

# Narratives of Nature: Indigenous Wisdom and Environmental Crisis in Wu Ming-Yi, Robin Wall Kimmerer and Elizabeth Kolbert

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**Abstract:** *This research paper offers a comparative ecocritical analysis of environmental sustainability as explored in three seminal works: Wu Ming-Yi's *The Man with the Compound Eyes*, Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass*, and Elizabeth Kolbert's *The Sixth Extinction*. By weaving together literary narrative, indigenous wisdom, and scientific inquiry, the study highlights how these authors interrogate humanity's relationship with the natural world and advocate for ecological stewardship. Wu Ming-Yi's novel situates Taiwan's unique geography within the context of global environmental crisis, using metaphor and indigenous perspectives to illuminate the interconnectedness of ecological challenges and the concept of world environmental citizenship. Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* blends indigenous knowledge with scientific botany, emphasizing reciprocity, kinship, and gratitude as foundational principles for sustainable living. Her narrative challenges dualistic thinking and demonstrates the practical and ethical value of integrating traditional ecological knowledge with modern science. Kolbert's *The Sixth Extinction* documents the alarming rate of biodiversity loss in the Anthropocene, urging readers to recognize human agency and responsibility in shaping planetary futures. Through scientific reportage and compelling storytelling, Kolbert critiques anthropocentrism and calls for urgent collective action. The paper further explores the synergy between indigenous wisdom and scientific knowledge, illustrating how collaborative stewardship and education can foster environmental consciousness. Ultimately, the works of Ming-Yi, Kimmerer, and Kolbert transcend literary boundaries to serve as catalysts for empathy, ethical engagement, and transformative action. Together, they offer a tapestry of insights that deepen our understanding of environmental sustainability and our role as stewards of Earth's biodiversity. This synthesis of narrative, knowledge, and wisdom underscores the urgent need for harmonious coexistence and responsible action in the face of escalating ecological crises.*

**Keywords:** Environmental sustainability, Indigenous wisdom, Ecocriticism, Biodiversity, Anthropocene

## I. INTRODUCTION

The 21st century has witnessed an unprecedented surge in environmental consciousness, with literature emerging as a powerful medium for interrogating humanity's relationship with the natural world. As climate change, biodiversity loss, and ecological crises intensify, contemporary writers have assumed the mantle of environmental advocates, weaving stories that not only reflect the state of the planet but also inspire collective action and introspection. Wu Ming-Yi's *The Man with the Compound Eyes*, Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass*, and Elizabeth Kolbert's *The Sixth Extinction* stand as seminal texts in this eco-literary movement, each offering unique perspectives on sustainability, indigenous wisdom, and the prevention of environmental degradation.

This paper critically examines these three works, exploring how they illuminate the intricate interdependencies between humans and nature, and how they advocate for environmental stewardship. As Smith observes, "The exploration of environmental sustainability within the realm of literature has undergone a transformative evolution, transcending mere examination of ecological concerns to encompass a heightened awareness of the urgent need for collective action"



(Smith 2020). Through a nuanced analysis, this study aims to synthesize the insights of these authors, drawing connections between literary narrative, indigenous knowledge, scientific inquiry, and global environmental citizenship.

## **1. Wu Ming-Yi and the Microcosm of Environmental Crisis**

### **1.1. Taiwan's Geography and the Global Context**

Wu Ming-Yi's *The Man with the Compound Eyes* is a masterful literary exploration that situates Taiwan's unique geography at the heart of a global environmental crisis. The novel's narrative unfolds against the backdrop of Taiwan's lush forests, rugged coastlines, and the ever-present threat of ecological disruption. Ming-Yi's depiction of environmental degradation is not confined to local concerns but resonates with global anxieties about climate change, pollution, and the loss of biodiversity.

As Heise notes, "Wu Ming-Yi's work becomes a poignant microcosm of environmental issues, situating narratives of environmental struggles and human-nature relations within the grand structure of world literature" (Heise 2017). The novel's central event—a massive floating island of garbage approaching Taiwan's shores—serves as a powerful metaphor for the interconnectedness of ecological crises. The debris, originating from distant lands, underscores the reality that environmental problems are transnational, defying political boundaries and demanding collective responsibility.

### **1.2. Indigenous Wisdom and Resilience**

A defining feature of Ming-Yi's narrative is its celebration of indigenous wisdom. The character of Atile'i, a young man from the fictional island of Wayo Wayo, embodies a worldview that is deeply attuned to the rhythms of nature. His journey and eventual encounter with Alice, a Taiwanese woman grappling with personal and ecological loss, highlight the potential for cross-cultural dialogue and the sharing of ecological knowledge.

Johnson observes, "Wu Ming-Yi appropriates images of transnational diasporic citizenship to evoke themes of memory, traumatic history, and planetary community" (Johnson 2018). Through Atile'i's perspective, the novel critiques modernity's alienation from nature and posits indigenous knowledge as a source of resilience and hope. The rituals, myths, and ecological practices of Wayo Wayo are not romanticized relics but living traditions that offer practical solutions to contemporary environmental challenges.

### **1.3. World Environmental Citizenship**

Ming-Yi's narrative advances the concept of "world environmental citizenship," urging readers to recognize themselves as participants in both local and global ecosystems. Heise articulates this idea, stating, "The novel becomes a lens through which readers contemplate not only the local repercussions of environmental degradation but also the global interconnectedness of places and processes" (Heise 2017). The characters' struggles with the disjuncture between local realities and global forces mirror the broader challenge of fostering environmental stewardship in an age of globalization.

The novel's postmodern structure, with its interwoven narratives and shifting perspectives, reinforces the theme of interconnectedness. As the story unfolds, the boundaries between human and non-human, local and global, past and present, become increasingly porous. This narrative strategy invites readers to reconsider their own place within the web of life and to embrace a sense of planetary responsibility.

### **1.4. Critique of Modernity and Environmental Sustainability**

Ming-Yi's critique of modernity is evident in his portrayal of technological progress as both a source of comfort and a driver of ecological destruction. The novel interrogates the assumptions of modernist thought, exposing the limitations of a worldview that prioritizes economic growth over ecological balance. As the narrative suggests, "The need for recognizing ourselves as citizens belonging to both local and global environments echoes Ming-Yi's narrative, where the characters grapple with the disjuncture between local and global realities" (Heise 2017).

The novel's engagement with global efforts—such as renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, waste management, and biodiversity conservation—provides a comprehensive backdrop for evaluating its thematic richness. Ming-Yi's work thus becomes a microcosm reflecting the broader challenges and efforts toward achieving a sustainable future.



## **2. Robin Wall Kimmerer: Weaving Indigenous Wisdom and Scientific Knowledge**

### **2.1. The Interconnectedness of All Beings**

Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* is a lyrical meditation on the interconnectedness of all beings, blending indigenous wisdom with scientific inquiry. As a botanist and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, Kimmerer occupies a unique position at the intersection of Western science and indigenous knowledge systems. Her narrative is suffused with a sense of kinship, reciprocity, and gratitude for the gifts of the earth.

Kimmerer writes, "In indigenous ways of knowing, human people are often referred to as 'the younger brothers of Creation.' We say that humans have the least experience with how to live and thus the most to learn-we must look to our teachers among the other species for guidance" (Kimmerer 9). This perspective challenges the anthropocentric assumptions of Western thought and invites readers to cultivate humility and respect for the more-than-human world.

### **2.2. Reciprocity as a Guiding Principle**

A central theme of *Braiding Sweetgrass* is the principle of reciprocity-the idea that humans must give back to the earth in return for its gifts. Kimmerer draws on the concept of the "Honorable Harvest," a set of ethical guidelines for interacting with the natural world. She explains, "Take only what you need. Use everything you take. Give a gift in reciprocity for what you have taken. Sustain the ones who sustain you and the earth will last forever" (Kimmerer 183). This ethic of reciprocity stands in stark contrast to the extractive logic of industrial capitalism, which treats nature as a resource to be exploited. Kimmerer's narrative is replete with stories of indigenous practices-such as the sustainable harvesting of sweetgrass, the cultivation of the Three Sisters (corn, beans, and squash), and the restoration of degraded landscapes-that exemplify a relational approach to environmental stewardship.

### **2.3. The Role of Storytelling and Ceremony**

Kimmerer's writing is characterized by its emphasis on storytelling and ceremony as vehicles for transmitting ecological knowledge. She observes, "Story is a way to remember. A way to shape identity, to become the person who belongs to the story. Story is a way to find kinship with the land" (Kimmerer 34). Through personal anecdotes, traditional tales, and reflections on her own experiences as a mother, scientist, and indigenous woman, Kimmerer weaves a tapestry that is both deeply personal and universally resonant.

The act of braiding sweetgrass itself becomes a metaphor for the weaving together of different ways of knowing. As Kimmerer explains, "Braiding is a form of reciprocity with the earth. It is an act of gratitude, a way of honoring the gifts we have received" (Kimmerer 5). This metaphor extends to the structure of the book, which interlaces scientific analysis, indigenous teachings, and poetic reflection.

### **2.4. Challenging Dualisms and Reimagining Sustainability**

Kimmerer's work challenges the dualistic thinking that separates humans from nature, science from spirituality, and culture from ecology. She writes, "The dichotomy between Western science and indigenous knowledge is a false one. Both are valid ways of knowing, and both have much to offer in the quest for sustainability" (Kimmerer 215). By bridging these epistemological divides, Kimmerer advocates for a more holistic and inclusive approach to environmental problem-solving.

Her reflections on the COVID-19 pandemic further underscore the relevance of indigenous wisdom in times of crisis. She suggests, "The pandemic is a reminder of our interconnectedness and our vulnerability. It is an opportunity to re-evaluate our priorities and to embrace more sustainable ways of living" (Kimmerer 298). In this sense, *Braiding Sweetgrass* is not only a celebration of indigenous knowledge but also a call to action for all people to become better stewards of the earth.

## **3. Elizabeth Kolbert and the Anthropocene: Confronting the Sixth Extinction**

### **3.1. The Scope of the Sixth Extinction**

Elizabeth Kolbert's *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* is a groundbreaking work of environmental journalism that documents the ongoing mass extinction event driven by human activity. Kolbert situates her narrative within the



context of the Anthropocene—a proposed geological epoch characterized by the dominance of human influence over the earth's systems.

Kolbert writes, “One-third of all reef-building corals, a third of all freshwater mollusks, a third of sharks and rays, a quarter of all mammals, a fifth of all reptiles, and a sixth of all birds are headed toward oblivion” (Kolbert 17). The scale and speed of these losses are unprecedented in the history of life on earth, rivaling the five previous mass extinctions caused by natural catastrophes.

### **3.2. Human Agency and Ecological Disruption**

A central argument of Kolbert's book is that humans have become a geological force, capable of reshaping the planet's climate, chemistry, and biological diversity. She observes, “We are deciding, without quite meaning to, which evolutionary pathways will remain open and which will forever be closed” (Kolbert 266). This recognition of human agency is both empowering and sobering, highlighting the ethical responsibilities that come with such power.

Kolbert's narrative is informed by meticulous scientific research and on-the-ground reporting. She travels to biodiversity hotspots, interviews scientists, and witnesses firsthand the disappearance of species and habitats. Through vivid storytelling, she conveys the urgency of the crisis and the stakes involved in preserving the planet's remaining biodiversity.

### **3.3. Challenging Anthropocentrism and Advocating for Biodiversity**

Kolbert's work challenges the anthropocentric worldview that places human interests above those of other species. She writes, “The history of life thus consists of ‘long periods of boredom interrupted occasionally by panic’” (Kolbert 94). By situating the current extinction event within the broader narrative of life's history, Kolbert invites readers to reflect on the contingency and fragility of existence.

Her call to action is clear: “The Sixth Extinction will continue to play out, and perhaps accelerate, as long as people fail to recognize their role in it” (Kolbert 261). Kolbert advocates for a shift in consciousness, urging society to value biodiversity not only for its utilitarian benefits but also for its intrinsic worth.

### **3.4. The Limits of Technological Solutions**

While Kolbert acknowledges the potential of technological innovation to mitigate environmental harm, she remains skeptical of techno-optimism as a panacea. She writes, “There's a kind of hubris in believing that we can fix what we have broken, that we can engineer our way out of the crisis” (Kolbert 228). Instead, she emphasizes the need for humility, restraint, and a willingness to accept limits.

Kolbert's analysis resonates with the broader critique of modernity articulated by Ming-Yi and Kimmerer. All three authors caution against the dangers of unchecked growth and advocate for a more balanced and respectful relationship with the natural world.

## **4. The Synergy of Indigenous Wisdom and Scientific Knowledge**

### **4.1. Integrating Diverse Epistemologies**

A recurring theme in the works of Ming-Yi, Kimmerer, and Kolbert is the need to integrate indigenous wisdom with scientific knowledge. As Kimmerer asserts, “Both indigenous and scientific perspectives are necessary for a full understanding of the world. Science polishes the gift of seeing, indigenous traditions work with the gifts of listening and learning from the land” (Kimmerer 47).

This integration is not without challenges. The legacy of colonialism, cultural erasure, and epistemic injustice has often marginalized indigenous voices in environmental discourse. However, as Johnson notes, “The inclusion of indigenous perspectives enriches our understanding of environmental sustainability and offers alternative models of coexistence” (Johnson 2016).



#### **4.2. Case Studies in Collaborative Stewardship**

The authors provide numerous examples of collaborative stewardship that draw on both indigenous and scientific knowledge. Ming-Yi's depiction of Wayo Wayo's ecological practices, Kimmerer's accounts of traditional agriculture and restoration, and Kolbert's documentation of community-based conservation efforts all illustrate the potential for synergy.

For instance, Kimmerer describes the restoration of wild rice beds in partnership with indigenous communities and scientists: "The knowledge of elders and the data of ecologists come together to guide the work, honoring both tradition and innovation" (Kimmerer 256). Such collaborations demonstrate that sustainability is not a one-size-fits-all solution but a dynamic process that adapts to local contexts and cultural values.

#### **4.3. Education and the Transmission of Ecological Knowledge**

Education emerges as a crucial tool for fostering environmental consciousness and bridging epistemological divides. Kimmerer emphasizes the importance of teaching children to "speak the language of the land," to recognize the names and stories of plants, animals, and ecosystems (Kimmerer 61). Similarly, Ming-Yi's narrative underscores the role of storytelling in preserving ecological memory and inspiring action.

Kolbert highlights the significance of public awareness and scientific literacy in mobilizing support for conservation: "The fate of the world's species depends, in large part, on the choices we make and the values we hold" (Kolbert 265). By promoting dialogue between different knowledge systems, education can cultivate a sense of shared responsibility and empower individuals to participate in environmental stewardship.

### **5. Environmental Literature as a Catalyst for Change**

#### **5.1. The Power of Narrative**

Literature has long served as a catalyst for social and cultural transformation. The works of Ming-Yi, Kimmerer, and Kolbert exemplify the capacity of narrative to shape perceptions, inspire empathy, and galvanize action. As Smith observes, "Contemporary authors have embraced a nuanced approach, delving into the multifaceted dimensions of environmental degradation, biodiversity preservation, and the pivotal role played by indigenous wisdom in shaping sustainable coexistence" (Smith 2020).

Through vivid imagery, compelling characters, and evocative language, these authors make abstract environmental issues tangible and immediate. Their stories invite readers to imagine alternative futures, to question dominant paradigms, and to envision new possibilities for coexistence.

#### **5.2. Fostering Empathy and Ethical Engagement**

One of the most significant contributions of environmental literature is its ability to foster empathy—not only for other humans but for the entire web of life. Kimmerer writes, "To love a place is not enough. We must find ways to heal it" (Kimmerer 318). This ethic of care extends beyond individual action to encompass collective responsibility and systemic change.

Ming-Yi's portrayal of grief, resilience, and hope in the face of ecological loss resonates with readers on an emotional level, prompting reflection on their own relationships with the natural world. Kolbert's meticulous documentation of extinction elicits a sense of urgency and moral obligation.

#### **5.3. Inspiring Collective Action**

Ultimately, the goal of environmental literature is not merely to raise awareness but to inspire action. As Kolbert asserts, "The fate of the world's species depends, in large part, on the choices we make and the values we hold" (Kolbert 265). The works examined in this paper serve as calls to action, urging readers to recognize their agency and to participate in the ongoing project of environmental stewardship.

The integration of indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge, and literary imagination offers a powerful framework for addressing the complex challenges of the Anthropocene. By fostering dialogue, empathy, and ethical engagement, environmental literature can help to cultivate a more just, resilient, and sustainable world.





## II. CONCLUSION

The exploration of environmental sustainability in the works of Wu Ming-Yi, Robin Wall Kimmerer, and Elizabeth Kolbert reveals the profound potential of literature to illuminate, critique, and transform humanity's relationship with the natural world. Through their distinctive lenses, these authors interrogate the causes and consequences of ecological crisis, celebrate the resilience of indigenous wisdom, and advocate for a more inclusive and reciprocal approach to environmental stewardship.

Ming-Yi's *The Man with the Compound Eyes* situates local struggles within a global context, highlighting the interconnectedness of ecological crises and the importance of world environmental citizenship. Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* weaves together indigenous and scientific knowledge, offering practical insights and ethical guidance for sustainable living. Kolbert's *The Sixth Extinction* confronts readers with the reality of mass extinction and the ethical imperatives of the Anthropocene.

Together, these works transcend the boundaries of literature and geography, fostering a deeper understanding of our role as stewards of the earth. As we confront the challenges of climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental injustice, their insights offer a beacon of hope and a roadmap for action. The tapestry they weave-of narrative, knowledge, and wisdom-invites us all to participate in the ongoing work of healing and sustaining the planet.

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