The Paradox of Labeling Nature

Naturally, humans are desperate for closure. In their resistance to ambiguity, they stipulate the defining of foreign, non-human entities. Society applies their construct of terminologies to the natural world. While doing so may enable people to understand nature on a technical level, this labeling will not yield the intimacy and reciprocity encompassed in a deeper understanding. Robin Wall Kimmerer’s “Speaking of Nature” compellingly advocates for invoking a grammar of animacy, emphasizing the value of using language to extend limited personhood and respect to Earth’s natural beings. Howard Nemerov, Kimmerer’s predecessor, shares a similar stance on the indispensable role language plays in perceiving nature. In *Learning the Trees,* Nemerov sings of qualified delight derived from immersing oneself in lyrical descriptions of the physical qualities of trees. Both Kimmerer and Nemerov recognize the merits of language—stressing its potential to connect humans with the Earth. Yet, their works ultimately articulate the ways in which language *falls short* of this potential. Upon closer inspection of the structure, scenic natural imagery, shifting syntax, convivial tone, and other literary devices in *Learning the Trees*, it becomes clear that Kimmerer’s critiques of language’s capacity to strengthen interactions in an environmental context are reflected in Nemerov’s poem; thus, with this parallelism, each composition synchronously assists in the comprehension of the other.

Kimmerer appreciates the beauty of language and its efficacy in providing a means of expression. In explaining how she publicized her grammar of personhood, Kimmerer presents a natural experience: “I’ve sent these two little words out into the world like seeds on the wind”. By choosing delicate, alluring similes that evoke the beauty in nature, she echoes the admiration she has for language and its power to connect human concepts to nature.

Likewise, Nemerov acknowledges the utility of language in satisfying the need for familiarity. In the first half of *Learning the Trees*, Nemerov hints at the proclivity of humans to categorize the world around them. Nemerov communicates this obsession with “invidiously distinguishing everywhere, / dividing up the world to conquer it” (39-40) in the structure and syntax of the first five stanzas. Each is shaped like a box, sorted meticulously—four lines, ending with periods, precisely marking the ends of thoughts. The syllables are even orchestrated in iambic pentameter. This rigid, stifling structure reflects a need for organization: separating thoughts and observations into the boxes of language.

Although language is valuable overall, Nemerov candidly conveys its shortcomings. In citing language’s refusal to change, Nemerov writes that language keeps “an obstinate / intransigence, uncanny, of its own” (35-36). Language can be oppressive in its rigidity. Kimmerer concurs with Nemerov’s critique; she admits the impossible task of changing English to incorporate grammar of animacy. Instead, Kimmerer and Nemerov propose supplementing our vocabulary: in adding complex leaf descriptions, pronouns of personhood, and verbs to emulate the flowing essence of the Potawatomi language and culture. Moreover, Nemerov points to language as “competing with experience” (33). The increased complexity of syntax towards the end of the poem mirrors this conflict. Across stanzas 8 and 9, Nemerov evidently includes enjambment and a break in iambic pentameter. The language, symbolized by sentences, competes against the orderly structure established by the rest of the poem. Likewise, language can compete against its purpose of allowing people to experience the unfamiliar by imposing boundaries on a deeper understanding.

Kimmerer’s views on the boundaries of language build on Nemerov’s, underscoring the faults of language through formatting prose and content. Throughout her writing, Kimmerer weaves in students’ quotations from outdoor sessions of her botany class. Her decision to integrate the considerations of students in her writing reflects her decision to integrate the considerations of nature into language with a grammar of animacy. Furthermore, in choosing to conduct classes outdoors, she exhibits the boundaries of “textbook learning”. Taking education beyond the confines of a classroom allows students to learn with experience. Similarly, taking knowledge beyond the confines of language allows for deeper understanding. She believes that language itself is insufficient. Kimmerer’s analysis is analogous to Nemerov’s view of language as restrictive and stifling.

Ultimately, both writers see language as a valuable tool for understanding the world, yet they acknowledge the limitations of language and knowledge. Although introducing more inclusive pronouns may positively influence the relationship between humans and their surrounding environment, Kimmerer concedes that a “language of animacy will not dictate that its speakers will behave with respect towards nonhumans”. The power of language is not absolute. Nemerov furthers this awareness in the last stanza of *Learning the Trees*, when he asserts that no matter how many names and descriptive terms one learns, the trees’ “comprehensive silence stays the same” (44). In other words, knowledge is imperfect—humanity will never understand everything there is to know about the world. Thus, it is not necessary to constrain the boundaries of language to understanding and forming true connections with nature. There is a limit to what language can do for understanding. Using words to describe or personify a tree will not yield a perfectly comprehensive connection—both Kimmerer and Nemerov agree that there exists a point when language’s influence fades away, leaving the rest of understanding to internal, less concrete vitalities.

While these abstract energies are fairly inexplicable, unable to be defined by language, tangible experience may inculcate these powerful and more profound connections with nature. Speaking from my own experience, in my most recent attempt to connect with a piece of the natural world, I sat alone on the bank of a stream and painted a witch hazel tree. During those three hours, listening to the slow trickle of water and intermittent rustling of leaves, I lost track of time and space. Completely immersed, my senses perceived details that words could not adequately capture. While the tree helped me in creating art, I honored its splendor with my paintbrush. The reciprocity and intimacy of raw experience is irreplaceable in fostering a deeper understanding of nature.