water," messages from mosses are abundant. Throughout this essay there is an exchange of ideas going on between the observations of mosses and Kimmerer's inner life, connected by a shared theme of waiting. During the summer, the plants suspend their growth and wait for rain, just like Kimmerer has to wait at the airport for her daughter Linden to arrive (*Gathering Moss* 35). The first personal passage introduces the overall theme of the chapter, which is change. Kimmerer shares a memory about wishing that her daughter would be a child again. The passage about mosses that follows picks up the topic of change:

> It may be only a matter of days before the dew returns, or it may be months of patient desiccation. Acceptance is their [mosses] way of being. They earn their freedom from the pain of change by total surrender to the ways of rain. (Kimmerer 35)

This passage already introduces the first message from the mosses. As persons, mosses can be thought of as having character traits or virtues (Kimmerer, "The Fortress, the River and the Garden" 60). Kimmerer claims that "acceptance" is a major character trait of mosses, since acceptance is part of who mosses are (their "being"). Thus, acceptance is essential for being a moss. Due to frequently drying out completely and thus having experience with waiting, Kimmerer claims that mosses have developed acceptance. Mosses patiently wait for the next

rain and accept being desiccated. That is to say, mosses accept their fate, and therefore they do not suffer from change. This main message is developed further throughout the rest of the chapter.

The overall message of the mosses has already been stated, but how has this message been communicated? It is through the relationship between mosses and water that the mosses' message is revealed. In the way that mosses behave towards water, they communicate their message to Kimmer. To elaborate, unlike higher plants, mosses do not have "sophisticated water-conservation mechanisms" (Kimmerer, *Gathering Moss* 37). Thus, in contrast to most other plants, mosses are not trying to hold on to water as long as they can in order to survive. For example, mosses do not have roots with which they could struggle to gather water out of the soil when it does not rain. Instead, mosses grow when there is water and curl themselves inward when there is no water. In times of abundance (rain) mosses flourish and in times of scarcity (drought) they simply exist. From this way of living, Kimmerer deduces that mosses accept change, since they live in total accordance with the changing weather.

Kimmer elaborates on the message of mosses, by explaining that:

> … most mosses are immune to death by drying. For them, desiccation is simply a temporary interruption in life. … Even after forty years of dehydration in a musty specimen cabinet, mosses have been fully revived after a dunk in a Petri dish. … They shrink and shrivel while carefully laying the groundwork of their own renewal. They give me faith. (*Gathering Moss* 37)

This passage further explains the first message and adds a second message. First, mosses' "freedom from the pain of change" can now be understood (35). Mosses are able to accept the changing water supply and are not hurt by it, because they survive being dried out. Unlike higher plants which struggle when they are dry (and are thus in "pain"), mosses choose acceptance of inevitable change. Therefore, mosses live in harmony with the changing water

supply. Second, Kimmerer receives a message of hope from the mosses ability to survive. Mosses are shown to be extremely frugal and enduring in the example of mosses that were revived after 40 years. Kimmerer underlines the wonder about such perseverance by using "even." Above that, she guides the reader's attention to the last word of the passage ("faith").

Figure 2: *The Same Mosses Before and After Rainfall*

She accomplishes this effect by using "they" as an anaphora in the last two sentences and keeping the last sentence very short. The anaphora slows down the pace of the sentences and underlines the significance of the mosses. The reason why mosses bring "faith" is that mosses' survival is a suggestion that life is stronger than death. The comment that desiccation is only a temporary interruption in life might even suggest that there is hope for an (after)life. Thus, the second message is communicated through the unfolding and colouring of the dried-out mosses (which can look dead) into luscious green plants, which can be seen in figure 2. Thereby the mosses express: 'be hopeful, life might preserver, just like we do.'

The personal passages help us to understand which implications the messages have for Kimmerer. When the personal plot continues the reader finds out that Linden has come to visit Kimmerer's grandfather together (*Gathering Moss* 36). The personal plot is provided piece by piece and the reader eventually realizes that Kimmerer's grandfather has died. Thus, that her daughter moved far away and that her grandfather died are the two instances of change that Kimmerer is personally struggling with. By intertwining those instances with her discussion of mosses' relationship to water, she shows how the messages of mosses are relevant to her own life. The effect of the switch between personal and moss stories is that it seems as if the two would be in dialogue with each other. Therefore, Kimmerer appears to ask mosses for help with her personal losses. One answer that she received so far is that acceptance of change protects her from unnecessary pain. In what way Kimmerer applies what she learned from the mosses, can be seen on page 38. Kimmerer explicitly alludes to mosses in her personal part on page 38, thereby blurring the line between personal and moss plot. She writes: "*How fearfully we fight the losses that* Dendroalsia [moss] *so gracefully embraces. Straining against the inevitable, we spend ourselves on futile resistance*" (38). The diction creates a contrast between *Dendroalsia* and human beings. While *Dendroalsia* is characterized as stoic and in control by gracefully embracing what cannot be changed, humanity is characterized as unnecessarily afraid and helplessly trying to alter fate. This contrast implies an analogy: just like the *Dendroalsia* mosses do not fight the inevitable desiccation, Kimmerer should not try to resist what cannot be changed. Otherwise, she will feel pain, which stops her from seeing what possible good the change has brought about. Thus, when she accepts that her daughter will never be a child again, she can appreciate the "lovely young woman" that Linden has become (37).

The third message from the mosses is about community. First Kimmerer explains that mosses have a great capacity for holding water due to living in a colony. By standing

intertwined and close to many other mosses in a clump, they form “a porous network of leaf and space” together (Kimmerer, *Gathering Moss* 38). Such a clump functions like a sponge that makes use of the capillary forces of water (39). A single moss shoot by itself would dry out immediately. Therefore, mosses show the importance of community for support. In the personal passage that follows, Kimmerer already shows the effect that the community with her daughter has on her. She states that she feels herself “expand in her presence” (38). The word “expand” is also used to describe mosses filling with water. Thus, this reference shows a similarity between Kimmerer’s community with her daughter making her life richer and the mosses community enabling them to expand together in shared water. Thereby, community is shown to enrich both mosses and humans.

The fourth message is about love. The theme of expansion is referred to again in a later personal passage and thus functions as a thread connecting the different passages. Kimmerer writes down her reflection:

> *The mutuality of moss and water. Isn’t this the way we love, the way love propels our own unfolding? We are shaped by our affinity for love, expanded by its presence and shrunken by its lack.* (*Gathering Moss* 41)

This passage demonstrates how Kimmerer gathers messages from mosses through reflecting on her attentive observations of mosses. Before, Kimmerer has explained that moss leaves are only one cell thick and that therefore every raindrop can soak into it immediately (39). That is one reason why water and moss seem to mutually attract each other. Kimmerer refers to this process of water entering moss cells and sees an analogy to love in it. Just like mosses have an affinity for water and are built in order to capture it, human beings are shaped by love. If they are loved and loving, they grow to their full potential (like mosses expanding due to water). If they are neither loved nor loving towards others then they become the least version of themselves, like a moss that shrinks to an extent that it is not recognizable as a moss anymore.

Thus, from mulling over mosses relationship to water, Kimmerer has gained an insight that humanity flourishes with love like mosses flourish with water. This message is more interpretative than many other messages gathered from the mosses. It can nonetheless be viewed as a message, since messages from human beings are also often not meant literally but as an analogy.

At the end of the essay Kimmerer elaborates on the lesson of community and demonstrates how it can help her with her hardships. The last two personal passages are about her dying grandfather. First, he is described when he is laying in the hospital bed. The last personal passage is about Kimmerer holding hands with her family at his funeral. Certain expressions such as the gaze of Kimmerer's mother "*gathering each of us in*" and "*we hold each other's* [hands] *tighter*" (*Gathering Moss* 43) emphasize the consolation that collective grieving can bring. The human grief is connected to the last moss passage. In that passage the theme of community is picked up: "Holding water against the pull of the sun, and welcoming it back again is a communal activity. … It requires the interweaving of shoots and branches, standing together to create a place for water." (43). By referring to the mosses communal activity of holding water, a connection between the mosses and Kimmerer's family is implied. The moss shoots and branches are interwoven, like the hands and eyes at the funeral. Moreover, the creation of "a place for water" functions as a metaphor for funerals providing a space for tears. Evidence for this reading stems from the fact that Kimmerer has already referred to tears as water earlier ("*a dewy cheek*" (38)). Therefore, the very last passage, written in straight letters, is nonetheless about both the mosses and her personal story. By having intertwined the two storylines more and more (through using the same words such as "water"), the sentence about mosses also carries the meaning of human community. Thus, the two plots become one towards the end of the essay.

Kimmerer concludes her dialogue with the mosses with an illustration of how she implements the lessons she learned from the mosses. All the main themes of (rain) water, change and acceptance come together in the last passage. The essay ends with Kimmerer running outside into the rain and asserting "I, too, can have a covenant with change, a pledge to let go, laying aside resistance for the promise of becoming." (*Gathering Moss* 43) The "covenant with change" is a direct repetition of what she first ascribed to the mosses (37). Kimmerer expresses that she wants to live like the mosses by accepting losses and focussing on the good that change can bring. At the very end, she mentions the mosses releasing their "daughters." Just like she sees *Dendroalsia* releasing their spores, so does Kimmerer plan to be content with her daughter having moved out. In the opening of the capsules and the flight of the spores, Kimmerer receives the message that it is good to let one's children be independent and leave home. The vibrant references to the "scent of rain" and the sight of the mosses uncurling "branch by delicate branch" give the impression that Kimmerer is comforted by the mosses through her senses (43). Her love for life has been revived after all her hardships when she runs outside to see the mosses expand in the rain, who thereby express their messages every time anew.

2.2 The Red Sneaker

Throughout "The Red Sneaker" Kimmerer portrays mosses as taking on the conversational role as a medium. Thus, by analysing this essay I can demonstrate a variation with regard to how mosses are represented as communicating. Like in "An Affinity for Water", the narrative structure of "The Red Sneaker" is non-linear as well. The essay introduces us to Kimmerer dancing on a bog filled with *Sphagnum* mosses (*Gathering Moss* 111) and returns to dancing on the bog (119). Hence, the essay begins *in media res*. Most of the main body of the essay contains descriptions and explanations about *Sphagnum* mosses. These explanations are

helpful to understand the mosses' communication and messages. The essay entails three main messages from *Sphagnum* mosses.

First, the idea that we are responsible for our impact on earth and ought to provide for the next generations is introduced. The first part of the message is brought across by Kimmerer in the following passage:

> In these thick peat deposits, paleoecologists can read the history of the land. They slide a long shining cylinder into the bog, cutting through layers of undecomposed plants, and extract a core of peat. … Changes in vegetation, changes in the climate, stretching thousands of years before, are all recorded there. What will they read in the layer that represents our time …? We are responsible for that. (*Gathering Moss* 118)

Throughout this passage there are allusions to the trope of *reading* nature as a book. The trope 'reading nature as a book' usually means to view the world as a book written by God, from which moral messages can be decoded (Davis 32). In this case however, reading is used to express methods of empirical research. The dead *Sphagnum* mosses (collectively called peat) can be used as samples to research the time period during which they were alive. Thus, to read the peat means to view the peat as representative for the kind of plants that were there and the climate they lived under during a specific century. In accordance with the trope, Kimmerer also deduces a moral responsibility from what will be read in the peat from our century. That is to say, we are responsible for our time in history and the conditions that plants and animals lived under. The peat keeps a record of humanity's impact on earth. This idea is connected to the messages of the *Sphagnum*, which is stated at the very end of the essay.

The message from the *Sphagnum* is formulated as a simile: "When we steward the earth for our children, we are living like *Sphagnum*." (Kimmerer, *Gathering Moss* 120). The simile stands for living in a way that our lives function as a support for the generations after us. Thus, to live well humanity ought to care for life on earth, instead of endangering it. The

descriptions, which Kimmerer provides, are evidence for my interpretation. She explains that the dead peat holds a lot of water, thereby creating the bog, in which the living *Sphagnum* can strive. *Sphagnum* needs a constant water supply which the bog provides. The peat also creates acidic conditions under which almost no plant besides *Sphagnum* can survive (Kimmerer 112). That is why the majority of a bog is filled by different species of *Sphagnum*. In their dead existence, after a short life, *Sphagnum* mosses enable their offspring to live by laying under them. This way of relating to future generations communicates a message that providing for the next generations is a major purpose in life. Kimmerer views *Sphagnum* mosses as role models due to their way of living. Moreover, *Sphagnum* mosses do not merely egoistically take care of their own offspring. In the beginning Kimmerer mentions a fact: "There is more living carbon in *Sphagnum* moss than in any other single genus on the planet." (111). Although *Sphagnum* mosses create living conditions which are hostile for most other living beings, they do so for the greater good. By storing carbon more efficiently than any other plant, *Sphagnum* mosses play an important role in the climate crisis. This is evidence that *Sphagnum* takes care of all future generations.

Second, "The Red Sneaker" entails a message about memory. Kimmerer formulates her insight in the following way: "Memory, like peat, connects the long dead and the living." (*Gathering Moss* 119). According to this simile, memory connects the present with the past and the living with the dead, like peat connects the dead and living mosses. To understand this insight about memory fully, we need to dive into how it is inspired by *Sphagnum*. The *Sphagnum* mosses reveal this insight to Kimmerer through creating a space for preservation. A *Sphagnum* bog has two levels. First, a deep layer of dead *Sphagnum* (Kimmerer 113). Second, a thin surface layer of living *Sphagnum* (114). The dense amount of dead *Sphagnum* causes a lack of oxygen and thereby slows down decomposition in the whole bog. That is why anything that drops into a bog can "persist relatively unaltered for centuries" (Kimmerer 113).

The title of the essay refers to Kimmerer's red sneaker that she lost in a bog once. The reference to her red sneaker from the title becomes a symbol that stands for something that outlasts history. Due to slowing down decomposition, peat enables human beings buried in a bog and Kimmerer's red sneaker to outwardly stay the same (113). Therefore, their existence and even their outward appearance will not be forgotten (since they can be looked at again). This effect brought about by the peat is similar to memory which conserves impressions of others that are possibly no longer alive, that is why Kimmerer announces that memory functions like peat – both of them conserve. Thereby the peat and memory provide a bridge between the living and the dead. Thus, they enable the living to maintain a relationship to the dead. Without the peat or memory, the deceased would be completely forgotten, which means to be vanished altogether. By preserving something of the dead (their bodies or impressions of them) the dead continue to exist in some regards. The peat, moreover, vividly connects Kimmerer to her dead ancestors in a spiritual dance that we will discuss in the next part.

Third, the message that the Anishinabe people and their culture have survived is expressed in a complex manner. Anh Hua argues that postcolonial women writers often write "narratives of personal and cultural healing" to engage with and envision methods of healing (59). "The Red Sneaker" exemplifies a narrative about a healing process. Let me give an overview of how the message is communicated. The message is the result of a spiritual dance that Kimmerer dances with the *Sphagnum* mosses. Due to the mosses answering with the voices of Kimmerer's ancestors, the mosses take the role of a medium. *Sphagnum* enables Kimmerer to come into contact with her ancestors and therefore, it is ultimately her ancestors who send the message. But it is the mosses who forward the message through Kimmerer's feet. Thus, language in this instance is expressed through touch.

In the first chapter we discussed that normal looking was characterized as inadequate for understanding mosses. Instead, listening (as attentive observing) was recommended to

understand animate beings that as such have their own story to tell. In "The Red Sneaker" the listening to actual sounds is mentioned: "I love listening to a bog, the papery rustle of dragonfly wings, the banjo twang of a green frog … the 'pop' of *Sphagnum* capsules." (Kimmerer, *Gathering Moss* 118). In a bog one can hear a variety of sounds which illustrates the diversity of life. By using onomatopoetic words such as "twang" and "pop" the presence of different beings is depicted through their characteristic sounds. Thus, listening can also be an aesthetic experience that reminds us of the animacy of beings. In addition to that, Kimmerer writes about the sound of the *Sphagnum* capsules popping open: "listening intently, I thought I heard the sound of the Water Drum" (118). The "Water Drum" is a metaphor which stands for a being with spiritual significance that can connect the living and the dead. By suggesting that she almost mistook the sound of the *Sphagnum* capsules for the sound of the Water Drum, Kimmerer provides a hint that something of spiritual significance is about to happen. Afterwards Kimmerer states that the bog is like the sacred Water Drum. The Water Drum is bound by a hoop that embodies the circle of life and death (111). This comparison shows the sacredness of the bog and foreshadows that Kimmerer will have a spiritual experience with her deceased ancestors in the bog. Just like the Water Drum is spiritually connected to her ancestors, so is the bog (which embodies the Water Drum).

However, the main approach to the mosses in this chapter is not listening but touching. In line with the attentive quality of listening, Kimmerer recommends feeling the mosses of the bog through one's bare feet (*Gathering Moss* 116). Since most mosses in a bog are concealed under the water, the eyes cannot tell when a new circle of vegetation begins. Through one's feet one feels whether the surface is more like "a warm sponge" or whether there are shrubs which feel like "taut wire" (116). Subsequently, Kimmerer describes that she stands still and senses that she was standing on "an earthly Drum" (118). This imagery merges the way the bog feels and sounds with the touch and sound of the Water Drum. Due to this likeness in

touch and sound, Kimmerer implies that like a drum calls to be drummed upon, the *Sphagnum* mosses invite her to drum on them with her feet. Therefore, she begins to dance in her traditional way from heel to toe, which sets the bog in rhythmic motion. Every move of Kimmerer's feet is answered by the *Sphagnum* rippling (118-119). Above that, the peat underneath the living mat is also set in motion: "The soft peat below responds to my step, compressing with the downbeat and springing back. It too is dancing deep beneath me, sending its energy up to the surface." (119). This quote demonstrates how Kimmerer makes sense of the peat within the framework of animism. Instead of writing that her movement *causes* the peat to bounce back she writes that the peat "responds" and that it is "dancing" and "sending its energy." All of these phrases emphasize that the peat is an agent that wilfully reacts to Kimmerer. Moreover, the quote shows how reciprocity is unfolding between Kimmerer and the peat. Kimmerer's steps send energy into the peat and in response the peat sends energy upwards. Thus, they mutually give and receive energy. The energy is exchanged through touch, which is connected to the idea that touch can be healing. According to Hua, trauma is frequently conceptualized as affecting the body in literary works, which is captured in the trope "written on the body" (60). The trope stands for the idea that bodies can memorize violence. Moreover, Hua contends that compassionate touch can be a healing counter-action to violence from the past. This idea is expressed in the exchange of energy during which the touch from the mosses steadily give Kimmerer more confidence. Thus, the touch of the mosses is one way in which they support Kimmerer in her healing process.

Afterwards a new phase of the dance begins, during which the peat functions as a medium between Kimmerer and her ancestors. 'Listening' comes into the foreground again:

> Dancing on the *Sphagnum*, buoyant on the surface of the peat, I feel the power of connection with what has come before, the deep peat of memory holding me up. The drumbeat of my feet calls up echoes from the deepest peat, the oldest time. The

> pulsing rhythm, persistent, wakens the old ones and as I dance I can hear their faraway songs … (Kimmerer, *Gathering Moss* 119)

Dancing together with *Sphagnum* makes Kimmerer feel "buoyant," which implies that she feels strong and receptive. In addition to that, dancing on *Sphagnum* mosses, who carry their ancestors underneath themselves, makes her feel connected to the past of her ancestors. Finally, the drumbeat from her feet on the earthly Water Drum of *Sphagnum* creates a spiritual connection to her ancestors ("the old ones").

After Kimmerer's ancestors are said to be awoken, the narrating time changes. Throughout most of the essay, the narrating time is simultaneous. Thus, Kimmerer uses the present tense, for example "feels" or "read" (*Gathering Moss* 118), which is contemporaneous with the action. In order to describe what happened to her ancestors, she uses flashbacks formulated in the past tense. For example, Kimmerer describes a flashback during which she hears "the cries of the people marched off their beloved homelands" (119). This memory is about her ancestors being forcefully displaced. The flashbacks have a sonic nature, because they are all about hearing sounds from the past. However, when Kimmerer refers to herself, she continues to use the present tense. For instance, "I can feel in response" (119). Therefore, the narrating time can be characterized as interpolated, because the narration switches between Kimmerer's present experience and her ancestors' past experiences, which are marked by different tenses. The horrible experiences of her ancestors accumulate in a climatic passage: "Up, up through the peat, up through time their voices are rising, voices of the good sisters of St. Mary's teaching the red children their duplicitous catechism." (119). The "good sisters" is an instance of irony, since the nuns of St. Mary were enforcing their language and culture on Kimmerer's grandfather (to destroy his Anishinabe identity), which is immoral instead of good. The anaphora "up through" links the peat to time and illustrates the

movement of voices being summoned through the peat. The first anaphora “Up, up” emphasizes the process of an upward movement.

The anaphors, moreover, initiate several changes. First, in response to these terrible memories, Kimmerer sends the “message of [her] presence” (*Gathering Moss* 119). Second, the present tense begins to be employed for the flashbacks, as in “carrying my grandfather … to Carlisle Indian School, where they dance to the persistent rhythm of ‘Kill the Indian to Save the Man’” (119). Thus, the memories from her ancestors began in the past tense and progress into the present tense, although the events happened in the past. By progressing into the present tense, the narrating time returns to being simultaneous. This narrating time has the effect of illustrating that the past of Kimmerer’s ancestors is relevant for her present time.

The dense list of short, but violent experiences creates an atmosphere of existential fear about Kimmerer’s roots being destroyed. Kimmerer has written about her discontentment about being separated from her heritage due to violations from the past (*Braiding Sweetgrass* 21). Because of colonial assimilation policies, aimed at eradicating Native American culture and language, a lot of knowledge has been lost and communities have been destroyed by forcefully displacing them. Kimmerer’s parents and she herself did not receive a full education in their own Anishinabe culture. She is especially frustrated with not being fluent in the Potawatomi language. That is why she is worried that the racist measures of the past have succeeded in destroying Native American culture and identity. Kimmerer expresses this worry when she refers to the past as “dark times, when the Water Drum nearly lost its voice” (*Gathering Moss* 119). To lose one’s voice is a metaphor for the Water Drum being forbidden and thus marginalized. Moreover, the metaphor also stands for the sound of the Water Drum, which would not have been heard anymore. If the Water Drum would not have been played anymore, then the communication with Kimmerer’s ancestors would have also been

destroyed. Thus, throughout these passages, Kimmerer is struggling with the trauma caused by the horrible atrocities in relationship to her own identity.

In the end, Kimmerer gathers strength from the idea that the spirit has sustained her grandfather, just like the water sustains the very *Sphagnum* that she is dancing on. In an epiphany Kimmerer exclaims: "They did not Kill the Indian. For today, I am dancing, on a Water Drum of peat in a country of vast blue lakes where loons are calling." (*Gathering Moss* 119). She realizes that her enactment of the traditional rituals in a place that her ancestors have been persecuted on is an act of resistance. Moreover, it means that her ancestors' culture has not been eradicated, she is keeping the culture alive at the very moment. By dancing the traditional dance, being connected with animate beings and understanding the world in indigenous ways she is part of the Anishinabe culture. The dance is a way of reclaiming her culture. After this epiphany, the violent memories stop, which implies that the healing process progresses.

In order to send the message to her ancestors that the Anishinabe people have survived, Kimmerer dances:

> Dancing, my feet sending the message of my presence in waves through the peat, and in waves of memory, they send back the message of their presence. We are still here. Like the living surface of the *Sphagnum*, the sunlit green layer at the top of a column of dark accumulated peat, individually ephemeral, collectively enduring. We are still here. (*Gathering Moss* 119)

Kimmerer dances in order to communicate her message to her ancestors. It is a simple message: 'I am here which means we as a people still exist.' Sending rhythmic waves into the peat is a bodily demonstration of her presence. The peat is very receptive for her expression and enables her ancestors to respond through waves. The waves that touch Kimmerer's feet feel like a collective response that tells her she is not alone, because "we are still here." She

understands her connection to her community thanks to the *Sphagnum* mosses relation to their ancestors. Just like *Sphagnum* mosses lead short lives but are supported by their dead ancestors and thereby still form a collective, her ancestors are gone as individuals, but can still be said to exist as a community. Without the many dead *Sphagnum* plants there could be no living *Sphagnum*. Without all of her ancestors there would be no Anishinabe culture and community that Kimmerer can reclaim and cherish. Despite all of her grievances, during this spiritual dance on the *Sphagnum* mat, Kimmerer realizes, that the Anishinabe people as a culture have survived. It is due to the responses she receives through her feet, that she intuitively knows that her ancestors are still supporting her in their spirit. As long as there are still members of the Anishinabe people who dance in the old way, they are not extinguished. The message is repeated like a mantra that expresses confidence by the end of the dance. *Sphagnum* as a physical medium seems to have given Kimmerer strength by making her feel bodily connected to other animate beings. Although it was the *Sphagnum* who touched her, they were at the same time an avenue for her ancestors to spiritually touch her.

2.3 The Forest Gives Thanks to The Mosses

"The Forest Gives Thanks to The Mosses" is about conversations between mosses and other more-than-human-beings. Thus, the essay lends itself to my analysis due to portraying a third variation in mosses' communication. The essay entails a reflection on clear-cut forests, which functions as a red thread. The essay begins with Kimmerer describing the view on the Oregon Coast Range, which entails many clear-cuts and patches of Douglas-fir returning. In the middle of the essay (*Gathering Moss* 144-45), Kimmerer visits a clear-cut forest and at the end she reflects on the fact that clear-cutting only serves humanity (150). Humanity's treatment of the forest is contrasted with the mosses caring relationship to the forest. The whole essay is written in the genre of a thanksgiving prayer. According to animism scholar Roberte Hamayon, "words take precedence over gesture" in prayer (290). Thus, the use of the

word “thanks” has been established as the necessary marker of a thanksgiving prayer. Because most paragraphs end with an animate being giving “thanks” for the mosses, the whole chapter can be identified as a thanksgiving prayer. Kimmerer explains in the beginning of the essay that indigenous people name and thank every being who is intertwined with their lives (*Gathering Moss* 141). The animate beings are thanked for their role in creating the well-being of the world. The essay is based on the idea that if the forest (with all animate beings living there) would give thanks to someone, they would all thank the mosses (142). The mosses express one main message of generosity in this essay. This message is communicated repeatedly in all the different relationships that the mosses lead with other beings. Since this essay is above all about thanking the mosses, I first, analyse the importance of thankfulness within animism. Second, I interpret the message of the mosses.

In the first chapter I argued that one of the moral consequences of animism is the call for reciprocity. All animate beings ought to find out what their gifts are and use them for the good of others. As the first plant that grew on land, mosses have had time to perfect the art of sharing their gifts with others. In the “Forest Gives Thanks to the Mosses” Kimmerer writes down prayers that she suspects the forest’s beings would utter, if they pray. Thereby, gratitude is expressed for all of the gifts that mosses share with other beings. This purpose of thanksgiving does several things to the one who prays. Thanking focusses one’s attention on what is good (instead of what one wants to change). Thus, the one who gives thanks focusses on something that is there, instead of on a lack.

Moreover, thankfulness gives reasons to praise others, which can be seen in the following example. Birds (among many other animals) use mosses for their nests to keep their eggs safe and well insulated (Kimmerer, *Gathering Moss* 147). After providing this fact, Kimmerer shares an observation she made: “I once found a hummingbird nest where trailing mosses decorated the rim of the tiny nest like fluttering Tibetan prayer flags. Birds giving

thanks for mosses." (147). Since the mosses are used as decoration it is apparent that they do not serve the purpose of the nest. Kimmerer uses a simile to express that in the mosses' resemblance with the religious Tibetan flags she recognizes a spiritual quality. Thus, Kimmerer senses the praise of the hummingbirds in the way that they beautifully arrange the mosses in their nest. By decorating their nests with mosses, they praise the mosses which blow beautifully in the wind.

Furthermore, thanking channels one's attention outwards, since one usually thanks someone else. Therefore, thanksgiving is a way to focus one's attention on other's and to view them in a positive light. One example, for viewing others in a positive light is how Kimmerer interprets the relationship between ferns and mosses. At many places plants can only take root, because the mosses were there first. Mosses can grow without soil underneath them, since they do not have roots. During their lifetime the mosses build up organic soil underneath them. Thus, mosses enable other plants to grow in places where they could not have grown otherwise (like on rock). Therefore, mosses are also often the first plants to make uninhabitable places (like a clear-cut) habitable again. Moss mats are nursing ecosystems. Ferns can grow on trees, but only if there is already a layer of mosses on top of the trunk, which is illustrated in figure 3. For this reason, Kimmerer is convinced that "Ferns give thanks for mosses." (*Gathering Moss* 147). Kimmerer does not provide evidence for

Figure 3: *Fern growing on top of mosses on a log (in the Hortus Botanicus in Leiden)*

individual ferns showing gratitude (like in the case of the hummingbirds). In general, that is not her approach in this essay. Instead, she looks at beings in the forest from the premise of what they have reasons to be grateful for and from that she assumes that these beings are grateful. She seems to imply that a fern that finds a home on a tree trunk naturally feels grateful.

In addition to that, thanksgiving helps one to realize one's dependence on others. When the forest begins to thank the mosses, the list grows longer and longer, which exemplifies how entangled the flourishing of the forest is with the help provided by the mosses. Thus, thanksgiving is a way to recognize the gifts that one receives, which can inspire to gift something in return. However, as Warren Cariou points out, Kimmerer characterizes reciprocity as an "open reciprocity" (346). Cariou uses that term to signify that Kimmerer's ideal of reciprocity is not an economic relationship where receiving a gift implies that one has to return a gift. In other words, a gift that one has to give is not a gift anymore but a way to pay off one's debts. Instead, giving gifts to others is viewed as essentially good in itself. Therefore, giving gifts in return is represented as good, but it is not an obligation. The essay entails several examples where the mosses do not only give but also receive something. One example are the mosses and the trees, whose relationship starts at birth. Either the mosses' spores find a home in the cracks of the tree bark or the tree seedling lands on a moss mat and is nursed there. Mosses provide protection from the wind and consistent water supply for infant trees (Kimmerer, *Gathering Moss* 147). Their relationship is very entangled since they each provide for the infants of the species. Above that, mosses absorb a lot of water, which protects a forest from being flooded (143). Mosses furthermore provide trees with water for a long time after the rain showers, because they slowly release water to the soil. Thus, the trees can grow, and the mosses have a home in the tree bark. It is a reciprocal relationship which convinces Kimmerer that trees "give thanks for mosses" (148).

In the end, thanksgiving is a way of appreciating others for what they do for you, feeling love for them and a first step in giving something back. A second example for reciprocal relationships is the relation to banana slugs, which exemplifies how gratefulness can ignite loving feelings. Banana slugs eat mosses, but they also spread them. Thus, the slugs receive nourishment and give support by spreading mosses (Kimmerer, *Gathering Moss* 148). Furthermore, banana slugs spend the day covered up by mosses to not dry out in the sunlight. Kimmerer describes this relationship in loving terms: "Lying in individual rooms of spongy wood, each was nestled between the cool moist wood and the blanket of moss. I hastily cover them up, before the sun could catch them sleeping." (148). By using words like "rooms" and "sleeping" the mossy log is described like a human home for the slugs. Being "nestled" under a "blanket" of mosses gives evokes the image of a content banana slug laying in a comfortable mossy bed. Due to the mosses being characterized as animate beings throughout *Gathering Moss*, this description implies that the mosses take care of the slugs like parents. They cuddle the slugs to sleep and keep them safe. That is why Kimmerer quickly places the mosses back to not intrude and endanger the slugs. Once again, the praying mantra is repeated: "Slugs give thanks to the mosses." (148).

Throughout the essay, the soil, river, clouds, fungi, birds, ferns, trees and slugs explicitly give thanks to the mosses. The message that reveals itself in the mosses care for all these beings is one of generosity. Kimmerer writes:

> The patterns of reciprocity by which mosses bind together a forest community offer us a vision of what could be. … They take only the little that they need and give back in abundance. Their presence supports the lives of rivers and clouds, trees, birds, algae, and salamanders, while ours puts them at risk. (*Gathering Moss* 149-50).

Mosses are the role models of animism, because they live the ideal of reciprocity. The whole essay is a demonstration of all the good that mosses do for others. The metaphor to "bind

together" expresses the vital role of mosses in creating a temperate rain forest, which enables many different animate beings to flourish. The mosses live a life focussed on giving instead of taking, which is contrasted with humanity. Mosses live frugal lives and in their way of living show that they care about what they can do for others instead of what they can gain from them. Their humility and generosity are contrasted with humanity's greed. The clear-cuts are mentioned which "meet the short-term desires of one species, but at the sacrifice of the equally legitimate needs of mosses and murrelets, salmon and spruce." (150). Instead of giving a whole forest reasons to be grateful, humanity often destroys all of them for their own gain. This is the opposite behaviour of mosses and criticized as being out of balance. Kimmerer explicitly writes that humanity needs to learn from the mosses to practice self-restraint and "live like mosses" (150). Then humanity would fulfil its role in reciprocity and give the forest a reason to be thankful in return.

3. Conclusion

In this thesis, I addressed the question: In what sense and through which literary devices are mosses represented as communicating? In chapter one I provided an interpretation of Kimmerer's theory of language, which explains in what sense mosses are represented as communicating. By providing evidence that Kimmerer portrays mosses as communicating agents, I gave a justification for my method of interpretation that I used in the second chapter, where I applied Kimmerer's theory of language. In line with Kimmerer's theory, I analysed the mosses' communication. Above that, I analysed literary devices to provide insights into how Kimmerer herself communicates her stories about the mosses. Before drawing final conclusions about the purpose of *Gathering Moss*, I will summarize my findings from chapter one.

In the first chapter I addressed the first half of the research question: In what sense are mosses represented as communicating in *Gathering Moss*? I argued that mosses are portrayed as fully-fledged communicators. First, I addressed how mosses could be thought of as expressing messages if they do not use words. By comparing Kimmerer's implicit theory of language with Benjamin's theory, I showed that both conceptualize language as the expression of meanings, which do not have to be formulated with words. The communication of mosses is comparable to body language. Every movement of a body and also its stillness can be interpreted as body language. Likewise, mosses express themselves through their being and the things that they do. Thus, in *Gathering Moss*, mosses are represented as communicating through their being and movement. In the example of the golf yard owner, the mosses express that they do not flourish at his place by slowly dying. Their outward appearance changes from luscious green to withered brown. This changing appearance is their language.

Second, I addressed whether mosses are represented as mere means of communication or proper communicators. If mosses were means of communication, then their messages would not be actively sent by them, but merely passed on. Animism is the key to understand that mosses are portrayed as agential communicators. Although animism is not explicitly named as a guiding concept in *Gathering Moss*, there are many references to components of animism, which proves that Kimmerer incorporates animism into her essays. For example, the references to aliveness, spirit, will, person, kinship and reciprocity illustrate the importance of animism for *Gathering Moss*. Moreover, a commitment to animism has an impact on Kimmerer's theory of language. Mosses are proper communicators because they are animate beings. First, because mosses are alive, the communication originates from them. Second, since mosses are thought of as having a will, they are agents. As agents, mosses can choose to communicate and decide what to communicate. Third, understanding mosses is perceived as possible, because mosses are regarded as humanity's family members.

To arrive at a theory of how language and communication are portrayed, I focussed on the purpose of the preface. In the preface, the purpose is expressed in a partly metaphorical and partly literal sense. I argued that "listening" is meant metaphorically and stands for observing attentively. Likewise, I analysed "voices" from the preface as a metaphor that stood for the interests and knowledge of mosses, which they express themselves. In contrast to that, "story" and "messages" are meant literally. I provided evidence from the essays that mosses are characterized as having their own stories and as able to communicate messages. Thus, by writing that mosses have messages of importance, Kimmerer makes a claim about mosses' ability to convey meaning. The purpose of *Gathering Moss* can now be fully grasped. The purpose of the book is to make the reader receptive for the mosses' perspectives by illustrating that mosses can be thought of as communicating through their existence.

Kimmerer transmits the mosses' messages through her writing, because their knowledge and interests have been marginalized, whereas they share wisdom with persons who pay attention.

Throughout the second chapter I addressed through which literary devices mosses are portrayed as communicating. Moreover, I illustrated how Kimmerer's theory of language can be applied to interpret her essays. Once one understands Kimmerer's mosses as animate beings which communicate with her, one recognizes an abundance of messages in the essays. With regard to the messages, we can conclude the following. Mosses communicate through a variety of senses. In "An Affinity for Water" and "The Forest Gives Thanks to the Mosses," Kimmerer watches the mosses to understand their messages. In "The Red Sneaker," she communicates with the mosses through touch and hearing. Through all of these senses, Kimmerer receives the messages and then interprets them by reflecting. Moreover, the messages are "of consequence," because, first, they have personal implications (Kimmerer vii). For instance, *Dendroalsia* mosses teach Kimmerer how to deal with her grief and *Sphagnum* help her to realize that the Anishinabe people have survived. Second, the messages matter because they are often ethical. For example, mosses in a forest express virtue such as generosity and mosses in a bog communicate the importance of supporting future generations.

Throughout the thesis I have analysed various literary devices, now I reflect on what effect the three most significant literary devices have on the representation of mosses. All of the essays that I discussed, contain a nonlinear plot. The essays introduce a personal experience of Kimmerer to then describe her research, give explanations about mosses or share another story from Kimmerer's life. Thereby the plot lines switch between protagonists, places and timeline. For example, in "The Red Sneaker" the plot begins and ends with Kimmerer dancing on the bog. Likewise, in "The Forest Gives Thanks to the Mosses," the essay starts and ends with the same reflection on clear cut forests and our human responsibility. In "An Affinity for Water" the plot is parallel and relies on flashbacks. The

nonlinearity has the effect that the essays can portray several perspectives at the same time. Kimmerer's anecdotes at the beginning provide her perspective as a person. The middle part entails explanations about mosses and recaps research, which provides her perspective as a scientist (who combines indigenous and Western methods). The perspectives of the mosses are included in the middle part and summarized as a message at the end of the essays.

A second pervasive literary device are metaphors (and similes). One effect of metaphors and similes is that they can establish connections between concepts that are perceived as different from one another. For example, the 'voices of mosses' or the 'messages of mosses' are likely to be understood as metaphors, because it is an idea that many people are unfamiliar with. However, by combining these words, the reader is challenged to make sense of this new link. When one thinks about what the metaphor 'the mosses' voices' means, at least one aspect of the vehicle 'voice' needs to be found that can be applied to the tenor 'mosses.' In addition to that, interpreting presumed metaphors/similes can also lead to the conclusion that they are not intended to be understood metaphorically, but as proposals of a new theory. For instance, Jenkins assumed that the 'language of plants' was a metaphor for researching plants as if they had a language. In contrast to Jenkins, I demonstrated that there is convincing evidence that mosses are portrayed as expressing a language. The effect, of using many metaphors/similes surrounding the communication of mosses, is that they focus the readers' attention on the unusual combinations of words and challenge them to interpret them. Thereby, the reader's attention is focussed on re-thinking what it means for a moss to communicate.

Third, especially in "The Red Sneaker," onomatopoeias play an important role. The expressions of sounds in words that resemble these sounds creates an atmosphere of appreciation for the world outside of the book. When one reads onomatopoeia like 'splash' one is reminded of a sound that one has heard before and thus one's memory is engaged.

Moreover, Kimmerer's descriptions of beings' sounds are in line with her frequent appeal to listen. By using onomatopoeia, the animacy of beings is emphasized, because sounds underline the aliveness and agency of beings.

In the end, I would like to share a few remarks on the relevance of my findings. This thesis has advanced the research on (Kimmerer's) portrayal of plant communication. My method of reading *Gathering Moss* facilitates that one recognizes messages in the essays that are not explicitly announced as messages. My conclusion that mosses are represented as actively communicating, reveals the full ecocritical appeal of *Gathering Moss*. The literary devices in *Gathering Moss* have the potential to challenge the reader's ideas about the-more-than-human-world, by providing several perspectives, creating links between words and illustrating the aliveness of beings. For instance, the use of "voice" can illustrate the marginalization of mosses, which Kimmerer points out and counters by writing about mosses' abilities and importance for the ecosystem. Moreover, applying Kimmerer's theory of language, helps with thinking from the mosses' perspective, which is relevant considering the growing alienation between human beings and the more-than-human world. *Gathering Moss* offers insights about how to re-connect. Reading *Gathering Moss* can convince people to go outside, because it shows that, ultimately, one learns from and about plants by being with them. For example, Kimmerer recommended to consult mosses rather than libraries. Moreover, the book invites the reader to relate differently to the more-than-human world. *Gathering Moss* exemplifies how to relate to all animate beings as persons with inherent value. A strong case is put forward to use one's senses to pay attention to what animate beings communicate. Kimmerer's book can function as a guide to look for messages from living plants oneself. In addition to that, dominant ideas about mosses as weeds are undermined in *Gathering Moss*. As an alternative, Kimmerer represents mosses as actively communicating

messages through their existence and their way of living and appeals to us to take their messages seriously.

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