

I Am Wild:

An Ecofeminist Reading of Terry Tempest Williams's *Refuge* and Mary Oliver's Poetry

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The natural world plays an active role both in Terry Tempest Williams's *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* and the poetry of Mary Oliver. Williams's deeply felt and affectionate unity with the land informs her desire to protect it. Her beliefs that women have a particular bond with nature and that land also has its own life make up the core of her politics. Williams frames her identity inside the context of her environment, finding strength through intimacy with wildness and place. Similarly, Oliver's intimacy with the natural world helps her answer essential questions of life and death, and philosophical questions about the meaning of the world's beauty. The use of natural imagery supports Oliver's understanding of the world and of herself. The poet's connection of nature with her own ideas, emotions, and body forms an authentic vehicle for her exploration of her sense of self and of meaningful ways of being in the world. Comparing the work of Williams and Oliver in the light of ecofeminism, we see their connection with the natural world emerge as a means of empowerment.

The idea of women connecting to nature can be discussed in the most relevant and meaningful way through the lens of ecofeminism: the theory that links women and nature. Ecofeminist activist and scholar Greta Gaard states that the main premise of ecofeminism "is that the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature" (1). There are multiple perspectives within ecofeminism that attempt to explain the shift from a worldview of reverence for women and nature, of all life being interconnected, to a conceptualization of women and nature as subordinate objects, a "world-view based on separation" (Gaard & Gruen 7). One of the lenses of ecofeminism observes how Western culture came to describe the world in terms of "self-other" -- value dualisms, false dichotomies. Some are: man/woman, white/nonwhite, human/animal, civilized/wild, and reason/emotion. "Domination is built into such dualisms because the other is negated in the process of defining a powerful self," explains Gaard and professor Lori Gruen, who is also engaged in activism and scholarship on environmental justice and feminism. The privileged self is always "male," leading to the creation of "value hierarchies" (5). Hence, according to environmental philosopher, activist, and ecofeminist Val Plumwood, the way men are often perceived as being superior to women is interrelated with the way civilization is often seen as being superior to the wild. In general, humans view themselves as superior to the natural environment, making patriarchy the "villain behind the ecological crisis" (Plumwood 11). The core goal of ecofeminism is to eradicate these patriarchal structures that are responsible for the degradation of both women and nature.

In ecofeminism, the woman/nature connection is strongly associated with patriarchal oppression. Plumwood states that (non-eco-) feminists also observe this association. They

emphatically reject the idea of unity of the feminine and the natural, believing that connecting nature with femininity is always "regressive and insulting" (20). According to Plumwood, feminists "view the traditional connection between women and nature as no more than an instrument of oppression, a relic of patriarchy," and judge that the focus must be shifted away from this connection and toward women's rights (20-21). The remarks of Dr. Andrea O'Reilly, feminist writer and professor of Women's Studies, align with this argument: "The earth is depicted (both currently and historically) in feminized terms, and this descriptive language is complex and fraught with ambivalence: nature is portrayed as fertile, nurturing, and protective (stereotypically maternal); sexualized and seductive (as observed and possessed by men); and wild, dark, and dangerous (needing to be tamed and civilized)." This type of language that treats women and nature like objects to be controlled, exploited, "tamed," and "civilized" effectively leads to their patriarchal domination, O'Reilly explains. After recognizing this as truth, Plumwood calls for a new ecological feminism where "women *consciously* position themselves *with* nature" (21). She posits that there can be real, positive value in women reclaiming their unity with the natural world.

Thus, for ecofeminists such as Plumwood, the women/nature connection does not by definition have to result in mutual oppression for women and nature. If approached "*consciously*," more positive things can result. This idea can form the basis of an analysis of Terry Tempest Williams's *Refuge*, which portrays the female protagonist/narrator's relationship with nature as a necessary and authentic medium for healing and strength.

Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place recounts the author's struggle to reconcile herself with her mother's eventual death from breast cancer, which she believes was caused by the nuclear weapons testing that took place in Utah in the 1950s. This family story interweaves with the story of the flooding of Great Salt Lake threatening a place that had become essential to her family's experience. At the heart of the memoir is its geographic center, the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge. Williams tells us that this wildlife sanctuary has "remained a constant." For her, "it is a landscape so familiar" that, at times, she has "felt a species long before [she] saw it." Her and the birds there "share a natural history." She explains that this "is a matter of rootedness, of living inside a place for so long that the mind and imagination fuse" (21). This unity that Williams senses with the wildlife here is grounded in family – it goes back to the days of her childhood, bird watching with her grandmother at the Refuge. "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).

This connection is disturbed, however, when Great Salt Lake rises drastically, dramatically changing the refuge. Many species are forced out of the now inhospitable area. Simultaneously, Williams' mother struggles with the cancer that will eventually take her life. Williams draws frequent parallels between the deteriorating health of her family and the destruction of the wild. She observes: "I could not separate the Bird Refuge from my family. Devastation respects no boundaries. The landscape of my childhood and the landscape of my family, two things I had always regarded as bedrock, were now subject to change. Quicksand" (40). About the Great Salt Lake, she remarks, "I

could have never anticipated its rise." Similarly, her mother was now "aware of a rise on the left side of her abdomen" (22). She asks herself and her readers, "How does one find refuge in change?" (119). The story is driven by this question -- by her search for a way to remain rooted and strong without being metaphorically swept away. Williams's answer lies in her connection with the land.

Rather than being distanced from the land, Williams considers herself a part of it. In her essay, "Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination," Leslie Marmon Silko speaks to this concept of intimate identification with the land when she explains the ancient Pueblo Indian belief that "[t]he land, the sky, and all that is within them -- the landscape -- includes human beings" (1006). Both authors find power and hope in the very identification with nature that many feminists see as insulting: in a relatively similar way to Silko, Williams sees the earth's body as her own. Some might view the way she describes the earth here as erotic; however, it is not an eroticism that is meant to be debasing or commercially appealing, but instead authentic and empowering. She writes, "There is musculature in dunes. 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). Although dunes are technically objects, she does not objectify women in the usual degrading sense. Instead, by equating femininity with the powerful, timeless force of the dunes, she circumvents the previously-mentioned "value hierarchies," or false dichotomies, in which the most powerful "self" is always something that's 'male' and thus non- 'nature'-based (Gaard & Gruen 5). In her article, "Gender-Specific Relationships with Nature in Terry Tempest Williams' *Refuge*," Cheri Molter asserts that by "embracing" the unity of the natural and the feminine in this way, Williams "empower[s] womankind" (21). Furthermore, Molter argues that "[d]espite 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." In an interview with Scott London, Williams explains this personal relationship with nature as "intimacy with the land" (3). She states later on, "...the only thing that can bring us into a place of fullness is being out in the land with *other*. Then we remember where the source of our power lies" (5). She believes that pursuing unity with the natural world teaches us how to live fully and with "power."

For Williams, this identification with nature is not just conceptual and personal, it is political. Her linking of women with land situates both as victims of patriarchy: "[O]ur bodies and the body of the earth have been mined" (10). However, the author actively resists this power structure's oppression of the feminine and the land (the feminine land). Her radical identification with the landscape provides a philosophical framework of resistance from which ecofeminists could draw inspiration when she declares, "I am desert. I am mountains. I am Great Salt Lake" (29). By actively connecting with nature, she is able to see past the false dichotomies that separate out human from land, male from female, civilized from wild. "I want to see the lake as Woman, as myself, in her refusal to be tamed" (92). In her unification with the land, she resists domination.

Women and the landscape are portrayed as inextricably linked in *Refuge* due to their shared position in regards to patriarchy. The second key factor that links the feminine and the land in the

author's mind is her own upbringing. Essential to the strength of the women in her family is their deeply felt connection to the land: "We are no more and no less than the life that surrounds us" (29). William's belief that intimacy with the land leads to our strength comes from her mother, who tells her that "I have never known my full capacity for solitude" (15), and how at an early point in her cancer she "just needed to get away, to be reminded by the desert of who I am and who I am not. The exposed geologic layers in the redrock mirror the depths within myself" (136). The Williams women find a source of inner power within their relationship to the land. This is crucial to the story, as it helps them to endure the constant presence of cancer. Conflictingly, their love of this land is also what will lead to their painful deaths. As we know, the Great Basin is contaminated by nuclear fallout. The Williams women's perception of their deep connection with the landscape comes with the tense realization that they and the land both face (similar) terrorization.

Williams suggests that some men aren't comfortable with such intimacy with nature, are disconnected from the land, and therefore end up destroying the environment. "We spoke of rage. Of women and landscape. How our bodies and the body of the earth have been mined. 'It has everything to do with intimacy,' I said." Her friend stipulates, "Men have forgotten what they are connected to. ... Subjugation of women and nature may be a loss of intimacy within themselves" (10). According to Carolyn Merchant, this "loss of intimacy" is a result of the scientific revolution, which shifted our worldview from recognizing and celebrating the aliveness of nature to viewing nature "as a machine," as "dead" and "inert," an object to be experimented on and analyzed (Gaard & Gruen 4). To treat nature like an object is to prevent a close, give-and-take, egalitarian relationship, such as the one the Williams women maintain with the animals and the land by loving and respecting it as a place of solitude.

By the middle of the memoir, Williams fully understands the power of the solitude her mother had spoken of. Here, she sees it as something transformative, something that allows you to be at home where you are and reclaim your identity: "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. ...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). As Williams searches for an intimate connection with the land, she finds an intimate connection to her self-determination. Connection to the land is a source of her resilience.

Williams' personal relationship with the landscape also helps her to find strength in another way: by teaching her to adapt by abandoning control. Her beloved birds stir in her the realization that she cannot predict change, but must adapt and grow despite change. In an attempt to "create divine order out of chaos," Williams goes to the lake for "a compass reading, to orient [her]self once again in the midst of change" (196, 75). While she and the Great Salt Lake are both changing, her connection with it is a constant. "[The] Refuge is not a place outside of myself. Like the lone heron who walks the shores of Great Salt Lake, I am adapting as the world is adapting" (267). As she watches the remaining species of birds in the area adapt to their fluctuating habitat to survive, Williams learns to adapt too, in order to cope with her mother's impending death. She observes how

"[t]he hostility of this landscape teaches me ... how to find grace," how, "in the face of stressful intrusions, we can eventually settle in."

Williams's refusal to believe that the natural environment is "a place outside of" herself and insistence that no boundaries between the Refuge and herself exist is what allows her to "settle in" to the changes, accept the inevitability of her mother's death, and relinquish her need for a return to stability. She eventually recognizes that her desire for her mother to "be cured" and go back to normal is a denial of her mother's life (76). She has learned from Great Salt Lake that being rooted in a place requires one to be committed to change and adaptation. "The heartbeats I felt in the womb -- two heartbeats, at once, my mother's and my own -- are heartbeats of the land" (85). Therefore, being rooted in a family requires one to accept a similar instability. To resist it "stops us from listening" (76). "Today, I feel stronger," she observes, "learning to live within the natural cycles of a day" (136). In letting go and giving herself over to the cycles of nature, she finds resilience.

The consequences of resisting this intimate knowledge of the landscape are apparent in the women's cancers. The cancer is the result of a worldview that looked at the Great Basin and saw nothing but a decent place for nuclear waste. Due to the exposure of the radiation from the nuclear testing, Williams's mother, grandmothers, and six aunts "have all had mastectomies," and she herself has had "two biopsies for breast cancer" with one tumor already diagnosed as a "'borderline malignancy'" (281). To Williams, the repercussions of alienating oneself from the landscape are tangible and real -- they are directly played out on women's reproductive organs and the environment. "'The hollow eggs translated into hollow wombs. The Earth is not well and neither are we. I saw the health of the planet as our own.' ... 'It's all related,' she said. 'I feel certain'" (262-263). She recognizes that the power that tries to keep the land in subjugation is the same power that tries to keep women's bodies in subjugation.

Her response to this injustice is civil disobedience. In the closing chapter of the memoir, titled "The Clan of the One-Breasted Women," Williams enters the Nevada Test Site to protest the nuclear testing, "to protest with the heart, that to deny one's genealogy with the earth is to commit treason against one's soul." She and the other arrested protesters are put on a bus and let out short of the nearest town. "The officials thought it was a cruel joke to leave us stranded in the desert with no way to get home. What they didn't realize was that we were home, soul-centered and strong, women who recognized the sweet smell of sage as fuel for our spirits" (290). Williams has lived through women's mental and physical suffering caused by the tests of atomic bombs, and by asserting her oneness with the earth, she rebels against this horrific and unnecessary suffering. And so, intimacy with the land emerges as the root of her politics, as her way of resistance. She is a woman acting against ecological destruction, aware of the connection between patriarchal violence against women and against nature. "As women, we hold the moon in our bellies," she asserts (136). From her experience as a woman, she has a deep and particular understanding of this specific violence.

At the end of the memoir, Williams has adapted to change, survived loss, and fought against patriarchal power over her body, the bodies of the women in her family, and the Salt Desert land. Her intimate relationship with the natural environment has helped her to navigate both her mother's journey and her own. In the closing chapter, Williams's unity with the land culminates into one empowering ecofeminist message: She is "soul-centered and strong" as she attempts to "reclaim the desert for the sake of their children, for the sake of the land" (290, 287). She has resisted the patriarchal discourses that legitimize oppressive, hierarchal power structures by reclaiming her connection to nature, not rejecting it. She is an advocate for the liberation of women *and* nature, rather than the liberation of women *from* nature, in concurrence with Plumwood's new ecological feminism.

We can also approach the poetry of Mary Oliver from Plumwood's ecofeminist standpoint. In the process, we uncover the core power of Oliver's communion with the nature. In consonance with Williams, Oliver treats every aspect of the natural world as if it has her same soul -- as if no barriers between herself and the natural world exist. Also similarly to Williams, this is what allows her to feel the elemental source of her power, which contradicts the feminist argument that women's connection with nature can only be an insulting reminder of patriarchy.

In "Some Questions You Might Ask," Oliver asks questions regarding the nature of her soul. Is it "solid, like iron?" Or is it easily destructible, like "the wings of a moth in the beak of an owl?" She wonders whether the soul's shape is that of "an iceberg," or "the eye of a hummingbird." She presents a supposition about her soul's anatomy: Like "the snake and the scallop," does it contain only "one lung"? Does she have ownership over it? Why doesn't "the anteater," "the maple trees," "all the little stones," the "roses," and "the grass" have her soul? (65). In so scrupulously considering the idea that her human soul and the souls of all other earthly creatures have no difference between them, she adopts an unconventional, expanded outlook on herself that adds depth and meaning to her life experience. Furthermore, she engages in a radical process of self-definition that enacts what Plumwood advocated. She is reclaiming her connection with nature and redefining it as something very empowering -- even spiritual and sacred. By lavishing her artistic attention on something as basic to nature as "the grass," and thus elevating it, she also elevates herself. In the same vein, the way that she doesn't just write poems about the most spectacular, exquisite parts of nature, but also the humble (not stereotypically beautiful) parts of nature, is empowering to women.

Likewise, in "The Summer Day," Oliver personifies a grasshopper when she refers to it as a "her," suggesting an equivalent value between the grasshopper and herself. Both she and the grasshopper do things with care and intention -- the grasshopper eats "sugar out of my hand" and "thoroughly washes her face," while Oliver knows "how to pay attention, how to fall down/ into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass." By elevating the grasshopper to her own level in the hierarchy of things, she dismisses her traditional Western upbringing. The associated patriarchal norms, such as that nature is sinful and should be dominated, civilized, dismissed, or kept hidden (stigma around breastfeeding, taboo to talk about menstruation, girls taught to feel body shame, etc.) can obviously be destructive towards women. Considering creation in this way, by looking closely at

a grasshopper and observing how it is a reflection of herself, is also what helps the poet come to the revelation at the end of the poem: A life lived close to nature is instead worth protecting with care and intimately experiencing to the fullest; the power of life is extreme (94). This poem discards patriarchal patterns, emphasizing instead the narrator's oneness with the world.

In "White Night," Oliver moves from identifying with an individual aspect of nature, like a grasshopper, to a wider, broader definition of nature. In this poem, she explores her longing to return to a maternal environment through her own body and senses: "I want to flow out/ across the mother/ of all waters,/ I want to lose myself/ on the black/ and silky currents." Immersed in the world of night, floating "in the shallow ponds," she wants to stay cemented there, "yawning,/ gathering/ the tall lilies/ of sleep." However, she knows that the other world, the "difficult/ and beautiful" world of day, will inevitably come and interrupt (163). In this poem, she is investigating her desires, as well as exploring what it means to be herself, beyond restrictions and limits. Similarly, in "The Sea," her "body remembers that life and cries for the lost parts of itself--/ fins, gills/ opening like flowers..." Though Oliver doesn't specify what "that life" is exactly, one might guess she alludes to the same water-mother as in "White Night" and speaks of a pre-human, more free-flowing existence. She references a divine feminine, the basis of all life and the starting point for all evolution: "Sprawled in that motherlap,/ in that dreamhouse/ of salt and exercise,/ what a spillage/ of nostalgia pleads/ from the very bones!" (172). Again, she is radically expanding her definition of herself. "Sprawled," "spillage," and "exercise" are all word choices that reinforce this sense of actively expanding outwards.

Unlike in "White Night" and "The Sea," where she utilizes words like "want," "cries for," and "long to," desiring isn't involved in "Sleeping in the Forest." Rather than wishing she could, in this poem she skips straight to actually doing it: imaginatively transforming into the fluid consciousness, "as if in water," nothing separating her from "the white fire of the stars." She "thought the earth remembered" her, which begins this process (181). In "White Flowers," Oliver again rejects any wistful verbs of desire. Instead, even though they are in the past tense, her strong verbs make the poem feel immediate. She describes her experience in the fields as if it were a real event that took place. First, she explains what someone may have seen if they had stood above her and observed her: "I lay down," "I fell asleep," "I woke," "I was covered/ with blossoms." Then, she presents two possibilities for what really happened to her: Either "my body went diving down/ under the sugary vines/ in some sleep-sharpened affinity," or "that green energy/ rose like a wave/ and curled over me, claiming me." One thing she knows for sure is that "Never in my life had I felt so plush,/ or so slippery,/ or so resplendently empty. Never in my life/ had I felt myself so near/ that porous line/ where my body was done with and the roots and flowers began" (58). Plumwood would approve of this empowering ecofeminist concept. The poet's merging with the earth causes her to become more rooted in herself, by entering into her most true, powerful, authentic state: a woman one with everything. In this poem, as well as in "Sleeping in the Forest," "The Sea," and "White Night," Oliver each time investigates meaningful ways to understand her world by stepping outside herself and into a different plane that only exists in nature, which in turn gets her to a place inside of herself that is most authentic.

In her article, "'Into the body of another': Mary Oliver and the poetics of becoming other," Vicki Graham explains Oliver's desire to become a part of the natural world as "mimicry," creating "a cosmic order in which she can cross the boundaries between human and non-human and become another, at least momentarily" (353). Thus, by imaginatively crossing these "boundaries" into nature, Oliver returns to a less domesticated state and finds meaningful ways to exist in the world that challenge the feminist idea that the conceptual association of the feminine with the natural reverses women's progress toward liberating themselves from their domesticated status in patriarchal society. She authenticates Plumwood's radical ecofeminist theory that women consciously linking themselves with nature can create positive outcomes. Just as in her most-loved poem, "Wild Geese," through her radical acts of self-definition, the poet is "announcing" her "place in the family of things." To her, this place, which is rooted in nature, is a source of empowerment.

In brief, through a comparative analysis of the works of Terry Tempest Williams and Mary Oliver, we see that their assertion of their relationship to wildness glows through them. It is power itself. Though the traditional idea of feminine connection with nature has historically been a tool of oppression and still authorizes "the dynamic behind much of the treatment of both women and nature in contemporary society" (Plumwood 21), the works of these two writers implore us to stop, take a step back, and not end the discussion there. They demonstrate that women *can* embrace their ancient identification with nature without accepting the oppressive, outdated identity of less-than-human earth-mothers to be subdued and tamed. They *can* stand up to that unacceptable identification in which the patriarchy has imprisoned them, reclaiming and redefining it in the process. In deliberately and reflectively reconnecting to the unity with the natural world that they so ardently feel, they join forces with nature, and against an oppressive power structure. Ultimately, by showing how all life is interconnected, they effectively reassert their true humanity.

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