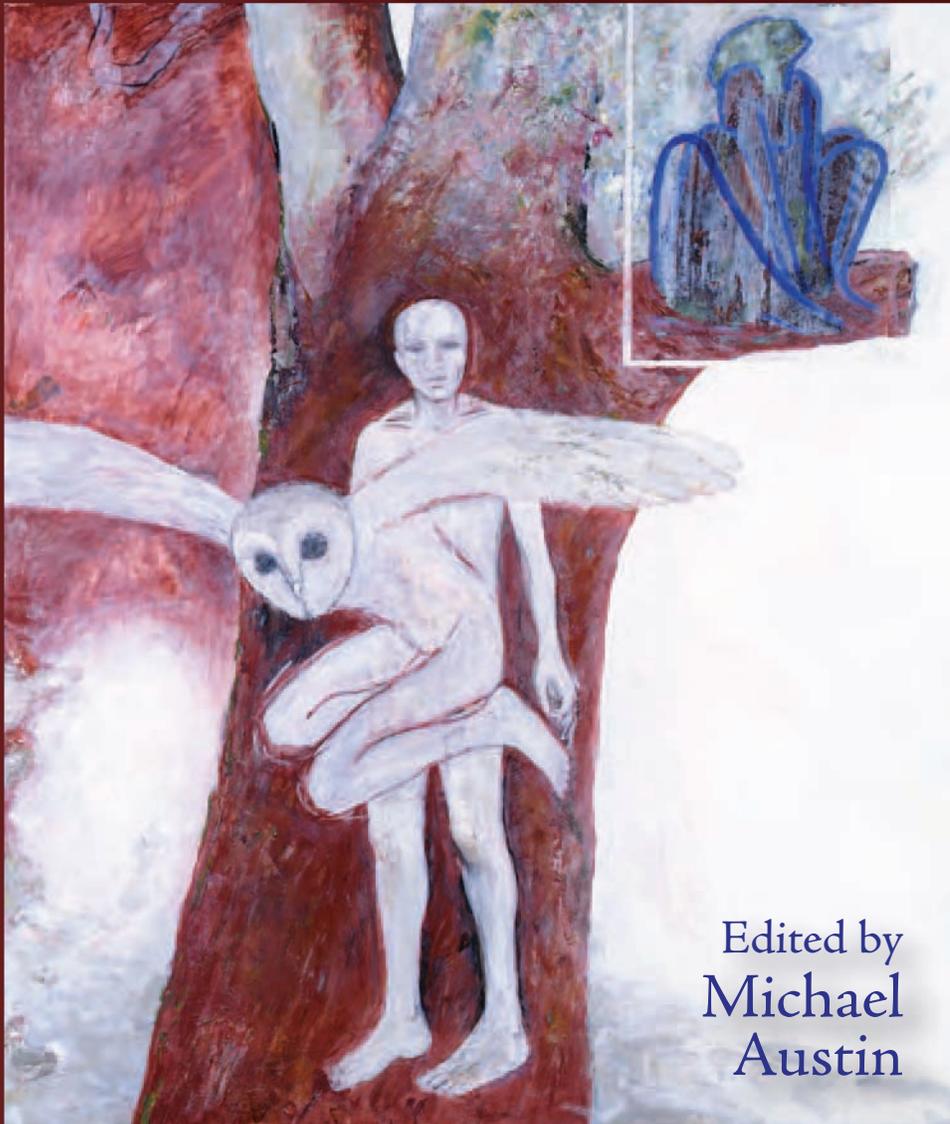


A Voice in the Wilderness



Edited by
Michael
Austin

Conversations with
Terry Tempest Williams

A Voice in the Wilderness





Photo by Cheryl Himmelstein

Terry Tempest Williams

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Conversations
with
Terry Tempest Williams



Edited by
Michael Austin

Willet Drawing by Lee Carlman Riddell

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For Karen, Porter, and Clarissa

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A Life Engaged

A Critical Introduction

Michael Austin



Paradox is life. It's the same thing as balance. You can't have one without the other . . . Tell me what you fear most and then we can talk about what we desire most. Then this "third thing," which in this case is conversation or understanding, becomes the creative expression of an idea.

—Terry Tempest Williams to Derrick Jensen (p. 44)

Critics describe Terry Tempest Williams as a paradox. In the introduction to a recent book of essays devoted to her work, Katherine R. Chandler and Melissa Goldthwaite note that “tensions and oppositions abound in her work . . . As critics, we have set our sights on ferreting out how those contradictions contribute to a coherent vision.”¹ This is a daunting task: Williams is a feminist, a Mormon, a scientist, an environmentalist, an activist, and a writer of great beauty and passion. In the final interview for this volume, I asked Williams specifically about some of these contradictions. “There are so many Terry Tempest Williamses,” I queried, “the writer, the activist, the naturalist, the wife, the speaker, the educator—how

1. Katherine R. Chandler and Melissa A. Goldthwaite, eds., *Surveying the Literary Landscapes of Terry Tempest Williams* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2003), ix.

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does writing integrate with other facets of your life?” Her response was as simple as it was sublime: “I only know one me. I don’t know those other people that you’re talking about. It’s one life and it’s a life engaged” (p. 180).

Many readers—and most literary critics—have become accustomed to working with prepackaged critical and cultural narratives with well-established boundaries. By refusing to be trapped in these narratives, Williams demands the full attention of her readers. Invariably, this means abandoning many of the standard tools of literary criticism—analysis, categorization, comparison, and detached observation—and entering into an honest dialogue with the words on the page and with the woman who wrote them. To read Terry Tempest Williams well, one must enter into intimate conversations with the texts, dialogue in the margins, interact with the words. The literary interview is a logical extension of this reading process.

The purpose of this volume is to showcase some of the most extensive and valuable conversations that Terry Tempest Williams has had with scholars, critics, journalists, readers, and friends during her literary career. The 17 interviews in this collection were drawn from some 40 print or radio interviews that Williams has given since 1989. Williams’s interviews, like her books, are suffused with the passions of her life—her family, the land, the power of words, and unwavering courage and personal integrity—and can be read profitably as primary works of literature in their own right. Those familiar with Williams’s books will find that the interviews offer insights unavailable in any other source. What follows below is a brief introduction to some of the recurring themes, arguments, and ideas of Williams’s work, with an emphasis on how they interact with the interviews in this volume.

Desire, Intimacy, and the Erotics of Place

How does our intimacy with each other, or lack of intimacy, affect our intimacy with the land? Like death, I think our sensuality is something we’re afraid of and so we have avoided confronting it. I am interested in taboos, because I believe that’s where the power of our culture lies. I love taking off their masks so we can begin to face the world openly. I believe that will be our healing.

—Terry Tempest Williams to David Petersen (p. 20)

In both her books and her interviews, Terry Tempest Williams weaves together the strands of her life—fully embracing the contradictions that they create. Consider the following passage from *Refuge* (1991), Williams’s most well-known book, about the impact of Utah’s desert landscape on her sense of spiritual connectedness:

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It's strange how deserts turn us into believers. I believe in walking in a landscape of mirages, because you learn humility. I believe in living in a land of little water because life is drawn together. And I believe in the gathering of bones as a testament to spirits that have moved on.

If the desert is holy, it is because it is a forgotten place that allows us to remember the sacred. 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.

In the severity of a salt desert, I am brought down to my knees by its beauty. My imagination is fired. My heart opens and my skin burns in the passion of these moments. I will have no other gods before me.

Wilderness courts our souls. When I sat in church throughout my growing years, I listened to teachings about Christ in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights reclaiming his strength, where he was able to say to Satan, "Get thee hence." When I imagined Joseph Smith kneeling in a grove of trees as he received his vision to create a new religion, I believed their sojourns into nature were sacred. Are ours any less?²

This single passage merges most of the recurring images in Williams's early work: the desert landscape, Mormonism, community, spirituality, the power of narrative, and the integrity of bodily experience. A specific landscape—the desert—is the starting point for a large constellation of ideas and values. By its lack of water, the desert produces community; by its solitude, reflection; by its fire, passion; by its remoteness, a refuge. It is tempting to see the desert as a metaphor for many other things in Williams's work, but to do so would commit the fatal error of not taking the land seriously as itself. For Williams, the land is not simply a metaphor for ideas; it *is* an idea and, as such, forms an integral part of the mosaic of ideas, truths, stories, and desires that she weaves into her work.

In her interviews, Williams employs three overlapping concepts to define her approach to place. The first of these is a *poetics of place*, an aesthetic that begins with a landscape—and with the cultures that grow out of it—and, as she works it onto the page, honors that land, its culture, and its stories. Williams's early literary efforts—children's books entitled *The Secret Language of Snow* (1984) and *Between Cattails* (1985)—are deeply rooted in her poetics of place. Her first work for adult readers, *Pieces of White Shell: A Journey to Navajoland* (1985), frames traditional stories through the landscape of the Navajo Nation, and her second, *Coyote's Canyon* (1989), continues the project in the desert of her native Utah. "I think each of

2. *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (New York: Pantheon, 1991), 148–49.

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my books has turned on a question,” Williams tells Ona Siporin. “With *Pieces of White Shell* it was ‘What stories do we tell that evoke a sense of place?’ In many ways, the Navajo sent me back home. And with *Coyote’s Canyon* it was ‘Okay, do I have those stories within my own culture?’” (p. 70).

In *Refuge*, Williams’s notion of landscape broadens to include that of her family, religion, and culture. In the process of this shift, her *poetics of place* grew into a *politics of place*, as her writing combined its initial emphasis on the narrative gifts of the land with a sense of urgency in speaking on the land’s behalf. Unlike the gradual, often undetectable changes in a writer’s ideological orientation over time, this one occurred during the course of a single conversation—a conversation with her father that forms the basis of the essay that concludes *Refuge*: “The Clan of the One-Breasted Women.” In her interview with David Petersen, she describes the momentous impact of that conversation: “For years, every time I went south into the desert, I would have these horrifying dreams of nuclear explosions. But it wasn’t until a year after Mother’s death that my father told me I had in fact witnessed such an explosion. Suddenly, all the pieces of the puzzle came together for me. I realized we, too, were downwinders. Suddenly, my poetics of place evolved into a politics of place. It was then that I made the decision to write *Refuge*” (p. 19).

Soon after the publication of *Refuge*, Williams’s attention shifted to her third conceptual framework, which she calls the *erotics of place*. Perhaps no phrase in Williams entire oeuvre has evoked as much critical commentary—or misunderstanding—as this one. With strong echoes of the notion of Eros as defined by Plato in the *Symposium*, Williams posits erotic longing as the foundation of connection. Eros develops from the realization that we are incomplete and fragmented—that the mask of wholeness that we present to the world is an illusion. Even if our minds do not acknowledge this incompleteness, our bodies understand it, sensing that, as isolated organisms, we are not whole. We long for connection, for completion, and this is the starting point of desire. When we focus on relationships, “we are engaged, we are vulnerable, we are both giving and receiving, we are fully present in that moment, and we are able to heighten our capacity for passion which I think is the full range of emotion, both the joy and sorrow that one feels when in wild country” (p. 75). For Williams, the erotic algebra of longing and desire is rooted in the land. Meaningful intimacy between people and meaningful intimacy with the natural world proceed from the same sense of longing. As she tells Justine Toms, “our lack of intimacy with the land has initiated a lack of intimacy with each other” (p. 32).

There is a key distinction for Williams, as for other feminists and social theorists, between the erotic and the pornographic. The erotic is based on genuine connection to, sharing with, and acceptance of another’s whole being, on intimacy.

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Pornography involves domination, control, and the perception of another as a mechanism for satisfying desires. In her essay “The Erotic Landscape,” Williams quotes Audry Lorde to define “pornography” as “sensation without feeling.”³ In her interviews, she expands on the notion. “When love is only one-way,” she tells Derrick Jensen, “eventually it becomes pornographic, a body that is used, rather than a body that is shared” (p. 36). When the pornographic impulse—the desire to subjugate, use, and control—is transferred to the land, the result is strip mining, pollution, mountaintop removal, sprawling development, extinctions, and, ultimately, the destruction of wildness, whose value can never be understood within the confines of a pornographic relationship.

Writing the Body

The body does not lie. Therefore, if we write out of the body, we are writing out of the truth of our lives. This creates a language that is organic and whole . . . The body is the realm of the story. And it is in story that we bypass rhetoric and pierce the heart. We feel it first and understand it later. Memory resides in the body. Memorization resides in the mind.

—Terry Tempest Williams to Jana Bouck Remy (p. 151)

In both her writing and her interviews, Terry Tempest Williams takes seriously the work of French feminist scholars—foremost among them Hélène Cixous—who exclaim that women should write from the body. “Write yourself,” Cixous writes in *The Newly Born Women*, “your body must make itself heard. Then the huge resources of the unconscious will burst out. Finally the inexhaustible feminine Imaginary is going to be deployed.”⁴ In many ways, *Leap*, Williams’s follow-up to *Refuge*, is about the discovery of the body. After she sees the *Garden of Earthly Delights* for the first time in the Prado, Williams remembers that she had seen two of the three panels before:

We turned, and there we were, confronted with El jardín de las delicias, The Garden of Earthly Delights, by Hieronymus Bosch. At that moment, I realized I knew the painting, or at least part of it: the panels of Paradise and Hell. My grandmother had thumbtacked these prints above the bed where we slept as children. What I didn’t know . . . was the whole center panel, the panel of

3. *Red: Passion and Patience in the Desert* (New York: Pantheon, 2001), 108.

4. Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betty Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 97.

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earthly delights; I never knew that existed. The body, the body of the triptych, my body—and a seven-year search ensued. (p. 116)

In the pages of *Leap*, the center panel thus becomes a figural representation of the body, in the process challenging religious orthodoxies that try to suppress the physical self and undermine both sexuality and femininity.

Williams goes beyond the normal understanding of *écriture féminine* by joining it with her passion for wild spaces. For her, wildness represents a force that is at once restorative, transgressive, erotic, playful, and deeply intuitive—all terms that French feminist theory applies to the feminine body and to the art that flows from it. *Leap* explores the complicated relationship between art, nature, physicality, and spirituality. All are governed by an ideal of wildness rooted in both body and landscape—connections that she explores further in her interview with Jana Bouck Remy:

The body carries the physical reality of our spirits like a river. Institutional thinking is fearful of rivers because rivers inevitably follow their own path, and that channel may change from day to day, even though the muscle of the river, the property of water remains consistent, life sustaining, fierce, and compassionate, at once. To write out of the body is to write ourselves into a freedom. It is here we can let go of fear and trust the joy that is held in each movement of the hand, word by word by word. (p. 151)

Perhaps no work better displays Williams's fusion of French feminist theory and the landscape of the American West than her small book *Desert Quartet*, a series of four brief vignettes that she describes in her interview with Ona Siporin as her effort to "write out of the body and to create a narrative where it was of the flesh, and even ask the question, 'What might it mean to make love to the land?' Not in an expletive manner, but in a manner of reciprocity" (p. 70). In this book she showcases what her other works and interviews only describe: a landscape that serves as a touchstone for both bodily desire and the longing for spiritual connection—the very elements that make up an erotics of place. Her thinking here merits careful consideration, as it refuses to simplify either wilderness or Eros. In "The Erotic Landscape," she writes that the erotic "calls the inner life into play. No longer numb, we feel the magnetic pull in our bodies toward something stronger, more vital than simply ourselves. Arousal becomes a dance with longing. We form a secret partnership with possibility."⁵

5. Red, 106.

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Writing from the body, for Williams, means not only ignoring the censorship of logic and reason, but also overriding the protective mechanisms built into us by evolution and adaptation. She is fond of quoting Cixous's maxim that "the only book worth writing is the book that threatens to kill us" (p. 125). Our defense mechanisms, she believes, become our greatest censors, and our biggest obstacle to writing the truth. In my interview with her, I asked her about the paradox of trying to write from the body while at the same time trying to ignore our natural protective instincts. Characteristically, her answer both embraced and dispelled the paradox:

We are mammals. We want to survive. It's part of our evolution. But it is also in our evolutionary interest to take risks. Whether we are Mormon, Catholic, Buddhist, or whatever our spiritual tradition is, there are conditionings that create an "ought" and a "should." As writers, we have to bypass the oughts and shoulds to the "what is." I think this really goes to the heart of the matter of exposing our true selves. Inherently, we don't think people are interested in what we have to say, and we don't have any confidence that our voice matters. So writing against our instincts is also believing that maybe we do have something to say. (p. 184)

The Religious Dance

I am a Mormon woman. I am not orthodox. It is the lens through which I see the world. I hear the Tabernacle Choir and it still makes me weep. There are other things within the culture that absolutely enrage me, and for me it is a sacred rage.

—Terry Tempest Williams to Scott London (p. 55)

To acknowledge that which we cannot see, to give definition to that which we do not know, to create divine order out of chaos, is the religious dance.

—*Refuge*, p. 196

For many of Williams's readers, her complex relationship with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints stands as a formidable obstacle to her work. Mormon readers often express frustration with her unorthodoxy and her criticisms of the faith's emphasis on conformity, authority, and patriarchy.⁶ Non-Mormon readers, on the other hand, are equally confused by her refusal to reject Mormonism entirely

6. For an overview of Mormon reactions to *Refuge*, see Michael Austin, "Finding God in the Desert: Landscape and Belief in Three Modern Mormon Classics"

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and by her repeated insistences that she is a Mormon woman, an inhabitant of a culture, and an heir to a rich spiritual tradition. This culture and tradition serve as the fountainhead of the values that pervade her work: family, history, spirituality, and connections to the land. As she writes in *Leap*: “I cannot escape my history, nor can I ignore the lineage that is mine. Most importantly, I don’t want to.”⁷

Williams has carried out her religious dance in full view of her readers, in an extended narrative that develops gradually through her work. In her first two books—*Pieces of White Shell* and *Coyote’s Canyon*—her religion remains safely on the sidelines. In *Refuge*, however, it becomes a major focus. As she tells Jana Bouck Remy, her early drafts of *Refuge* attempted to avoid Mormon issues, but her editor pushed her to deal with them explicitly (p. 155). For most of *Refuge*, Williams presents Mormonism in a positive light. It is the source of the family traditions that she honors, and it is also the source of the land ethic that she has always professed. “Genealogy is in our blood,” she writes. “As a people and as a family, we have a sense of history. And our history is tied to land.”⁸ The 19th-century Mormon experience in the Salt Lake Valley provides an extremely rich storehouse for Williams. Early Mormons, as she explains, emphasized such concepts as communitarian economics, the existence of a divine feminine being, and, perhaps most important, the function of wilderness as a place of refuge.⁹

Mormonism does not become a paradox in Williams’s work until “The Clan of the One-Breasted Women,” where she describes the impact that her knowledge of nuclear testing had on her faith. Though the testing was not, of course, carried on by Mormons, it did cause her to reject the unquestioning devotion to authority that she sees in her faith. Once she discovered that her mother’s death may have been caused by this testing, she recognized “that the price of obedience is too high” and concluded, “I could never go back . . . back to the same place in the family, the same place within Mormon culture” (p. 19).

The rupture between faith and authority that comes to the surface in “The Clan of the One-Breasted Women” becomes the main focus of *Leap*, which, she tells Remy, she views as “a sequel to *Refuge* in many ways” (p. 150). *Leap*’s extended meditation on Hieronymus Bosch’s medieval triptych painting allows her “to see various patterns and connections within [her] own religion and homeland” (p. 150). Specifically, the three panels of the *Garden of Earthly Delights*, which

in *Literature and Belief* 23:1 (2003), 51-52. Williams also brings up some of these critiques in her interview with Jana Bouck Remy on pp. 146-59.

7. *Leap* (New York: Pantheon, 2000), 177.
8. *Refuge*, 14.
9. *Ibid.*, 99-103; 241; 13, 69.

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represent *Paradise*, *Earthly Delights*, and *Hell*, correspond to the three “Kingdoms of Glory” in traditional Mormon eschatology: the Celestial, Terrestrial, and Telestial kingdoms. Williams told me that “I always imagine that my audience is a Mormon one. *Leap* is a book that certainly has a Mormon reader in mind” (p. 182).

Yet Williams’s relationship to Mormonism in *Leap* is very different than it is in *Refuge*. The question that she identifies, to Michael Toms, as the prime mover of *Leap* is “What happens when our institutions no longer feed us” (p. 120)? Whereas *Refuge* focused on the communal and nurturing aspects of Mormon families, *Leap* shines its light on the corporate, conservative aspects of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In one of the book’s most memorable passages, Williams acknowledges the painful distance between herself and her religious culture. “I weep in the midst of my people,” she writes, after describing a jingoistic stadium rally celebrating Mormon pioneer heritage. “I weep because I recognize I no longer believe as I once did. I weep because I do not believe there is only one true church. I weep because within my own homeland I suddenly feel foreign, so very, very foreign.”¹⁰

It is crucial to note, though, as Williams does in both *Leap* and *Refuge*, that there is room in the 150-year-old Mormon tradition for environmental activism, community organization, and even challenges to authority. In the 19th century, Mormons were driven into the Utah desert and adopted it as their own place of refuge. Their persecution stemmed largely from their unorthodox marriage practices. The theology that they espoused held that God was a corporeal being—a deity of “body, parts, and passions.” Williams presents her crisis of faith in *Leap* not as a fundamental quarrel between Mormonism and progressive ideology but as a historical conflict between two different versions of Mormonism: 19th-century Mormonism, which was transgressive, erotic, charismatic, and connected to the land; and 20th-century Mormonism, which has become bureaucratic, conservative, conformist, and hostile to the environment. Yet Williams has always held out hope that Mormonism can be reconciled with its roots. To this end, she coedited the volume *New Genesis: A Mormon Reader on Land and Community* (1998), which presents essays by 39 well-known Mormons on environmentalism. Williams tells David Thomas Sumner, “I am convinced there is a broader vision within Mormonism. There is something beautiful and meaningful here on the edges of this ‘American religion,’ as Harold Bloom has called it. I do not believe that a fundamentalist viewpoint is all that is available to members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints” (p. 102).

10. *Leap*, 180–81.