

“The Only Girl in the Woods”: Gender in Contemporary Nature Writing¹

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To many readers of Ralph Waldo Emerson, his image of himself walking in the woods, “buoyed up by force of his exhilaration” to “become a transparent eye-ball,” is “the quintessence of Emersonianism.”² Lawrence Buell uses this phrase, so often highlighted by readers, as evidence of his broader claim about Emerson’s intentions: when writing about being one with nature and valuing physical work, his aim is “invigoration of the mind,” valuing “spiritual vigor” over physical exertion in the wilderness (94). According to Emersonian views, nature primarily serves to bring the truth of who our individual selves really are into clearer focus. He writes, “I may yet be wrong; but if the elm-tree thinks the same thing... it must be true.”³ Nature is a proving ground for his thoughts, checking their accuracy, voicing incontrovertible truth. To Emerson, understanding one’s genuine self necessitates seeing and comprehending the truths outside, which requires a removal from one’s particulars. Looking outside can awaken introspection. For many readers, the striking image of the transparent eye-ball is a lasting reminder of what Buell interprets as Emerson’s central theme: “physical nature’s potential to energize the powers of the human mind once we awaken fully to their inherent interdependence” (112).⁴ In fact, Emerson acknowledges the reciprocity of the “occult relation between man and the vegetable,” as “they nod to me, and I to them,” but

¹ Quote in the title is from *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*, by Cheryl Strayed. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012. Print. 111.

² Buell, Lawrence. *Emerson*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard UP, 2003. Print. 92. Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Essays & Lectures*. Comp. Joel Porte. New York: Literary Classics of the U.S., 1983. Print. 10. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *E*.

³ Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Poetry and Imagination." *Emerson: "Poetry and Imagination."* American Transcendentalist Web, n.d. Web. 08 Mar. 2014.

⁴ Of course, Buell’s interpretation of Emerson’s views on the self is one of many. The varied description of selfhood as mental invigoration, genuine introspection, and escape or removal from the self in these pages reflects Emerson’s own descriptive oscillation. His inconsistency with terms describing the self illustrates his interest in exploring the idea, rather than restricting it within one definition.

his view is often interpreted as an impartial, uninfluenced lens, removed from a first person perspective (*E*, 11). Critic Gretchen Legler argues that Emerson believes these mental excursions transcend the personal lens in “a move toward universals, not particulars,” interpreting his metaphor to mean “the eye is transparent or can be, meaning it can be separated from the body and, by implication, generally from all context,” enabling the individual to “see purely, absolutely, objectively, apolitically, and ahistorically.”⁵ To do so, to develop objective impressions and understand the lessons of nature, one must be a transparent eye-ball.

In Emerson’s vision, self-reliance, developed in the wilderness, allows one to move beyond the restricted particulars of the self and access larger truths. This view has permeated how Americans view the wilderness, and the outdoors, for centuries, informing what William Cronon describes as the American “romantic legacy” of wilderness: more of a “state of mind than a fact of nature.”⁶ In modern environmentalist debate, this idea of nature as an escape from the self, interpreting the transparent eye-ball as a way towards rapturous transcendence, contributes to the idea that “wilderness presents itself as the best antidote to our human selves, a refuge we must somehow recover if we hope to save the planet” (69). Presenting the outdoors as “the last remaining place where civilization, that all too human disease, has not fully infected the earth,” the myth of wilderness in America has grown to represent the last frontier where one can

⁵ Legler, Gretchen. "I Am a Transparent Eyeball." *Reading Under the Sign of Nature: New Essays in Ecocriticism*. Ed. John Tallmadge and Henry Harrington. Salt Lake City: University of Utah, 2000. Print. 244, 243.

⁶ Cronon, William. *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*. New York: W.W. Norton &, 1996. Print. 88.

escape the stifling self-awareness and consciousness of humanity.⁷ In this view, Emerson's imagery supports the vision of an idyllic nature entirely removed from the self. But Cronon argues that rather than being an escape from the modern world, nature "is a product of that civilization," dangerous because it has been constructed as the one remaining place outside of it (69). Cronon writes, "as we gaze into the mirror it holds up for us, we too easily imagine that what we behold is Nature when in fact we see the reflection of our own unexamined longings and desires" (69). He sees it as a reflection of the self, and warns of the dangers of not realizing our vision of nature is always self-constructed.

Cronon argues that this separation of nature and humanity is detrimental. When we idealize supposedly untouched wilderness, we are "forgetting the wildness that dwells everywhere within and around us" (89). Patricia Ross argues that the movement to save National Parks after World War I was based on the principle that "we must save these wild spaces so as to save some vestige of our great American selves."⁸ But Cronon points out that this view is detrimental to nature as a whole. "Less sublime landscapes" suffer due to our visions of finding truth in the vistas of Yosemite or Zion: "to this day there is no national park in the grasslands" (73). Cronon articulates a concern central to the modern environmentalist movement, calling for the "reconciliation of humans with their environment," and "the reconception of nature and our relationship to it," beyond "a dualistic vision in which the human being is entirely outside the natural."⁹ The recent

⁷ Cronon, *Uncommon Ground*, 69.

⁸ Ross, Patricia Anne. *The Spell Cast by Remains: The Myth of Wilderness in Modern American Literature*. New York: Routledge, 2006. Print. 7.

⁹ The first two are quotes from the reviews of *Uncommon Ground*, listed in the first few (unnumbered) pages of the book. The first quote is from William Reilly, former

shift of nature writing towards autobiographical narrative encourages the integration of the wild and the human, and the development of personal, everyday relationships with the natural world, as authors use nature as a space to find reflection, rather than objectivity. I will argue that women writers have been especially adept at showing this in their nature writing. Forced to retain particularity and subjectivity in a way distinct from male writers, they have shifted from escaping to the wilderness in an effort to find transcendent universal truths, towards development of personal relationships with nature in pursuit of self-reflection.

Annie Dillard is able to access transcendence of the self through the seemingly trivial experience of petting a puppy. In her afterword to *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, she explains the purpose of her year in the woods memoir, as “using the first person, I tried to be—in Emerson’s ever-ludicrous phrase—a transparent eyeball.”¹⁰ In her encounter with a puppy, Dillard describes her experience moving outside of the confines of the individual. She watches a sunset, observing without thought, as her “mind has been a blank slab of black asphalt for hours,” and her “hand works automatically over the puppy’s fur” (*P*, 79). She describes the sky’s transition breathlessly, in sentence fragments full of vivid verbs: “gold lights” “shatter and glide,” “bosses and hummocks sprout bulging,” “the bare forest folds and pleats” are “wildly scrawling” (*P*, 79). Her ability to express herself becomes less bound within formal grammar when she feels she moves beyond the restrictions of the self. While she maintains her blank mind and

administrator of the EPA, and the second is from Michael Pollan. The last quote is from *Uncommon Ground*, 80.

¹⁰ Dillard, Annie. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. New York: Harper's Magazine, 1974. Print. 283. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *P*.

automatic movements, Dillard has transcended time, “more alive than all the world” (*P*, 79).

But Dillard encounters the problem of a subjective lens: articulating personal experiences unsurprisingly necessitates an individual self, as “the second I verbalize this awareness in my brain, I cease to see the mountain or feel the puppy” (*P*, 80). Her transcendence is fleeting. When she tries to describe it, she imposes her “very self-consciousness” (*P*, 80). Articulating her transcendence for a reader necessitates an individual consciousness and lens. In her essay “Living Like Weasels,” Dillard describes her momentary experience “in that weasel’s brain,” transcending limitations into another’s self.¹¹ She remembers the “muteness” as “time and events are merely poured, unremarked, and ingested directly, like blood pulsed into my gut through a jugular vein” (“L,” 14). When Dillard tries to verbally explain the feeling, merely acknowledging it to herself brings her back into the limitations of time and her physical body, as “I drew scales over my eyes between me and the mountain and gloved my hand between me and the puppy” (*P*, 80). The first person required to write prevents losing one’s particular lens. Emerson articulates, “I am not solitary while I read and write, though nobody is with me” (*E*, 11). Dillard proposes that she can experience being a transparent eye-ball, but not with awareness, since that would include awareness of self.

Dillard recognizes this inability to experience and tell without the self, describing it as the “scandal of particularity” (*P*, 81). Legler agrees with Dillard that these universal moments outside of the self that she strives for are central to her mission, but argues that they are impossible to achieve, as “the ‘great door’ that opens when you ‘experience’

¹¹ Dillard, Annie. “Living Like Weasels.” *Teaching a Stone to Talk*. New York: Harper & Row, 1982. Print. 14. Hereafter cited parenthetically as “L.”

something utterly unself-consciously does not open on eternity (i.e., on a universal truth) but on the particular” (248). Dillard does believe that this transcendent experience opens onto a specific moment. Her experience is not outside of time, but rather outside of mind: “I have experienced the present purely through my senses” (*P*, 81). In such brief moments, she describes herself as “noticing everything, remembering nothing, choosing the given with a fierce and pointed will” (“L,” 15). Legler interprets the challenge to stay in the moment as acknowledgment of its impossibility. “In the end,” Legler argues, Dillard “is really bent on showing us how impossible it is” to escape her consciousness, to live as “mute and uncomprehending” as a weasel (*P*, 247, “L,” 16).

But Dillard does believe being a transparent eye is possible, by distinguishing between consciousness and self-consciousness. She writes, “consciousness itself does not hinder living in the present,” as “it is only to a heightened awareness that the great door to the present opens at all” (*P*, 82). Dillard does not wish to be the puppy, which “may have experienced those same moments more purely,” but “profited only in the grossest of ways, by having an assortment of itches scratched” (*P*, 82). Dillard believes transcendence of self is prevented not by awareness, but by *self*-awareness: “so long as I lose myself in a tree... the tree stays tree,” but “the second I become aware of myself,” “looking over my own shoulder,” “the tree vanishes, uprooted from the spot and flung out of sight as if it had never grown” (*P*, 82). In this metaphor, Dillard sees her self-consciousness as a kind of unnatural human interference, equating it with the violent destruction of nature. She seeks an aware transcendence outside of the interference of the personal: “the spirit’s unself-conscious state at any moment of pure devotion” (*P*, 83). In this moment, “one needn’t be, shouldn’t be, reduced to a puppy,” to a lesser degree of

consciousness (*P*, 83). Dillard explains the distinction as two different kinds of sight: “to notice the lesser cataclysms of valley life, I have to maintain in my head a running description of valley life,” “I analyze and pry” (*P*, 33). That marks the kind of sight articulated through description. The other kind of seeing, a “letting go” which leaves her “transfixed and emptied,” is akin to “walk[ing] without a camera,” as “my own shutter opens” and “the moment’s light prints on my own silver gut” (*P*, 33). Contrary to Legler’s assertion, Dillard can transcend her particulars. Doing so does not elucidate larger truths, but does allow her to become “an unscrupulous observer,” to see the world around her without analysis or thought (*P*, 33).

The books she reads provide Dillard with models for her attempts to see the world without processing it. Although she explains that her purpose is to contemplate large transcendent concepts—“the uncertainty of vision, the horror of the fixed, the dissolution of the present, the intricacy of beauty, the pressure of fecundity, the elusiveness of the free, and the flawed nature of perfection”—Dillard proscribes a different relationship with nature through her writing, one focused on visual experience, rather than mental contemplation (*P*, 5). As Legler glosses, “do not stalk the truth, she tells her readers, seek places from which to see” (*P*, 250). Throughout her work, Dillard uses sight as a metaphor for insight. In *Space and Sight*, by Marius von Senden, Dillard is able to explore sight more literally, by considering the loss of perception. In his book, von Senden recounts the transformative experiences of individuals who, blind since birth, underwent cataract operations to gain sight. Dillard is intrigued by the ways in which the senses of the patients merge: “one patient called lemonade ‘square’ because it pricked on his tongue as a square shape pricked on the touch of his hands” (*P*, 28). In Dillard’s

interpretation, “for the newly sighted, vision is pure sensation unencumbered by meaning,” although, of course, she refers to *conventional* meaning: “square” still describes lemonade, if in an unconventional way (*P*, 28). This experience of “the world as a dazzle of color-patches” is what she strives for by leaving herself behind in nature (*P*, 28). She longs for what one doctor describes as “that striking and wonderful serenity which is characteristic only of those who have never seen” (*P*, 30). Dillard describes how after reading *Space and Sight*, she “saw color-patches for weeks,” “wrapped round my eyes, intricately, leaving not one unfilled spot” (*P*, 31). She is briefly able to suspend her self-consciousness and just be conscious of the world around her. But she cannot permanently “unpeach the peaches,” or “see without understanding” (*P*, 32). Words have complicated her bare sights with meaning; “seeing is of course very much a matter of verbalization” (*P*, 33). She recognizes how words have encumbered her, bemoaning that no one had given “those newly sighted people paints and brushes from the start, when they still didn’t know what anything was,” since “then maybe we all could see color-patches too,” and envision “Eden before Adam gave names” (*P*, 33). Without the clouding of words, “the scales would drop from my eyes,” those very scales with which her self-awareness obstructs her sight when transcending time with the puppy (*P*, 33). In fleeting moments, Dillard is able to see like the newly sighted do. Like when “the girl who was no longer blind saw ‘the tree with the lights in it,’” Dillard is able to transcend her concepts of the world when she “saw the tree,” “less like seeing than like being for the first time seen, knocked breathless by a powerful glance” (*P*, 35-36). She understands these moments outside of herself as experiences of the divine, that which beholds her with its powerful glance. She “had been my whole life a bell, and never knew it until at

that moment I was lifted and struck” (*P*, 36). For Dillard, transcendence is not about gaining insight, but losing sight: not about seeing, but being seen.

This idea of bare sight as a place from which to see, but not to process, is exemplified in “the stone men built by the Eskimos of the great desolate tundras west of Hudson Bay,” to which Dillard compares the gruesome Eskimo stories she reads throughout her year at Tinker Creek (*P*, 44). She explains, “an Eskimo traveling alone in flat barrens will heap round stones to the height of a man, travel till he can no longer see the beacon, and build another” (*P*, 44). For Dillard, books do not provide mediation, functioning as a lens through which to see, but rather provide a set of models for how to see. Dillard does not see what her authors describe in nature, but rather sees a vantage point. She writes, “I travel mute among these books, these eyeless men and women that people the empty plain” (*P*, 44). These books of bleak, lonely survival, authored by a “liturgy of names,” all male, allow her to seek broad truths, and locate her within a context of hermetic religious vision (*P*, 44). She places her effort to quiet the interior voice of the self, “the mind’s muddy river,” within “the literature of saints and monks of every order East and West” (*P*, 35). What she seeks instructs her to “raise your sights” above that flow of thoughts, “gazing beyond it into the realm of the real where subjects and objects act and rest purely, without utterance” (*P*, 35). Like the men made of piles of rocks in the Arctic tundra, and like religious hermits, Dillard seeks a type of vision impeded by perception or insight.

Dillard illustrates this desired inarticulate transcendence through her encounter with a muskrat. When she watches the animal, “he never knew I was there,” and “I never knew I was there, either” (*P*, 200). Dillard writes, “my own self-awareness had

disappeared” (*P*, 200). She is able to do this only without self-consciousness of her actions. She “received impressions, but I did not print out captions” (*P*, 200). Doing so would entail looking over her own shoulder, ending the experience. She instructs her reader not to actively look for the transcendent concepts she seeks, but rather to learn the method of how to “retreat—not inside myself, but outside myself,” which will lead to them (*P*, 203). She writes, “I come to Hollins Pond not so much to learn how to live as, frankly, to forget about it,” to escape “out of your ever-loving mind and back to your careless senses” (“L,” 15). To Dillard, being a transparent eye-ball is akin to observing without particulars, to having sight with no self.

Gender is chief among the particulars Dillard wanted to leave behind in her transcendence of the self. In her chronicle of a year at Tinker Creek, she doesn’t mention any interpersonal specifics of her life: her husband, her softball team, her dinners with friends. But the particular of gender singularly affected reception of her work. She anticipated this. In the afterword, Dillard writes, “Because a great many otherwise admirable men do not read books American women write, I wanted to use a decidedly male pseudonym” (*P*, 280). She hoped that her reader would “just read the book,” “not knowing the writer’s gender, or age, or nationality” (*P*, 280-281). Her publisher convinced Dillard to use her full name, and a dust-jacket picture, and she writes, “I regret both decisions” (*P*, 281). To Dillard, in order to give her explorations of transcendence critical legitimacy, she must place them outside of her daily life, and her female lens. Although she purports to write a chronicle—“a nature book” of her “daily life,” transcribed “through a year’s seasons”—she offers no specifics of her material circumstances to her reader, relating instead an idealized relationship with nature (*P*,

279). She attempts to find an impersonal consciousness through nature, but striking all of her particulars leaves her in an unsustainable situation, separating her year in the woods from the relationships and concerns of her quotidian life. Striking her particulars also proved impossible for cultural reasons, as publishers and marketers wanted a depiction of Dillard's gender to frame *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* on its cover, if not within its pages. When Emerson and Thoreau pursued broad human truths in nature, they did not leave behind their specifics, but rather universalized them, possible in the context of a culture where the male was the seemingly unmarked gender. For Dillard to experience and write about similar human truths, she unsuccessfully tries to leave behind her particular self as narrator, and occupy the same ungendered lens.

Gendered particulars are far from banished in Terry Tempest Williams' memoir depicting the loss of her mother, grandmother, and the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge. In her familial narrative, nature acts as one of three maternal figures, largely shaping Williams' outlook and values. She opens *Refuge* with a quote from "Wild Geese," by Mary Oliver: nature is "over and over announcing your place/in the family of things."¹² For Williams, nature and family are the two integral spaces that define her, each asserting the importance of the other. She writes, "the landscape of my childhood and the landscape of my family, the two things I had always regarded as bedrock, were now subject to change" (*R*, 40). She regards losing the bird refuge, which serves as both the physical landscape of her childhood relationship with her grandmother and "a constant" presence in her adult life, in the same way that she describes losing her

¹² Williams, Terry Tempest. *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*. New York: Vintage, 1992. Print. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *R*.

maternal figures (*R*, 21). She even regards the physical space as a friend, explaining that on road trips, she takes a particular route, “because we get to pass through the refuge, and often we’ll stop off and say hello.”¹³ In “Nature Writing as *Refuge*,” Brooke Libby suggests that for Williams, nature “does not simply function as background but as protagonist—a self-directed figure with which the autobiographical subject is in relation, a figure who both adds to and limits the construction of the self.”¹⁴ With nature as a guiding female figure, Williams can move beyond the loss of her mother and grandmother. Her mother, Diane, articulates, “I am realizing the natural world is my connection to myself,” and when Williams copes with her loss, she looks to how her mother “found [her] strength in [nature’s] solitude” (*R*, 86, 29). Her literary influences are her family: Williams looks to her mother’s letters as guidance, constructing her own personal canon. She also strengthens the connection between her sense of self and sense of place through what she describes as “plein air writing” (“W”). As Williams describes, “a great deal of *Refuge* was written out at the refuge, in my journals” (“W”). Her practice of “writing in place” demonstrates how nature, the self, and expression are thoroughly intertwined for Williams (“W”). She doesn’t strive to be a transparent eye-ball, leaving her particulars behind. Rather, she sees her personal perspective as shaped by her changing relationship with nature. This fluidity between the self, the mother, and the natural world allows each role to inform the others in Williams’ writing.

¹³ "Interview with Terry Tempest Williams." Telephone interview. 15 Apr. 2014. Hereafter cited parenthetically as “W.”

¹⁴ Libby, Brooke. "Nature Writing *Refuge*." *Reading Under the Sign of Nature: New Essays in Ecocriticism*. Ed. John Tallmadge and Henry Harrington. Salt Lake City: University of Utah, 2000. Print. 262.

Instead of transcending her particulars, Williams identifies herself primarily through the particular of gender, embracing her biological connection to what she sees as Mother Earth. Although she does include references to the other roles she plays, namely a wife and a teacher, she portrays herself primarily as a daughter, of her mother and of the physical world. This deep emotional connection to the land enables her to process the deaths of her mother and grandmother. She credits her physical relationship with nature to her father, who loves to hunt, but “the spiritual sense, and sense of wonder, come from the women” in her family (“W”). Her bond with nature allows her to feel that “Mother and Mimi are present,” as “the relationships continue” (*R*, 275). During our phone interview, as she exclaimed over the woodchuck running across her yard, she remarked, “when I just saw that woodchuck, I thought, Mimi [her grandmother] would love that” (“W”). But embracing the particular of gender also allows her to connect with women beyond her own family. By emphasizing her role of daughter, she shows that being a child of nature is central to her identity, and proposes that the same is true for all of us, allowing her to connect beyond her biological relatives. Identifying herself through gender allows Williams to embrace a collective social role, united with all women, natural daughters of Mother Nature protesting against ravages on their female bodies.

In the last chapter of *Refuge*, Williams moves outside of her personal identification as a daughter to use gender as a politicized identity. She frames her protests against bomb testing in the Utah desert as objection to the masculine abuse of nature’s femininity. She explains, “when the Atomic Energy Commission described the country north of the Nevada Test Site as ‘virtually uninhabited desert terrain,’ my family and the birds at Great Salt Lake were some of the ‘virtual uninhabitants’” (*R*, 287). She again

associates her family and the birds, this time as victims, in her belief that the radiation from atomic bomb testing contributed to the cancer that killed her mother and grandmother. She describes the effects of the bomb on the earth as that of a painful childbirth, writing, “each time there was another nuclear test, ravens watched the desert heave” as “stretch marks appeared” (*R*, 288). Williams highlights the unnatural rupture of the bombing: “the women,” whom she identifies as mothers, “couldn’t bear” how “a contract had been made and broken between human beings and the land” (*R*, 288). These mothers “had suffered labor pains but always under the promise of birth,” not in the unnatural, forced labor that Williams sees men imposing on Mother Earth through the bomb testing (*R*, 288). Williams earlier writes that a mother’s “womb is the first landscape we inhabit” (*R*, 50). In her vivid descriptions of nature’s childbirth, she extends the metaphor: nature is a version of that first landscape of the womb. Williams explains her association of women and environmental protest: “it has been my experience that much of the call for the earth in nonconventional ways has been women, coming out of the sorrow of what mothers know” (“W”). This link enables her to grieve for the loss of the bird refuge as she does for her mother and grandmother, as she calls for “a new contract...drawn by the women, who understood the fate of the earth as their own” (*R*, 288). To Williams, this unity of the personal, the natural, and the political is impossible to separate, particularly as a writer. She explains, “a lot of writers want to keep pure, create art, and have nothing to do with politics,” but “for me, I can’t separate the two: it’s all about a life engaged” (“W”). Personal connections with nature prompt advocacy for the natural world, as her own relationships with the desert land in Utah combine with her family’s breast cancer to induce her political protest. Although she views the chapter on

bomb testing as essential to *Refuge*, Williams insisted, against the advice of her editor, that it “belongs at the end, as an epilogue” (“W”). She explains, “I want the reader to discover it”—how human harm to nature ultimately harms ourselves—“in the way that I did,” contextualized by a deep understanding and appreciation for each individual’s personal relationship with the natural world (“W”).

For Williams, nature’s role in constructing the self comes from an unexpected source: her “family’s business, working construction,” cutting into and building onto nature (“W”). While growing up, her day, and the livelihood of her family, was structured around the natural world. She explains, “At 5:15, everything stopped. At the dinner table, we watched the weather, because it meant whether my family was working or not” (“W”). In Williams’s work, unlike the notable absence of Dillard’s husband or friends in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, wilderness is inextricably tied to others. Williams sees her “relationship to the natural world and the wild [as] about relationships, and that includes those with my own species” (“W”). Her everyday companionship with the outdoors, beginning with an upbringing of sleepovers with her grandmother, spent “on our backs looking up at the stars,” a childhood in which “everything was infused with the miraculous, and that was nature,” exemplifies the modern environmentalist stance that Cronon calls for: a landscape with personal significance, part of her everyday, and central to her sense of self (“W”).

In *Wild*, Cheryl Strayed combines Dillard’s relationship with reading and Williams’ inclusion of gender, finding her way to her voice by looking to the voices of other female writers. Dillard views reading as providing models for how one should

interact with the wilderness, using an explicitly literary canon. Williams forms a biological and political identity in nature, rather than a literary one: her writing is influenced not by a published canon, but by nature's role in her childhood daily life and the written work of her mother, testifying to the importance of the everyday writing of women. Strayed strikes a balance between the two: she places her pursuit of self amidst female writers and a female earth. She imagines that these two contexts enable her to find herself outside of the masculine lens. Strayed surrounds herself with female discourse, using women's words as her maps in the wilderness. She overtly acknowledges this, quoting "Diving into the Wreck" by Adrienne Rich: "The words are purposes/The words are maps."¹⁵ Strayed describes the power of these words, citing individual poems by Rich, Mary Oliver, and Emily Dickinson as "a consolation, an old friend," since "certain lines had become like incantations to me" (60). In particular, Strayed declares, Rich's *The Dream of a Common Language* "was my religion" (60). Through her descriptions of the roles of these poems—as a friend, a consolation, an incantation—Strayed indeed gives them an all-encompassing religious power. Dillard placed her pursuit of transcendence of the self in search of a higher meaning in a canon of what she sees as a "liturgy" of male explorers: "Knud Rasmussen, Sir John Franklin, Peter Freuchen, Scott, Peary, and Byrd; Jedediah Smith, Peter Skene Ogden, and Milton Sublette; or Daniel Boone singing on his blanket in the Green River country" (*P*, 44). To Dillard, religion is a way to transcend the self, and come in contact with the larger forces of creation and destruction beyond humanity's actions. For Strayed, religion is a driving faith, an affirmation of her choices

¹⁵ Strayed, Cheryl. *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012. Print. 45. Quoting Adrienne Rich, "Diving into the Wreck," from *Poems: Selected and New, 1950-1974*. New York: Norton, 1974. Print. 197.

and sense of self. She places her pursuit of self-understanding in a self-made canon of female writers, who also seek the assurance of knowing and articulating their own selves. By placing herself in conversation with these other texts, Strayed also uses religion to produce community. Unlike Dillard, Strayed hopes her identity, found in the wilderness, will help her construct a life back in civilization. Her chosen books, her religion, provides her with a sociality in solitude.

Unable to access the ungendered lens, the female poets whom Strayed sees herself in conversation with are informed by their particulars, offering a more quotidian, personal view of one's relationship with nature. The critic Rachel Stein argues that Adrienne Rich sees social identity as inextricable from the self. In her poem "Yom Kippur 1984," Rich lists individuals whose specifics prevent them from seeking a universal lens in the wilderness: "faggot kicked into the icy/river, woman dragged from her stalled car/into the mist-struck mountains, used and hacked to death," a woman "hiking alone/found with a swastika carved in her back at the foot of the cliffs/(did she die as queer or as Jew?)"¹⁶ Stein proposes, "Rich makes it clear that we always carry our social identities with us into the woods," where "rather than being transparent eyeballs seeing everything from nowhere, we always remain densely socialized beings whose relations to natural terrain are mediated by complex social realities."¹⁷ Stein proposes that Rich's list "insists that solitude is a boon to the privileged but not to those who are violently, inescapably

¹⁶ Rich, Adrienne. *Your Native Land, Your Life*. New York: Norton, 1986. Print. 77. Hereafter cited parenthetically as "Y."

¹⁷ Stein, Rachel. "To Make the Visible World Your Conscience: Adrienne Rich Revolutionary Nature Writer." *Reading Under the Sign of Nature: New Essays in Ecocriticism*. Ed. John Tallmadge and Henry Harrington. Salt Lake City: University of Utah, 2000. Print. 203.

reminded of their social location, for whom solitude and wilderness are dangerous sites,” claiming that Rich proposes a dark view of the limitations of social identity as inescapable (203).

Rich does see each person as inescapably informed by his or her particulars, but this context does not prevent any individual from asserting their selfhood in nature, no matter how socially unconventional. In “Yom Kippur 1984,” Rich also writes, “Find someone like yourself. Find others... Understand that any rift among you/means power to those who want to do you in” (*Y*, 76). Her questioning of the meaning of solitude does not assert that “a Jew,” “a woman,” “a queer woman or man” cannot find it, but rather that a broader range of individual experiences extends the scope of realizations found within solitude (*Y*, 75). She writes, “when we who refuse to be women and men as women and men are chartered, tell our stories of solitude spent in multitude... what will solitude mean?” (*Y*, 78). Rich argues that experiences alone, not only in nature but also in the context of society, are informed and defined by the circumstances of the individual: a woman’s gender influences, but does not prevent, her solitude as such.

Strayed exemplifies this reading of Rich through her relationship with fear. She initially tries to ignore it, but later acknowledges its role in her experience. In her journey backpacking alone, she recognizes that “fear, to a great extent, is born of a story we tell ourselves,” and if she is paralyzed by fear every time she “felt something horrible cohering in my imagination,” she would fail (51). She explicitly acknowledges fear’s role in one’s personal narrative. Strayed decides “to tell myself a different story from the one women are told,” and “simply did not let myself become afraid” (51). In her initial months on the trail, this denial, a “form of mind control,” allows Strayed to continue

walking (51). She asks herself, “Who is tougher than me?” answering “no one was, I told myself, without believing it” (90). She chants this mantra, or incantation, to herself to prevent paralyzing fear. Strayed writes that she embarks on her journey “to stare that fear down, to stare everything down, really—all that I’d done to myself and all that had been done to me” (122). Eventually, she realizes that in order to overcome her fear, she must acknowledge it: as Rich advocates, she must come to terms with her context. Rich lists individuals who cannot go into nature alone for fear of bodily harm; Strayed looks past this dark view of the inescapable confines imposed by social identity. Instead, she interprets Rich’s words as an invitation to remake her social identity in solitude. Strayed writes that she no longer needed to deny fear through her “old mantra,” as “by now I’d come far enough that I had the guts to be afraid” (229). She develops an ability to realistically live with fear, and to acknowledge it as a manageable part of her.

Alone at night on the trail, Strayed largely can move past her fear through the companionship found in words of female writers, turning her attention from the unknown noises outside to *The Dream of a Common Language* in her hands. She writes, “I opened it up and read the first poem out loud, my voice rising above the sound of the wind battering the walls of my tent. I read it again and again and again. It was a poem called “Power” (60). In “Power,” Rich reasons that Marie Curie “must have known she suffered from radiation sickness/her body bombarded for years by the element/she had purified.”¹⁸ In the last line of the poem, Rich writes, “She died a famous woman denying/her wounds/denying/her wounds came from the same source as her power” (*D*, 3). Uranium, the physical element that gave Curie fatal cancer, also enabled her life’s work. Strayed

¹⁸ Rich, Adrienne. *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems, 1974-1977*. New York: Norton, 1978. Print. 3. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *D*.

reads this passage aloud to herself when afraid, using it as an incantation, reassuring herself that the same is true for her. Her gender, an elemental part of herself, both provokes her fear, and enables her to overcome it. Strayed reasons, “fear begets fear. Power begets power” (51). The poem “Power” certainly begets power in Strayed. Through the sociality of poems as friends, beside her in her tent, and through Rich’s description of the hurt, and strength, which Curie found in radium and polonium, Strayed is able to find the ability to overcome fear. Williams sees her mother’s written words as companionship in the pursuit of solitude. In poems, Strayed also finds community, and the assurance of a canon of predecessors.

By using Rich’s writing as mediation to develop her own sense of self, Strayed is using her poems as Rich intended. Although her essays may seem to indicate views to the contrary, Rich actively worked to create a canon of female voices for women trying to define their own identities. In her essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” Rich embraces the idea of a limited audience in order to make claims specific to her particulars. She didn’t want to reach an all-inclusive audience. She responded to heterosexual readers who self-identified with her love poems with “anger at having my work essentially assimilated and stripped of its meaning, ‘integrated’ into heterosexual romance.”¹⁹ To Rich, resonance with a heterosexual audience meant “a denial, a kind of resistance, a refusal to read and hear what I’ve actually written, to acknowledge what I am” (58). Critic Sylvia Henneberg argues that through her displeasure with heterosexual readers, Rich “decided to determine her position and period in literary history and

¹⁹ Rich, “An Interview with Adrienne Rich,” by Elly Bulkin, part 2, *Conditions 2* (1977): 58.

regulate the canonization and categorization of her poetry herself.”²⁰ But, of course, no author can control the canonization of his or her work. Although Rich is “deeply mistrustful of the shapers of canons,” the response to Rich’s poetry, as for all published work, remains up to the reader (227). And, despite Henneberg’s assertions to the contrary, Rich did hope that a more general audience could find guidance in her work. In her essay “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,” Rich details the problem that awaits a woman looking to words for guidance, especially a writer. She explains, “peculiarly susceptible to language,” a female aspiring writer goes to words, “looking eagerly for guides, maps, possibilities; and over and over in the ‘words’ masculine persuasive force’ of literature she comes up against something that negates everything she is about: she meets the image of Woman in books written by men.”²¹ Rich believes that in order to find and speak in an authentic voice, women must be able to turn to a female canon, and she works to provide guidance to all women through her poetry. Strayed accepts this. She uses Rich’s writing as a path to find her own personal voice: not a voice for the feminist cause, but for herself.

Another of Strayed’s preeminent sources, Mary Oliver, does not see her work as lending voice to any cause or group other than herself, allowing her work to be interpreted as providing guidance to a reader, like Strayed, as individually needed. In an interview with Steven Ratiner in 1992, she explained, “the women’s movement—I did not join that either. I applaud it, and I guess I may even be part of it. I don’t see it working very well in poetry. I see very good poets defeating their own poems with

²⁰ Warren, Joyce W., and Margaret Dickie. *Challenging Boundaries: Gender and Periodization*. Athens: University of Georgia, 2000. Print. 227.

²¹ “When We Dead Awaken: Writing Re-Vision.” Adrienne Rich. *College English*, Vol. 34, No. 1, Women, Writing and Teaching (Oct., 1972), 21.

polemic.”²² To Renee Olander, she expresses frustration over misguided readings of her poetry through a gendered lens, as “many younger female critics, especially those who work from feminist precepts—they critique me from a feminist point of view, and I don’t always have a lot of patience with it.”²³ Oliver intends her poetry to be accessible to all. She writes from a perspective that is both personal and general, allowing the reader to recognize her transcendent experience and search for broader truths.²⁴ She writes for all readers, to provide “poems that might serve as comforts, reminders, or even cautions if needed, to wayward minds” in pursuit of literary guidance, irrespective of gender.²⁵

In Strayed’s choice of materials in her canon, she imagines she is able to write outside of the limitations of masculine nature writing, as Rich and Oliver attempt to step outside the male canon themselves. While Rich does so by asserting her place in a separate, feminist canon, Oliver does so by voicing her own thoughts, clearly influenced by the transcendentalist canon, as solely her own. In *Women Writers and Poetic Identity*, Margaret Homans concludes, “poetry by women is still and is likely to remain conditioned by its response to various manifestations of masculine authority.”²⁶ Rich’s

²² Ratiner, Steven. “Poet Mary Oliver: A Solitary Walk.” *The Christian Science Monitor*. N.p., 9 Dec. 1992. Web. 2 Mar. 2014.

²³ Olander, Renee. “An Interview with Mary Oliver.” *AWP Chronicle* 27 (1994): 1-8.

²⁴ In fact, Oliver’s transcendent experience often mirrors Emerson’s transcendentalist tradition. This is perhaps most evident in her essay “Winter Hours,” as Mark Johnson claims in his essay “‘Keep Looking’: Mary Oliver’s Emersonian Project.” In “Nature,” Emerson explains the “perfect exhilaration” he feels when “in the presence of nature a wild delight runs through the man,” which Oliver echoes in her description of “returning to the arms of delight.” She displays Emerson’s commitment to the inclusive first person and attempt to “look into everything without cutting into everything,” but does not see her writing as a feminist reaction to his.

²⁵ Oliver, Mary. *Winter Hours: Prose, Prose Poems, and Poems*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999. Print. 102.

²⁶ Homans, Margaret. *Women Writers and Poetic Identity: Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Brontë, and Emily Dickinson*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1980. Print. 215.

writing does acknowledge and reject a preexisting male canon. Oliver, while treating traditionally transcendentalist themes in her writing, refuses categorization of her work as explicitly feminist, or female. Beyond their own relationships with masculine authority, the two poets both allow Strayed to turn to female voices within her own canon. Homans imagines that in order to have a truly female voice, to write authentically about the self as a woman, one must be entirely outside of the canon, which she sees as impossible. While Strayed cannot escape entirely from male influence—she also cites Robert Pinsky, and, of course, Rich, Oliver, and Strayed have all been exposed to male voices—she is able to write from a physical and literary place where masculine authority does not dictate her identity.

Strayed believes that female authors allow her to leave behind masculine constraints in her canon, and that her physical removal to the Pacific Crest Trail enables her to escape from confining masculine influence in her self-representation, illustrated in how her few encounters with men on the trail pose challenges to her newfound identity. She writes that before her hike, she had hidden herself in a version of femininity constructed in response to masculine expectation, “the one for whom behind every hot pair of boots or sexy little skirt or flourish of the hair there was a trapdoor that led to the least true version of me” (111). Strayed recognizes that this version of femininity is inauthentic. On the trail, she “felt I had to sexually neutralize the men I met by being, to the extent that was possible, one of them,” abandoning “the powers my very girlness granted me” (111). But Strayed does not become “one of the guys,” as she describes (111). In her rejection of “girlness,” prompted by her need to sexually neutralize, she develops an ability to interact with the men on the trail as herself. This version of self

includes her gender, but is not defined by it. Instead, she defines herself by her willpower and self-reliance. The trail, harsh and unconcerned with how she defines herself, gives Strayed a location to develop outside of masculine authority. Female poets provide her with guides into that place.

Increasingly moving outside of her traditional, feminine relationships with men, Strayed develops confidence in her ability to look to texts by female authors and cure herself, rather than turn to male figures to do so. After her mother's death, before she began hiking the PCT, Strayed tried to heal herself through romantic affairs. She writes that she pictured herself as "the woman with the hole in her heart," and that this wound "was why I'd longed for a companion," and why she eventually pursues "this preposterous idea of hiking alone for three months on the PCT" (38). She explains her affairs as "trying to heal. Trying to get the bad out of my system so I could be good again. To cure me of myself" (36). On the PCT, this identity, of which she tried to rid herself, is inescapable. Before the PCT, "alone had always felt like an actual place to me, as if it weren't a state of being, but rather a room where I could retreat to be who I really was" (119). She finds that the trail forces her to expand and develop this version of herself, independent from the comforts and confines of relationships with men. She writes, "the radical aloneness of the PCT had altered that sense," as "alone wasn't a room anymore, but the whole wide world" (119). On her solo hike, "I was alone in that world, occupying it in a way I never had before" (119). The trail provides a valuable location for her development of self. While the wild enforces the masculine influence for Dillard, it frees Strayed. This "world called the Pacific Crest Trail," "one I'd staggered to in sorrow and confusion and fear and hope," one she hoped would "make me into the woman I

knew I could become,” enables Strayed to develop her independent sense of self (4). Yet because of her canon, Strayed is not entirely isolated. She writes of her beloved books, “on the trail, they’d taken on even greater meaning,” offering her companionship, enabling her to develop herself outside of the familiar structure of response to masculine expectation (105). For Strayed, these books “were the world I could lose myself in when the one I was actually in became too lonely or harsh or difficult to bear” (105). Her female poets allow her to foster a sense of self not entirely isolated, but within the context of chosen female voices. The combination of the trail and her canon allow Strayed companionship in her quest for solitude.

Strayed illustrates her independence from certain kinds of male influence, both the constraints of her personal romantic relationships and the canonical expectations of Emerson’s rapturous descriptions of nature, through her interactions with the unscenic, practical aspects of her hike. She does respond to beautiful vistas of nature with Emersonian awe, describing a forest as “Gothic in its green grandiosity, both luminous and dark, so lavish in its fecundity that it looked surreal, as if I were walking through a fairy tale rather than the actual world” (289). Strayed distinguishes between the effects of the sweeping mountain views of California and the walls of green foliage in Oregon, affirming that “California had altered my vision, but Oregon shifted it again, drew it closer in,” allowing the particulars of landscape to affect her, as they do for Williams (263). But Strayed corrects her own preconception of her hike as a rapturous experience of nature. Although she had “imagined endless meditations upon sunsets or while staring out across pristine mountain lakes,” prompting her to “weep tears of cathartic sorrow and restorative joy each day of my journey,” she writes, “mostly I didn’t look up. Step by

step, my eyes were on the sandy and pebbly trail” (85, 81). Through her focus on the unvaried ground in front of her, rather than the sweeping landscapes above, Strayed communicates how her experiences helped her find realizations within herself, rather than the transcendent truths about religion and creation that Dillard seeks. Strayed writes, “for all the endless mountain and desert panoramas I’d seen, it was the sight of the two-foot-wide swath of the trail that was the most familiar, the thing upon which my eyes were almost always trained” (137). For her, this “bald monotony” was “a sort of scorching cure,” offering no beautiful distractions from the world within her own consciousness (193). The pilgrimage-like physicality of continued walking forces her to become comfortable within and reliant upon her own mind. A focus on the unremarkable quotidian of the trail, rather than the transcendent and spectacular, prompts Strayed to process her emotional suffering, rather than escape it, teaching her not to rely on others but on her inner self.

Henry Harrington and John Tallmadge write that along with the “autobiographical impulse” notable in the nature writing of Dillard and Williams, “the antidote for an excess of autonomy is not so much community as a discovery of unself-consciousness” (xiii-xiv). This is true for Dillard, who strives to lose herself and engage with impersonal truths, working to adopt an ungendered lens. But for Williams, and for Strayed, nature provides a space to strengthen ties to others. Williams does so by using nature as a mirror, uniting “our sense of intimacy with nature” and “our sense of intimacy with each other” (“W”). She brings together her strong sense of place and her sense of self, seeing her human relationships tied to the wilderness around her, which enables her connections

to her maternal figures to continue beyond their deaths. Strayed uses the trail as a physical way to prove that she can continue on, one step in front of the other, after her mother's death. Strayed does place her mother in nature, but only briefly expresses this theme central to Williams, who "sees my mother's character in the earth, always": a fox darts across Strayed's vision, prompting her to call out "MOM!" and "then, just as suddenly, I went silent, spent" ("W," *Wild*, 144). She uses her own words and silence to move through her pain, as she uses the words of other authors. But more central to Strayed's journey is finding community in her developing selfhood through the words of female poets. Contrary to the claim in *Reading Under the Sign of Nature*, autobiographical nature writing does lead to community, and developed self-consciousness: for Williams, strengthening her ties to her mother, grandmother, and self, and for Strayed, strengthening her sense of identity, placing her within a canon of women. Ultimately, Strayed best exemplifies Emerson's call to develop "the voices which we hear in solitude," which "grow faint and inaudible as we enter into the world," as her female canon enables her to find her own voice, and then to return to society, placing that newly developed voice in a community of female writers (*E*, 261).

As I've noted, Strayed, broken by her mother's death, writes that she goes to nature "to cure me of myself" and rebuild her identity (36). Jonathan Franzen looks to nature not to reshape his self of self, but to escape it entirely. Although it may seem arbitrary to look to a post-modern novelist in a discussion of women's autobiographical nature writing, Franzen shares philosophical concerns with these writers. He sees nature as a way to bring him outside of his consciousness, hoping to escape personal

preoccupations through the impersonal lens that Dillard strives for. In “My Bird Problem,” Franzen turns to birding after his mother’s death and the collapse of his marriage, the same context that prompts Strayed to hike the PCT. Yet he turns to nature to escape his problems, rather than work through them. He describes unsuccessful attempts to avoid his losses by entirely losing himself in birding. Franzen writes, “then my mother died, and I went out bird watching for the first time in my life.”²⁷ He does not explore this choice to go birding, but writes that as he “sat on the lawn with binoculars and watched a spotted towhee scratch vigorously in the underbrush,” he believes “I was working through my grief and would soon be over it” (“B”). He believes nature will allow him to move past his personal problems, to leave behind his sadness and acute self-awareness. This conception carries over to his romantic life as well. After “a final final breakup,” he “saw a male and a female mallard swimming side by side, nosing in the weeds together, and burst into tears” (“B”). For Williams, Strayed, and Franzen, nature reflects relationships back to the writer and provides a space to develop the self. But unlike these female writers, he doesn’t hope that the reflection will prompt acceptance and self-awareness. The authors he views as leading the way—Thoreau, John Muir, Edward Abbey, Bill McKibben, Verlyn Klinkenborg—inhibit Franzen’s relationship with nature.²⁸ In his view, these male nature writers do not find personal comfort or a sense of

²⁷ Franzen, Jonathan. “My Bird Problem.” *The New Yorker* 8 Aug. 2005: 52-67. Print. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as “B.”

²⁸ Verlyn Klinkenborg, who Franzen describes as a “professional trivialist whose job is to remind *New York Times* readers that spring follows winter and summer follows spring,” is able to sustain Cronon’s relationship of use with nature precisely because of what Franzen sees as triviality (“B”). Klinkenborg explains, “the really lovely part of living in the country, and adjacent to nature in some way, is that it seeps into every aspect of your consciousness.” To Klinkenborg, who lives on a farm, “city-dwellers” like Franzen “never get to experience the absolute day-to-day, minute-to-minute routine of nature.” He

community in nature, but rather encounter “spiritual refreshment,” unapologetic about their “misanthropy” (“B”). Franzen wants to belong in this “elite” “cult of wilderness” (“B”). But the problems that plague his consciousness, centering on his relationships with his wife and mother, do not allow him to pursue this impersonal, transcendent experience, as Dillard’s questions about creation allow her to do. Franzen, both insistent on his male canon and consumed by his relationships, cannot escape his consciousness through his “affairs with birds,” and refuses to use nature to interact with his self (“B”).

In his stubborn desire to see nature as an escape from his domestic concerns, Franzen becomes an example of why Cronon warns about idealizing wilderness as Other. Cronon proposes that we see wilderness as an “escape from responsibility,” reflecting our own concerns in our self-constructed vision (81). Franzen wants that version of wilderness as escape. While camping alone in Chile, in search of “some halfway secure sense of my own identity, a sense achieved in solitude by putting first-person words on a page,” Franzen objects to the man-made hut which provides him with shelter: “the *refugio*’s existence made my already somewhat artificial project of solitary self-sufficiency seem even more artificial, and I resolved to pretend that it didn’t exist.”²⁹ While bird watching, he bemoans the presence of “parking lots full of nature lovers’ cars” and “human voices up ahead,” complaining, “must humankind insert itself into *everything*? Having paid thirty-five dollars for my ticket, I’d expected a more perfect

explains the difference between his responsible use and Franzen’s unrealistic dualism of humanity vs. wilderness: “we so much want it to be extraordinary and moving that the idea for it to just be the backdrop for getting the mail or walking the dog seems perverse, but everyone who lives in the natural world has to experience it that way at some point.” (“Interview with Verlyn Klinkenborg.” Telephone interview. 13 Apr. 2014.)

²⁹ Franzen, Jonathan. “Farther Away.” *The New Yorker*, 18 Apr. 2011. Web. 14 Apr. 2014. Hereafter cited parenthetically as “A.”

illusion of nature” (“B”). For Franzen to appreciate nature, it “had to conform to my wish that it be unpopulated and pristine” (“B”). This is precisely the idealizing attitude that Cronon cautions against, and through his awareness of this vision as an “artificial” “illusion,” Franzen shows that he knows it. When Cronon claims that “wilderness poses a serious threat to responsible environmentalism at the end of the twentieth century,” he refers to the “dualistic vision in which the human is entirely outside the natural,” which Franzen articulates (81). About his decision to leave Colorado, he reasons, “Why stick around to see the last beautiful wild places getting ruined, and to hate my own species, and to feel that I, too, in my small way, was one of the guilty ruiners?” (“B”) Nature, not entirely unsullied and pristine, provides Franzen with a reason for resigned guilt. In his ethics of modern environmentalism, Cronon argues that we must reject this narrative of an “epic struggle between malign civilization and benign nature” in order to develop a responsible relationship (84). Franzen’s view of nature as an escape from consciousness and civilization is unsustainable, and does not allow for “an environmental ethic that will tell us as much about *using* nature as about *not* using it” (*Uncommon Ground*, 85).

In *Freedom*, Franzen experiments with the extreme version of his own tendencies in the character of Walter, illustrating the dangers of idealizing nature that Cronon warns against. Franzen articulates his own “abstract and misanthropic” reasons for nature conservation by contrasting Walter’s reasoning with Lalitha’s “earnest commitment to saving the earth.”³⁰ Walter explains that he is drawn to nature for its lack of mess and complication, as “it’s not all poisoned with resentment and neurosis and ideology” (*F*,

³⁰ Franzen, Jonathan. *Freedom*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010. Print. 491. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *F*.

490). Franzen frames this personal battle with hyperconsciousness through his characters. He continually highlights how torturously hyperconscious Patty's self-absorption metastasizes, "like a hideous purple-red growth in her that needed to be cut out" (*F*, 513). Franzen certainly fears hyper self-consciousness, which he sees as a malignant human growth on the natural world. According to Franzen, we must cut out the human consciousness from nature in order to keep it pristine. The mess inherent in human intention, including the responsible use that modern environmentalists like Cronon advocate, is tarnished with human desire, resolvable only by completely separating nature and humanity.

Cronon presents the absurd and untenable final result of the dualistic vision of nature vs. humanity as suicide, since the "logical extreme [of] the paradox that was built into wilderness from the beginning" suggests "if nature dies because we enter it, then the only way to save nature is to kill ourselves" (83). In "Farther Away," Franzen uses this logic to rationalize his friend David Foster Wallace's suicide, writing, "I can imagine the sick mental pathways by which suicide comes to seem like the one consciousness-quenching substance that nobody can take away from you" ("A"). In the end of his novel, Franzen presents a version of Cronon's ludicrous proposal as legitimate. Walter reconciles with his wife, accepting the imperfections and mistakes of human relationships. He leaves his desires for unattainably untarnished nature in a bird reserve, dedicated to the deceased Lalitha. Lalitha's tragic death allows him to enact the consequences without the act of suicide. Ultimately, only the dead can resist colonizing nature with hyper self-consciousness.

Franzen demonstrates this tension in his own choices in “My Bird Problem.” He uses birding as an escape from his desire to have children, which he sees as perpetuating the hyperconsciousness he finds unsufferable. Franzen writes, “I faced the question of what to do with myself for the next thirty childless years; and the next morning I got up early and went looking for the Eurasian wigeon that had been reported in south Santa Cruz County” (“B”). Birding frees him from the complications of human relationships, but his escapes do not allow him to avoid his domestic concerns. Franzen wants nature to exist as a separate realm from his human relationships. Cronon addresses the ramifications of this view of the wilderness as Other, writing, “the trouble with wilderness is that it quietly expresses and reproduces the very values its devotees seek to reject” (80). Franzen exemplifies this theory, as he manifests the same protective instinct towards birds as he would towards children. He hopes that “not having kids was my last, best line of defense against the likes of [environmentalists like] Al Gore,” but he “couldn’t find a way not to care about the billions of birds and thousands of avian species that were liable to be wiped out worldwide” (“B”). For Franzen, his protective love of birds manifests “the scenario I’d been at pains to avert for many years” (“B”). He turns to nature to escape the predicament he sees as prompted by children—“not the world’s falling apart in the future, but my feeling inconveniently obliged to care about it in the present”—but finds it in his avian attachments (“B”). To Williams, this obligation to care about the world around us is a positive effect of nature: it shows us that “the world is interconnected and interrelated,” as “we are not islands” (“W”). To Williams, ignoring the natural world allows us to “forget that” interconnectedness, “at the peril of our own

humanity” (“W”). Williams sees experiences in nature as essential, uniting our consciousnesses. Franzen desperately wants to escape his altogether.

In his attempted escapes from self-consciousness, like his birding expeditions, Franzen tries to experience the “reduction, a shedding, a sloughing off” that Dillard experiences in fleeting moments.³¹ They both attempt to escape the self through their experiences in nature. But while Dillard is able to explore her broad questions of religion and creation through an impersonal lens, Franzen paradoxically hopes to address his consuming concerns with human consciousness by leaving his own behind. For Franzen, “it’s a matter of indifference whether certain human processes have God involved or if there is not God,” rejecting the question that informs Dillard’s writing, which she asks in the opening pages of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*—“did God make the earth in jest?”—and attempts to answer in the last pages, writing, “the universe was not made in jest but in solemn incomprehensible earnest.”³² In his writing, Franzen is more interested in “trying to make sense of how I seem to have a soul, I have this ghostly consciousness” (“H”). Dillard wants to escape her consciousness to access what she envisions as fundamental truths about the divine. Franzen, unconcerned with Dillard’s God, wants to see nature through the impersonal lens that Dillard somewhat successfully employs, but his concerns and method of sight do not allow it.

Caught between a masculine ideology of “serious art” and a “feminine” projection of self onto nature, Franzen frames his writing, concerned with domesticity and self-

³¹ Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 255.

³² Singh, Anita. “Hay Festival: Jonathan Franzen: ‘Art is a Religion.’” *The Telegraph*. N.p., 30 Jan. 2012. Web. 8 Mar. 2014. Hereafter cited parenthetically as “H”. Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 9, 275.

consciousness, as elite, traditionally masculine literature.³³ He explains, “a century ago, the novel was the preeminent medium of social instruction,” and he aspires to write an “uncompromising book” that comes to terms with “the Ache of our not being, each of us, the center of the universe” (“P”). This was also Dillard’s project in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. But the preoccupations and concerns have changed, and what Franzen views as the elite discourse of novelists is no longer as relevant. Franzen’s self-identification depends on an implicitly masculine vision of serious literature, which excludes the domestic, interpersonal preoccupations he writes about. Oprah’s selection of *Freedom* for her Book Club carried out the threat of branding his work as female. Franzen “felt a certain resistance to the boost that [Oprah’s selection] would represent,” which David Gates articulated in his review of *The Corrections*, Franzen’s earlier novel, as containing “just enough novel-of-paranoia touches so Oprah won’t assign it and ruin Franzen’s street cred.”³⁴ Franzen viewed an affiliation with Oprah as tainting his position in “the high art literary tradition.”³⁵ His adherence to a traditional view of the author and novelistic intent limits him, and his scope.

Like Strayed and unlike Franzen, Williams is comfortable transcending the limitations of genre. *Refuge* has been understood as cancer memoir, nature writing, and

³³ Franzen, Jonathan. “Perchance to Dream.” *Harper's Magazine* Apr. 1996. Print. Hereafter cited parenthetically as “P.”

³⁴ Kachka, “Jonathan Franzen’s *The Corrections* and Oprah Winfrey’s Book Club.” *The Slate Book Review*. N.p., Aug. 2013. Web. 5 Mar. 2014. Gates, David. “American Gothic.” *The New York Times*. N.p., 9 Sept. 2001. Web. 5 Mar. 2014. Kachka quotes Gates in his article.

³⁵ Baker, Jeff. “Oprah's Stamp of Approval Rubs Writer in Conflicted Ways.” *The Oregonian* 12 Oct. 2001. Print.

an integration of the two.³⁶ Critic Tina Richardson suggests that by writing a book that belongs in the genres of both breast cancer literature and environmental justice, Williams investigates a clearly female and environmental concern: “the various ways patriarchal ideology and its practices are inscribed on the bodies of women” and the “body” of the earth.³⁷ Richardson points out the dangers of limiting literary categorization, claiming that “important [as] it may be to read *Refuge* with a copy of the *North American Field Guide to Birds* by your side,” it is equally key “to have a material understanding of the environmental justice and public health issues” central to Williams’ argument (237). Williams’ personally constructed relationship with nature as a space for individual reflection and political protest frees her writing from the limitations of one genre. Williams herself rejects the idea of categorizing her work in general, arguing, “the idea of genre—this is women’s studies, this is nature writing—it’s absurd to me. To me, it’s life” (“W”). She sees writing as “how we make sense of this all,” of “the injustices being done to a wild world” (“W”). She explains, “you take that anger, you take that sense of injustice, you turn it into sacred rage, and you try to create something beautiful” (“W”). To her, “we do that most compellingly through story” (“W”). As Williams sees it, writing

³⁶ Franzen and Williams both juxtapose cancer and the destruction of nature, but while Franzen uses cancer to describe hyperconsciousness (manifested in Patty, the mother) as an unnatural human growth on nature, Williams sees cancer as a natural process. As Libby claims, “if the cancer is the ‘natural’ production of her mother’s ‘natural’ body, perhaps she and the doctors have no ecological or moral grounds to intervene” (255). Cancer reflects both authors’ perspectives on conservation: Williams sees the outer world as part of ourselves, as she paradoxically accepts Great Salt Lake’s rising as natural and wants to prevent it to save the bird refuge, while Franzen sees all changes to a pristine vision of wilderness as tragically unnatural.

³⁷ Richardson, Tina. “Corporal Testimony,” published in *Surveying the Literary Landscapes of Terry Tempest Williams*, by Katherine R. Chandler and Melissa A. Goldthwaite. Salt Lake City: University of Utah, 2003. Print. 230.

is the most effective way to communicate our concerns, regardless of the limitations imposed by genre.

More specifically, Williams proposes, we best articulate our preoccupations through personal stories. About writing *Refuge*, she explains, “I was aware I was holding two contradictory stories” of the bird refuge and of her family (“W”). She describes the extremely organic process of uniting the two: she “got out an easel from my childhood, took a pen in one hand and a pen in the other, and on one side, wrote ‘mother,’ ‘cancer,’ ‘family,’ ‘church,’ and on the other side, ‘Great Salt Lake,’ ‘Bear River Bird Refuge,’ ‘rising lake’” (“W”). She separated out what would fall under the two genres of memoir and nature writing, and “realized what was holding them together was me: the narrator” (“W”). Unlike Franzen, who writes, “when I thought about writing confessionally, in an ‘I’ voice, I found that I was too self-conscious,” Williams feels uninhibited, free to write about self (“A”). When she allows herself to unite the two different threads of thought, “putting down TTW, circling that, and putting two lines down,” she “realized I’d created a map of the female reproductive system” (“W”). For Williams, the female gender literally provides form for her narrative. She writes “an embodied text” (“W”). She can defy categorization precisely because she isn’t bound by the expectations of masculine voice and form. And for Williams, writing about the female doesn’t exclude the male experience. Rather, it’s universal, since “if women are involved, then children are involved, and it’s not about gender” (“W”). To embrace her personal experience, informed by being female, is to embrace the universal human experience. To her, the process of writing, both deeply personal and universal, defies genre.

While Dillard and Franzen both seek the categorization that Williams resists, Strayed's *Wild* similarly is both a memoir about her recovery from a lost mother, and an example of nature writing. Exemplified in her enthusiastic interviews with Oprah after the selection of *Wild*, she embraces the association with popular culture. Strayed's acceptance of mass appeal, rather than Franzen's elite literary self-conception, frees her not only to construct her own canon of influences, but to influence a much broader swath of readers through her own work. She unapologetically writes autobiographically, and by addressing her own preoccupations, she addresses those of her reader, including those who may not be drawn to "serious art," as Franzen identifies his own work ("P"). By allowing them to identify with her own experiences, Strayed not only enables her readers to develop a more quotidian relationship with nature, but also with literature and the written word.

Forced to examine and create their own relationships with nature, and authorial identities, outside of the masculine influence of the nature-writing canon, female writers are uniquely poised to advocate a more personal relationship with our natural environments, necessary for humankind to develop a realistic relationship of use with nature.³⁸ As Stein argues when contextualizing Rich's poetry, "in Emerson's view, factors such as family, profession, class, and citizenship are impediments to the communion with nature, and they can and must be left outside the woods" (200). An unapologetically personal lens, exemplified in the works by Williams and Strayed, allows for the portrayal of an unconstrained, individual relationship with nature. Their works

³⁸ Cronon explicitly advocates this approach over Franzen's, proposing that "the wilderness dualism," played out so clearly in *Freedom*, "tends to cast any use as *ab*-use, and thereby denies us a middle ground in which responsible use and non-use might attain some kind of balanced, sustainable relationship" (*Uncommon Ground*, 85).

enable the reader to develop her own sense of self through an everyday connection with the outdoors, supported by relatable voices found in literature. *Wild* became an overwhelming commercial success largely because of this mission. As Williams explains, “the fact that Cheryl Strayed walked that narrative is what makes it so powerful and compelling” (“W”). Strayed offers her own specific instance of finding herself, using a relationship with nature and the transformative power of the written word. Through her example, Strayed encourages her reader, regardless of gender, to do the same.

This use of the outdoors in self-conception exemplifies the kind of personal connection with nature that Cronon calls for. To develop a sustainable relationship between humanity and nature, we each must do so on the individual scale, integrating the natural world into our own lives and domestic preoccupations. Franzen sees increasing self-consciousness as overcolonizing the world, and laments the loss of wilderness as a space entirely separate from the mind. But as Emerson writes, “in the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature” (*E*, 10). Because these women writers are happy to occupy a place of self-consciousness without worrying that their gender identity has been compromised, they can occupy a space marked as environmental, political, and personal, outside of gender. Franzen’s position in a high-art literary tradition doesn’t allow him to do this. Through the personal lens exemplified in works by female authors, we can reinterpret Emerson’s call for a relationship with nature. As the man who believed “the experience of each new age requires a new confession,” Emerson would want us to (*E*, 450). The human preoccupation with the self is inescapable, especially in a time so defined by self-

consciousness. If we can look to the natural world as a way to turn within and develop conceptions of self, as Williams and Strayed do, we will protect it.

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