

Gender-Specific Relationships with Nature in Terry Tempest Williams's *Refuge*

Cheri Molter

Dr. Kelly Walter Carney

Department of English and Writing

Terry Tempest Williams discusses her relationship with the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge and the lessons she has learned about life from the creatures who call the refuge their home in her book *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*. Often in *Refuge*, Williams portrays the relationships between men and nature, and between women and nature differently. By analyzing this story from the ecofeminist point of view, one can ascertain the significance of these contrasting portrayals and the continuous undercurrent of social criticism implied. Consistent with ecofeminist philosophy, Williams depicts most men as active, controlling, polluting, or attempting to exert dominance over the land, while many of the women in her tale are simply learning from nature, adding to its glory, melding with it, or protecting it.

If one is to fully understand the significance of Williams's representations of nature, one needs to understand ecofeminist theory. In order to discuss ecofeminist theory, which is an engendered view, one must have an understanding of what is meant by the word "gender." In her article "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," Joan Scott writes, "[G]ender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and...a primary way of signifying relationships of power" (1067). Thus, gender refers to the socially constructed restrictions on the behavior of both males and females. Institutionalized patriarchal ideology is maintained "through a ramified series of interrelated dualisms," such as man/woman, reason/emotion, and culture/nature (Garb 271). In each of these dualisms, women are assigned the attributes men do not want for themselves; in fact, for too many years, a man's masculinity was diminished or threatened if he was considered similar to a woman (271). Feminist philosophy attempts to examine these dualisms and dispel the myths and stereotypes they propagate, creating a more egalitarian society in which to live. In his article "Perspective or Escape? Ecofeminist Musings on Contemporary Earth Imagery," Yaakov Jerome Garb states, "[E]cofeminism is beginning to examine and challenge the ways in which our relationship toward the Earth and nature is shaped by this web of [gendered] oppositional categories" (271). Carolyn Merchant, the author of "Ecofeminism and

Feminist Theory,” maintains that there are three types of ecofeminists: liberal, radical, and socialist (100). Merchant explains:

Liberal feminism is consistent with the objectives of reform environmentalism to alter human relations with nature through the passage of new laws and regulations. Radical ecofeminism...is a response to the perception that women and nature have been mutually associated and devalued in Western culture and that both can be elevated and liberated through direct political action. ...Socialist ecofeminism grounds its analysis in capitalist patriarchy and would totally restructure, through a socialist revolution, the domination of women and nature inherent in the market economy’s use of both as resources. (100-1)

In *Refuge*, Williams takes the approach of a radical ecofeminist who sometimes leans toward more socialist ideals. This is evident in the language she uses and her representations of nature.

In the first few pages of *Refuge*, Williams “analyzes environmental problems from within the critique of patriarchy,” revealing her radical ecofeminist perspective in a documented conversation with her friend from Oregon, Sandy Lopez (100). Williams writes, “We spoke of rage. Of women and landscape. How our bodies and the body of the earth have been mined” (10). Furthermore, Lopez stipulates that “[m]en have forgotten what they are connected to....Subjugation of women and nature may be a loss of intimacy within themselves” (10). Men’s disconnect with nature is evident in the book; Williams suggests that the men in her world are uncomfortable with the notion of solitude and, in effect, rape the land (10-11, 284-290).

The linguistic interconnections between nature and gender are significant in Williams’s writing as well. Language shapes and reflects one’s concept of oneself and the world. Therefore, language that compares women and animals, or feminizes nature—stressing women’s inferiority to men in a patriarchal culture—is particularly damaging if it is accepted without question. Williams shares a Mormon scripture that contains gendered language to describe the earth, sun, and moon, a passage that caters to a male audience:

*The **earth** rolls upon **her** wings, and the **sun** giveth **his** light by day, and the **moon** giveth **her** light by night, and the stars also give their light, as they roll upon their wings in their glory, in the midst of the power of God. Unto what shall I liken these kingdoms that ye may understand? Behold all these are kingdoms and any **man** who hath seen any or the least of these hath seen **God** moving in **his** majesty and power.* (Williams 149, quoting the Mormon Doctrines and Covenants 88:45-47, boldface added)

The dualisms between “matter/spirit, body/mind...darkness/light, [and] evil/good” influence the manner in which men have assigned gender to these different components of the world, assisting in the maintenance of a gendered imbalance of power (Garb 271). In this scripture, God has been gendered as a male because men

prefer to empower themselves through their “likeness” with the Supreme Being, thereby reasoning that their dominance over all is “natural” or inherent. In male-dominated cultures, the spirit is assumed to be better than matter, so, while God is considered masculine, the earth is feminized and, as such, relegated to a position of subordination to be maintained or controlled by the men who walk all over “her.” In contrast, the sun is referred to as masculine: light is good and therefore manly. The moon, only able to offer a reflection of the productive, active sun, is labeled female. Since darkness is also associated with evil and the moon is actually dark without the sun, it is not surprising that it is assigned femininity. Despite the naturalization of gendered language used to maintain the degradation and subordination of women, Williams nurtures a healthy relationship with her environment along with an awareness of and desire to expose the institutionalized inequality. Furthermore, Williams appropriates this use of gendered language in *Refuge* to empower womankind, embracing women’s union with the land. She writes, “There are dunes beyond Fish Springs. . . . Wind swirls around the sand and ribs appear. . . . And they are female. Sensuous curves—the small of a woman’s back. Breasts. Buttocks. Hips and pelvis. They are the natural shapes of Earth. Let me lie naked and disappear” (109). Williams’s description of the dunes as female is respectful, inspiring, primal, and empowering in its portrayal of the strength and endurance of femininity.

Williams’s personal representation of nature is as a place of discovery, restoration, adaptation, and independence from societal expectations. In particular, she emphasizes her kinship with the Bird Refuge, its ability to provide her respite from the



THE HERON.

The Heron. In Harrison Weir (1824-1906), *Bird Tales*, 1889.

demands of familial and societal obligations, and the lessons she learns from witnessing the birds’ ingenuity and adaptability as they cope with the flooding of their homes. Williams writes, “The losses I encountered at the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge as Great Salt Lake was rising helped me to face the losses within my family. When most people had given up on the Refuge, saying the birds were gone, I was drawn further into its essence. In the same way that when someone is dying many retreat, I chose to stay” (3-4). Given the author’s obvious love for her family and the Refuge, in the title of the book, “refuge” refers to not only the literal Bird Refuge but also the peaceful sanctuary the natural environment in general offers her; it is her “safe-zone” that is threatened by rising water.

In *Refuge*, nature is represented in several different ways. One such way is in Williams’s personal relationship with the Bird Refuge, which is endangered due to

flooding. Williams explains the Refuge's importance to her, stating, "The days I loved most were the days at Bear River. The Bird Refuge was a sanctuary for my grandmother and me. . . . We would walk along the road with binoculars around our necks and simply watch birds" (15). Later, throughout her book, Williams explores two situations continuously: how the different species of birds who call the place home are adapting to the changes in their environment, and how she is coping with the news of her mother's illness and impending death. The changes in the environment and the changes in the health of Williams's mother become one, as Williams illustrates: "The pulse of Great Salt Lake, surging along Antelope Island's shores, becomes the force wearing against my mother's body. . . . The light changes, Antelope Island is blue. Mother awakened and I looked away. Antelope Island is no longer accessible to me. It is my mother's body floating in uncertainty" (64). As a result of this melding of what is happening in the Refuge and her feelings about her mother's cancer, Williams's natural surroundings have an active role in her tale, but, unlike herself, men in general relate on a much less emotional level with nature.

With the possible exception of her husband Brook, Williams depicts all men as actively dominating over the land, either searching for personal gain from the natural environment or attempting to control it. In contrast, Williams describes women as having a less manipulative relationship with nature; they observe it, learn from it, interact with it in a symbiotic manner, or find comfort in just being in a natural setting. For example, Williams writes, "My father would take the boys rabbit hunting while Mother and I would sit on a log in an aspen grove and talk. She would tell me stories of how when she was a girl she would paint red lips on the trunks of trees to practice kissing. Or how she would lie in her grandmother's Lucerne patch and watch clouds" (14-15). Williams describes her father and brothers as actively attempting to dominate their surroundings by violence—the killing of rabbits—taking whatever they desire from the land while she and her mother enjoy the ambience of the aspen grove and Williams's mother shares stories about watching clouds and kissing trees. Offering observations from her own life, Williams juxtaposes how men interact with nature with the manner in which she and other women relate with their environment.

Terry Tempest Williams is not the only environmentalist who discusses the gendered differences in how people behave in rural settings. In the 1800s, Transcendentalist author Henry David Thoreau wrote about his experiences living in the natural surroundings of Walden Pond, and though he writes from a male perspective, his observations are consistent with those of Williams. In *Walden*, Henry Thoreau states,

Girls and boys and young women...seemed glad to be in the woods. They looked in the pond and at the flowers, and improved their time. Men of business, even farmers, thought only of solitude and employment, and of the great distance at which I dwelt from something or other; and though they said that they loved a ramble in the woods occasionally, it was obvious that they did not. (103)

Thus, even Thoreau, a Transcendentalist who leaves an urban area in order to become one with Walden Pond for two years, notices the imbalance between the manners in

which women and men interact with nature. It is obvious that Williams and her mother easily “improved their time” during their moments in the woods and at the Great Salt Lake together (103).

Williams also represents nature as a place of solitude, which the women of her family value more openly than the men. Although Thoreau mentions that men “thought of solitude,” it is apparent that the men to whom Thoreau refers were generally more worried about forced solitude, more uncomfortable with their surroundings than with the idea of seeking solitude (103). According to Williams, women have a need for the solitude that is found in nature; they are the ones who seek unity with the land instead of seeing wilderness as something to be conquered. Williams’s understanding of solitude comes from her mother, Diane Dixon Tempest, who repeatedly tells Williams that she herself has “never known [her] full capacity for solitude,” and Dixon Tempest explains that solitude is “the gift of being alone” (15). As an adult, Williams seems to understand what her mother meant:

I have found my open space, my solitude, and sky. ... There is something unnerving about my solitary travels around the northern stretches of the Great Salt Lake. I am never entirely at ease because I am aware of its will. ... Only the land’s mercy and a calm mind can save my soul. ... Perhaps that is why every pilgrimage to the desert is a pilgrimage to the self. There is no place to hide, and so we are found. (148)

It is this representation of nature as a “wilderness [that] courts our souls” that reveals the disconnect that has occurred in the relationships between men and nature while it emphasizes the strength of the union between the matriarchs of Williams’s family, including the author herself, and the natural world around them (148). The women have found a core of strength within themselves through the gift of solitude in the wild.

It is that core of strength that enables these Utah women to endure the illnesses, procedures, and operations necessary because of the irresponsible, disastrous decisions made by the predominantly male politicians during the 1950s—the implementation of above-ground atomic testing that took place in Nevada from January 27, 1951, through July 11, 1962 (Williams 283). The irony of subtling her book *An Unnatural History of Family and Place* hints at the friction between civilization and nature, acknowledging that the histories of both her family and her home state are “unnatural,” forever marred by the irresponsible behavior of humankind. In the last chapter of *Refuge*, titled “The Clan of One Breasted Women,” Williams, in congruence with Merchant’s descriptions of a radical feminist, “argue[s] that male-designed and produced technologies neglect the effects of nuclear radiation... on women’s reproductive organs and on the ecosystem” (Merchant 102). Williams declares herself a member of the Clan of One-Breasted Women because her “mother, grandmothers and six aunts have all had mastectomies,” and she has had to have two biopsies for breast cancer and already has one tumor that has been “diagnosed as ‘borderline malignancy’” (Williams 281). The club’s name is an empowering twist on the horrifying realities these women face. Due to their exposure to the radiation from the atomic testing, many of these women will die of malignant tumors after having their breasts removed. The Clan

of One-Breasted Women alludes to the Amazons of Greek myth, women who removed one of their breasts so that they could more easily use weapons, enhancing their ability to defeat their opponents—men—in battle (Strabo XVI, ch. 5). After allowing her readers to connect with her on a very personal level, as well as connecting with her mother and grandmothers through reflection, Williams concludes *Refuge* on an activist note, asserting that “[t]he price of [women’s] obedience is too high” (286). After remaining silent about the Atomic Energy Commission’s deceitful pamphlets and the many injustices done to the families who lived in the rural communities of Utah, Williams states, “Tolerating blind obedience in the name of patriotism or religion ultimately takes our lives” (286). Williams’s unity with and desire to protect the land are obvious, and she builds her credibility as an intelligent, rational, stable individual before introducing her readers to the scene of her non-violent protest against atomic testing. Williams’s multiple representations of nature converge to one important, radical ecofeminist message in that last chapter: “The time had come to protest with the heart, that to deny one’s genealogy with the earth was to commit treason against one’s soul” (288). The message is ungendered; the fates of men and women alike are connected to the fate of the earth: to abuse nature is to abuse ourselves. Armed with her pen and paper, Williams is “soul-centered and strong” as she attempts to “reclaim the desert for our children” (289-90).

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