



Marco Wilkinson

Self-Speaking World

Introduction: The Great Lung

What is the self and what does it have to say for itself? For the most part the answers to these questions are narratives of individual lives, struggles, epiphanies. Narratives navigate solid unproblematic bodies through comfortably familiar natural and social landscapes. The preoccupations of nonfiction writers lie in how stories are told and by whom, in what is being told and how true it is. In *The Art of Time in Memoir*, Sven Birkerts draws a distinction between autobiography and memoir. The former is “the line of a life” (Birkerts 53) while the latter emphasizes life remembered and what the structures of that memory reveal about the life narrated. What goes without saying in Birkerts’ analysis is the underlying concept of the self upon which both forms are predicated. Both autobiography and memoir are self-narratives. Though one may rely on external social “facts” and the other may rely on internal emotional “truths,” neither could exist without a “self” at their center. But what is this centerpiece? The question seems ridiculous and the answer self-evident. Clearly the center of autobiographies and memoirs are individual people.

And yet, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, writes of the self that “it is as if my mouth were connected to some great lung outside myself which alternately calls forth and forces back my breath” (qtd. in Abram 55). This is a radical reconfiguration of the landscape of the self, where the easy bodies of autobiography become difficult and the steady minds of memoirs become uneasy. When the lung is “outside,” the body recovered and the mind remembered enlarge, and agency becomes dislocated when breathing lies in exhalations “call[ed] forth” and inhalations “forc[ed] back.” The self

tells its story, whether as autobiography, lyric, essay, memoir, or some other form, and in the body of “the great lung” these songs are all the tunes of a crazy person talking to themselves. If a self were to dive beneath concerns of form, authenticity, and truthfulness in what it says, and rather question just what it itself is and what/how/why it should say, then a whole exciting world of narrative possibility opens up.

Underlying the analyses of the works below is a phenomenological approach in which, as deep ecologist Neil Evernden puts it, “we are not talking just about observable interactions between subjects and objects but rather about a very complete interrelation of self and world, so complete that the world could serve as a definition of the self” (Evernden 81). When considering the question of just what comprises a “self” one necessarily has to consider how the “self” relates to the “not-self.”

Anthropologist David Abram, in reviewing phenomenological concepts from an ecological perspective, writes that the “body is a sort of open circuit that completes itself only in things, in others, in the encompassing earth” (Abram 62). It is no accident that these two quotations, from Neil Evernden’s *Natural Alien* and David Abram’s *Spell of the Sensuous* respectively, have as their subject the relationship of humans to the natural world. The following texts ultimately search for a mode of self-enunciation that eludes/undoes/repudiates narratives of self founded in definition through delineation, in violence as foundational utterance, and move the human toward the non-human as the primary axis upon which to consider “self”-hood.

The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas: Self as Mirror, Self as Relationship

Inasmuch as the genre of autobiography is “a line of a life,” it may also be a genre of history and a narrative of exteriorities. Autobiography is a record of the narrator’s senses, and thus ironically, an autobiography’s subject may be a summation of all the objects in its subject’s (i.e., narrator’s) life. The truest accounting of a life might very well be like a life lived without mirrors, completely outwardly directed and unself-conscious.

The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas plays with just this question for the genre of autobiography. The text is, as the title denotes, the self-told story of the life of Alice B. Toklas, partner of the American modernist writer Gertrude Stein. Leaving aside for the moment the obvious complication that the author of this text is not in fact Toklas but Stein, the book treats in a very unornamented but nonetheless gossipy way the social, professional, and artistic life of the circle of artists, writers, and others that gathered in Stein's and Toklas' famous rue de Fleurus home in Paris in the first half of the twentieth century. Throughout the account, Stein emerges as the protagonist and the primary character, the sun about which all the lesser planets orbit in this system, and the "I," i.e., Toklas, recedes to the point of near invisibility, in the same way that an eye can never see itself. Toklas becomes the witness, and so the text reveals "autobiography" as "testament," self-writing as the self narrating all that it experiences, which is necessarily everything but itself. Toklas is the panopticon guard, the witness of Stein's life bounded by the walls of Toklas' gaze.

Early in *The Autobiography*, it is explained that Gertrude, after posing for her portrait by Picasso, would walk down from Montmartre to her apartment, sometimes accompanied by the Picassos for Saturday dinner. She writes, "During these long poses and long walks she meditated and made sentences. She was then in the middle of her negro story Melanctha Herbert, the second story of *Three Lives* and the poignant incidents that she wove into the life of Melanctha were often these she noticed walking down the hill from the rue Ravignan" (Stein 49). The scene is of a writer moving through the world and doing the inner mental work of crafting text, in this case by weaving external circumstances into the world of the story, and yet what is provided here are merely the externals. The reader is given no access to the internal world of thought that is actually what this scene is about because this story is precisely not about the person walking the streets of Paris writing stories in her head, but about the person who witnesses this, that is, Alice B. Toklas. The gaze of the witness rebounds and the testament becomes really a testament not of what the subject *is* but of what the witness *sees*.

At least, that is one way of reading *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. However, the reader is nagged by the persistent fact that this *autobiography* is authored by Gertrude Stein, not Alice B. Toklas. There is a cognitive dissonance here that can't be overcome. Here, one might consider Foucault's work on Jeremy Bentham's prison-design, the panopticon. Such a design takes into account the curious nature of sight and selfhood such that a person may see all that is around them and every part of themselves except for one small spot at the crown of their heads. The panopticon's central guard tower around which prison cells are arrayed serves as the ultimate vantage point, as the Other who can claim totality of apprehension over the Self. As with Merleau-Ponty's "great lung," one glimpses a space in which the self does not emanate from within, but rather is "called forth" by an external force, in this case the guard/witness. Perhaps it is never the subject who is *authorized* (in every sense of that word) to write the history of the self, but rather the other, the only one who can bear witness to the blind spot of the subject.

When the only person who can completely apprehend oneself is another, then one pathway towards autobiography is to step out of oneself and *imagine* the self through the eyes of the guard/witness. What Stein attempts is not merely her own subjective self-appraisal but rather an objective holistic accounting by leaping out of herself and into the eyes of the primary witness/guard of her life, her partner Alice. This leads to the frustratingly opaque style of the text with its near-diaristic recounting of activities and conversations without a clear thread of plot or pacing.

If this were merely Stein's attempt to narrate the events of her own life through the eyes of another then it might be titled *The Biography of Gertrude Stein as Told by Alice B. Toklas*. Stein pushes the reader with her chosen title to still consider how this story really is about Toklas. In a tender scene, "Toklas" recounts how Stein is very patient when her cherished knick-knacks break and that in most cases it is she, Toklas, who breaks them: "I always beg her to promise to let me have them mended by an expert before I tell her which it is that is broken, she always replies she gets no pleasure out of them if they are mended but alright have it mended and it is mended and it gets put away" (88). In an all-too-

common scene among couples or any close relationship, something is broken by one person, who tries to fix it, and the other person resists but finally gives in. In recounting her own reactions to the breaking of these objects through “Toklas” appraisal, Stein simultaneously finds a way to be self-conscious about her own behavior while inhabiting the viewpoint of the other person involved in the scene. What is this but empathy? What is this but love?

In writing her own autobiography through the eyes of her partner and calling it Alice’s autobiography, Stein is not only problematizing the stability of any concept of “self” or “subject” as expressionistic, but is gesturing towards a radical reconfiguration in which subjectivity resides not in one body or the other, but in the relationship between the two, as in Abram’s formulation that the “body is a sort of open circuit that completes itself only in things, in others.” This is ultimately an ecological text in the sense that identity does not complete itself in an individual body or narrative of the “life-line” of that body, but in relationships. Through Stein’s seeming coyness in titling this work an “autobiography,” Stein has created space for a larger concept of self, one which might even extend beyond the sphere of her relationship to Alice B. Toklas. The reader takes Stein at her word, albeit problematically, that this is a work of “autobiography.” However the reader of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* may be just as likely to approach it as history. If one way to reconsider self-narrative is by acknowledging the panoptical blind spot of the subject and the necessity of the witness/guard as the only one who can truly offer an accounting of that self, then such an account, in totalizing a person’s “autobiography” through their relations with others, would necessarily result in a history. In which case, the “self” narrated is dispersed through a network of relations and encounters. As “Toklas” recounts all of Stein’s encounters, what Stein has created is really a history of the artistic and literary community of Paris in the first third of the twentieth century. The only way to understand the scope of an “autobiography” encompassing the whole milieu in which Stein and Toklas lived is to see that milieu as constitutive of the “self” being narrated into being.

The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers: Self as Target, Self as Kaleidoscope

If *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* engages its reader to reconsider the limits of a conventional understanding of “self” by extending its boundaries outwards and taking on as its surface that body’s partner, community, and historical moment, Bhanu Kapil’s *Vertical Interrogation of Strangers* asks what happens when the outside world pierces the boundary of the individual self and invades and colonizes and terrorizes—when Merleau-Ponty’s “great lung” “forces back breath” into the individual body. The text, in stark opposition to *The Autobiography*’s plain speech, is fractured and baffling, uneasily handled by the reader and unwelcoming to any analysis attempting fabrication of some stable body called “self.” *Vertical Interrogation of Strangers* is tenuously an exploration of the horrors of Indian/Pakistani partition and the alienation of a diasporic life. When inhalation is a “forc[ing] back” the self is liable to burst and scatter in a kaleidoscope of shards, sharp and painful to the touch.

The introduction provides the reader with a straight-forward if innovative method of anthropological interview. The author has created a list of twelve questions to be asked of other Indian women. Her subjects will enter a windowless, featureless room for a half-hour and during that time record or write their answers to the questions, all the while answering the overarching question, “Is it possible for you to say the thing you have never been able to say, not even to the one you have spent your whole life loving?” (Kapil 6). Speaking the self is speaking that which has never been able to be said, and it is accomplished alone and in the anonymous and hidden space of an enclosed moment of time. It seems no coincidence that Kapil’s subjects engage the question of themselves in pursuit of the unsayable for a half-hour, when Buddhist meditation periods are also thirty minutes long.

Kapil’s project as she imagined it was to compile an anthology of Indian women’s voices, a polyphonous (cacophonous?) chorus. Perhaps she hoped for a kaleidoscope of experience that in its multiplicity would resolve itself into some hazy form of a body called “Indian woman.” Kapil opens the

book with an epigraph from French feminist Helene Cixous which reads in part: “As a subject for history, woman always occurs simultaneously in several places. (In woman, personal history blends together with the history of all women, as well as national and world history)” (qtd. in Kapil, front matter). It would seem that Kapil’s project is to gather and recount the voice of the “Indian woman” scattered throughout the world in the bodies of countless individual women. In a diasporic world her aim is to bridge borders and stitch together one country of Indian womanhood.

Perhaps. But then, in her introduction, she notes that as she shuttled through the “countries of her birth (England), ancestry (India), and residence (America), I answered the questions again and again” (Kapil 7) and in the process it seems as if this centripetal in-gathering reversed itself. Rather than collecting other voices from around the globe, Kapil found herself scattering her own voice across space. She interrogates herself and finds a series of “strangers.” Her answers to her own questions end up not only in her notebook, but “on stickers that I affixed to escalator tubing, café tables, shop windows” (Kapil 7). In chasing down the voices of others Kapil confronts her own answers and sets them loose on the world. Cixous, in the epigraph Kapil quotes, writes of the woman who writes so that “other women, other unacknowledged sovereigns, might exclaim: I too, overflow... have felt so full of luminous torrents I could burst...” (qtd. in Kapil, front matter). Here is an image of joyous exuberance, of no-control, of chain reaction. Kapil concludes her introduction with the enigmatic conclusion: “The project as I wrote it: a tilted plane” (Kapil 7). Not the ethnographic survey, not the equilibrium of multiple voices arranged into a whole, but rather an ambiguous “tilted plane.” Kapil may be on the receiving end of the downward rush of her subject’s voices, finding herself reading and listening to their meditations until she too, like an “unacknowledged sovereign... overflow[s]” with “luminous torrents,” or the plane may tilt away, the interrogator finding herself giving everything away, spilling the beans, uncontrollably “bursting” into self across space.

The text itself confounds expectations. The reader presumes that what follows her introduction will be the project she sets out in the introduction, that of interviewing Indian women around the world, however that might be complicated by Kapil's reaction to the project of affixing her own answers in the world around her. They first encounter "Twelve Questions," a page of twelve questions ranging from the straightforward "What is the shape of your body?" to the more uncomfortable "Tell me what you know about dismemberment" to the provocative "And what would you say if you could?" (Kapil 9). The questions feel combative in their simplicity, meant to provoke introspection and discomfort. Particularly "Who was responsible for the suffering of your mother?" resonates with the language of Zen koans ("Show me your face before your parents were born."). Presumably these are her interview questions, but no explanation is given. The questions may be meant for her subjects or perhaps for her self/selves. Ultimately, and most obviously, they are meant for her readers. She forces the reader from the very beginning into the position of interrogation subject, into the "room without windows" of the experience of reading. The eye is lined up with and pressed against the dark hole of the kaleidoscope.

What follows are 98 sections, 98 "answers" to these twelve questions. Immediately the reader is disoriented: the first section does not correspond to the first question of the list and as the text continues Kapil follows no discernible order in how questions are answered. Eventually even the "answers" slip away from the questions and the body of each section seems to bear only an oblique (if that) relation to the question that heads it. Everywhere in the text from introduction through to its end, Kapil's language defies tethering, coherence, readability. Darkness gives way as the kaleidoscope is tilted to the sun to reveal a thousand tumbling colors. The "great lung" "forces" itself in and the body bursts in "luminous torrents."

What emerges in the thinnest of threads are themes of relationships: with a lover, with her parents, with place and culture. The lover is always linked with "going," whether travel or departure. To the question, "Who are you and whom do you love?" the answer is a circular series of images, from the

lover's departure and lighting candles in a basin as she did before he left to the increasing distance between their two bodies – sunlight, cows, hummingbirds, death – until it winds around to “a man who is about to knock on the door of a woman with black eyes, to tell her that he loves her; the woman herself, who is drawing a bath” (Kapil 14). But the woman doesn't hear the knock of the door over the water of the filling bath into which she will float candles. And anyway “her eyes aren't really black. They're brown” (Kapil 14). The romance of the lover enthralled by black eyes is undone by the reality of merely brown eyes, the roar of the water into the tub obscuring the knock on the door. Rather than the images circling around to return the gone lover to the narrator, the circle's line spins out into space: “Floating candles. The incommensurable distance. I forgot to memorize his face” (Kapil 14), leaving the narrator without even memory of her lover.

In the same way, the sections of the text spiral and shatter and whirl kaleidoscopically in transits that never cohere into one through-line of a life. Whether on a plane “jammed between a Kuwaiti advertising executive and a Chinese girl from Vancouver” (Kapil 43) on her way to Bombay, or searching with her grandfather for the place he “tried to return all his life, but couldn't... through the forests of Himachal, towards Gangotri [the source of the Ganges]” (Kapil 42) or crossing the flaming newly-born border of Partition seeing women tied to trees with their wombs cut open (Kapil 54, 66), the woman's/ women's voices experience travel as never-ending, as a decentering, a failure, a trauma.

In Louis Althusser's metaphor for subject formation, one is walking down the street, when from behind a policeman calls out, “Hey, you there!” At the moment one turns around, one comes into being as a social subject, bound by the definition of being addressed (Althusser 174). This coming-into-being takes into account that the “self” does not unfurl from some innate core so much as emerge through an endless series of responses to outside demands. Kapil takes this further. Her questions are “interrogations,” meant to pierce and expose. What emerges is not a self molded by response, but a

kaleidoscopic refracting or spilling of the trauma of having to answer. The interrogated will say anything in order to survive, be anything the interrogator needs her to be.

At two different moments, Kapil writes, “she is thinking that her body is not in one straight line” (Kapil 22) and “I am not in one straight line” (Kapil 65). The self being constructed in this text is far from the “line of a life” that is autobiography. Unclear even whose life is being mapped by the answers to these insistent questions and demands, the text suggests that “self” is at best tentative, contradictory, and afraid, but also communal, shot through with otherness, open to empathy. The “self” is in fact “selves.” A reverberating ripple through the text are stories of women’s bodies being brutalized, literally partitioned by war, border disputes, migration. Kapil writes of Hindu women tied to trees, “their wombs hanging out of their stomachs” and of Serbs that “have made a practice of cutting out the wombs of women they rape, then hanging these wombs on poles.” She offers these horrifying images because she has vowed never to write merely of art, but rather to write a “book of blood” (Kapil 54). This vow is empathetic, a fearless taking-in of other’s lives and an unflinching blood-deep incorporation of them into the “self” of this book, a body to hold the memory and the trauma. This vow is activist, refracting onto and contaminating the world with this unruly self, that in being “forced,” defiantly spills all its selves out in “luminous torrents” onto stickers “affixed to escalator tubing, café tables, shop windows” (Kapil 7).

Creaturely and Other Essays: Self as Animal, Animal as Self

If Kapil investigates the self shattering under the pressure of the “great lung,” Devin Johnston considers how that lung “forces” its way into many bodies at once and how the “call[ing] forth” from them constitutes multiple worlds whose membranes rub one against the other and that, if one had ears to hear and eyes to see, collapse into one world. Devin Johnston’s *Creaturely* is a collection of essays structured by the walks he takes his dog, Chester, on through the streets of St. Louis. Or rather, one might write that

the walks are ones his dog takes him on. Like some Virgil guiding the writer through previously unknown worlds, Johnston's dog uses his nose to navigate a world apart from his human companion.

Whereas Johnston notices "the sweet smell of hops from the Budweiser Brewery, a lawn mower's clippings, and gasoline sloshed on the curb... traces of old urine and turds are Chester's expertise: he examines each stain as if under a glass slide" (Johnston 4). Two beings on a journey together experience completely different perceptual worlds. Inasmuch as Johnston's essays are narratives of self, of his personal experience moving through the landscape(s) of St. Louis, this question of the multiplicity of worlds simultaneously perceived tugs at the definition of the border of the self as it relates to space and to the other beings inhabiting that space.

As Johnston notes, smell and taste are peculiar as senses because what they perceive is information from particulate matter. They are the decoders of "matter blown apart" and that in order to accomplish this, "smells invade our sensorium and adhere" (Johnston 5). As dust wafting on unseen breezes, bodily traces' "insides are out, nothing is private" and as one smells and tastes what those breezes bring "the outside is in again" (Johnston 4), melded into the fabric of our life as perception. Smell unravels the boundaries of space. Similarly, the trace of what is long absent "remains a palpable presence. We are so accustomed to the certainties of sight that olfaction baffles time. It ripples through the world like books or dreams" (Johnston 5).

In this opening gesture of this collection of essays on animal wandering, self and its relation to space and time are re-evaluated vis à vis the senses. Who one is is complicated by how one knows, because, like a dog reading the world with its nose, one creates oneself, i.e., creates what one knows, out of the matter of others. This understanding of self extends throughout Johnston's meditations on the animal, questioning the distance humans establish between themselves and the animal while also avoiding the pitfall of merely anthropomorphizing animal subjects by integrating them into a human world. It is important that Johnston begins this book of essays with the awareness that as he and his animal

companion take a walk together, they are walking in different worlds. To extend and complicate the Merleau-Ponty metaphor of the “great lung,” Johnston might consider that while it breathes into dogs’ through their noses, it breathes into humans through their eyes.

Derrida, in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, offers a framework for understanding this simultaneous shared/separate world of Johnston and his dog on a walk. For Derrida, the scene is of himself and his cat in the bathroom. Derrida, standing naked, sees his cat looking at him and a certain mode of human subjectivity is put in crisis: “I am seen and seen naked, before even seeing *myself* seen by a cat... I am presented to it before even introducing myself” (Derrida 11). The opening for Derrida’s analysis (and for Johnston’s essays) comes when he realizes that without being seen his cat still has the power to see. The animal can be a subject, and moreover, as such, it can communicate: “What does it [the cat] ‘say’ to me, demonstrating quite simply the naked truth of every gaze, when that truth *allows me to see and be seen* through the eyes of the other, in the *seeing* and not just *seen* eyes of the other” (Derrida 12)? What Derrida is confronting here is the weight of a whole Western scientific discourse built upon the premise that the animal, and by extension, the whole non-human world, has nothing to say, that it is incapable of “facing them [scientists, philosophers]... and in a word, without a word, *address[ing] them*” (Derrida 13). Human-ness, as opposed to animality, is constructed to the degree that Derrida in his bathroom can turn away from the gaze of his cat and “because I no longer see it seeing me still, from behind, I therefore risk forgetting” (Derrida 11). In “call[ing] forth” from Johnston’s dog and Derrida’s cat (noting that the possessive here is problematic and “forgetful”), the “great lung” draws voice from both. However, it is this willed forgetting of the wordless address of the animal that constitutes the human, who defines herself/himself by the unique ability to speak. (It is no accident that early anatomists, when vivisectioning animals for study, would first sever the vocal cords so as to mute the animals’ screams.) Of course, Derrida’s work is precisely a remembrance rather than a forgetting, as is Johnston’s.

Recurring through the procession of Johnston's essays are starlings. Like Derrida's cat's unanticipated gaze, the starlings are unbidden subjects in the landscape, having been brought to the United States on a literary whim and now present everywhere. Johnston notes that starlings' songs are a pastiche of the sounds of their environment. Like Toklas' life the sum total of her interactions with the world and like Chester the dog's connoisseurial inhalations in which the "outside is in again," the starlings incorporate, are constituted by, the aural world around them. Like Kapil, the starlings sing and spill in "luminous torrents" traces of this world/themselves everywhere. Mozart had a pet starling named Vogel Star, who upon hearing one of his piano concertos incorporated it into its own song. Like Derrida, Mozart was seen without seeing, "presented to it before introducing myself," when Vogel Star began singing Mozart's own music back to him with its own variations. Wonder-struck, Mozart is thought to have in turn incorporated some of Vogel Star's influence into subsequent works (Johnston 35). Here is a moment, in Mozart's adoption of Vogel Star's song, of the kind of remembering that Derrida is advocating.

Johnston takes this a step further when he describes a forlorn human space "past desolate industrial towns" where strippers and prostitutes and factories congregate. "Incongruously, waste fields and boggy wetlands separate these businesses" (Johnston 36) and in these spaces are deer in the windbreaks and wild turkeys on the shoulder of the road. This eerie juxtaposition of the shadow of human civilization with the presence of the "natural" in the form of animals living out their lives is akin to Derrida's ethical dilemma in the bathroom where he can either willfully forget or consciously remember that even with his back turned the cat still sees him and in its wordless way still addresses him. Even where humanity attempts to forget itself, where humans come to do things unseen, the deer and the turkeys look on.

And the starlings too. Johnston notes that a group of starlings are gathered on the roof of an abandoned copper smelting factory, attentively listening to this landscape where humanity turns its back.

Hearing the collective song of a “murmuration” (collective) of starlings, Johnston, back home, wonders at their song. Condensing all they have heard, the birds “sift the ambience of the day. Their chorus accrues much we will never hear, learnt from unpopulated grain fields, parking lots, and unlivable spaces that we have built” (Johnston 40). Far from mere background chatter, these starlings’ songs are the “address” of subjectivity, the wordless call by the animal to the human that throws humanity back at itself while unfolding for starling and human, for prostitute and deer, for Johnston and Chester an intersubjective matrix of a world where selves emerge through each other. Like Toklas as witness/guard, the starlings give an accounting of humanity’s blind spots—its eerily unpopulated monocultural expanses, its asphalted non-spaces, its shuttered factories—and in so doing blur the line of animal and self with their wordless voices. The human narrative is incomplete without the animal as witness, but moreover the human narrative is an animal narrative.

Johnston’s work, far from being merely observational, is an ecological ethical challenge to the reader just as Derrida’s analysis is far from mere sophism. Both draw the reader to the conclusion that animals, and by extension the entirety of the non-human world, are directly addressing humans with their presence and are not merely objects in a human world. Derrida, in leading his reader to understand that humanity is constituted by turning its back on the animal’s gaze and forgetting it is still there even when humanity does not see it, implies that in choosing not to forget humans are no longer human. Rather humans are animal in an animal world. Or perhaps animals are humans in a human world. Either is a version of the same thing: a unified world of intersubjective experience from which a completely new set of ethics would have to emerge. Johnston’s conclusion that the starlings bring back to humanity the song of every landscape it has created, from industrial monocultural crop deserts to the asphalted expanses of strip malls, makes them ecological witnesses and their songs simultaneously a definition and an indictment of what humanity is.

The final scene in *Creaturely* haunts with just this indictment. It is of Johnston walking across a park and coming upon “what’s left of an exploded mockingbird. A halo of feathers surrounds the ravaged remains – brains gone, astonished eye still in its head” (Johnston 101). Looking at this animal – this world – run over by humanity, can it see that the bird looks back and completes its story?

Refuge: Self as Place, Self as Community

Terry Tempest Williams’ *Refuge* takes up this complex coming to terms with a self brought into being and in dialogue with its environment. In recounting her family’s struggle with cancer in tandem with the natural and man-made history of the Great Salt Lake, Williams might be seen to take up where Johnston leaves off by choosing to listen to the address of the non-human world and responding. Williams’ memoir opens with her sitting among journals. “I open them and feathers fall from their pages, sand cracks their spines, and sprigs of sage pressed between passages of pain heighten my sense of smell—and I remember the country I come from and how it informs my life” (Williams 3). In this first image, sandwiched, like the feathers and sage she describes, between the devastation of the Great Salt Lake’s flood and the devastation of cancer on the women of her family, Williams constructs a text literally made of the environment around her.

Of all the works considered here, *Refuge* is most explicitly a work of environmental advocacy in the political sense. In the first chapter, Williams drives out to the Bear River Wildlife Refuge, which is threatened by the rising levels of the lake, with an older friend, Sandy. Williams, the narrator, in writing that “conversation which finds its way into the car often manifests itself later on the land” (Williams 10), gestures towards a relationship between the human and the natural. The conversation she records between the two women is of women’s bodies, like the earth, being mined by men. Asked by her older friend if she feels rage, Williams can only answer that what she feels is sadness, to which Sandy replies, “Perhaps your generation, one behind mine, is a step removed from the pain” (Williams 11). The passage

is slightly emotionally opaque on first reading, but comes alive when revisited with the knowledge that Williams' mother, grandmother, and countless other older women have suffered and succumbed to cancer (particularly breast cancer) as a result of the nuclear testing conducted in the western desert.

Here, the lake and the desert don't exist merely as scenic backdrop to a human interaction but completely determine it. Sandy's anger is the anger of the generation of women whose lives have been ravaged by sickness brought on by how their men treated the earth. In a patriarchal culture, both women and the earth were "mined," the latter for the uranium that hurt the former. Williams' sadness is that of the generation after, the one which bears witness to the destruction of the bodies of its foremothers as well as their own – the generation born into a fallen world. In this short exchange and all that it foreshadows, nature is implicated in human history and vice versa.

This is made manifest, as a conversation while driving in a car "often manifests itself later in the land," (Williams 10) when the two women arrive at the site where the object of their trip, a nest of burrowing owls, should be. Instead they find the site leveled for a gun club and two condescending men who laughingly explain the owls had to go because they are "messy bastards. They'll shit all over hell if ya let 'em" (Williams 12). Though in the car Williams claimed only sadness, faced with this situation she finds her "rage. It was fire in my stomach with no place to go" (Williams 12). In this short scene, Williams constructs a narrative where emotion shuttles back and forth between human and natural history so that the two become one shared concern. Like Kapil, Williams, when "forced" to take in the world, finds anger "called forth" from her.

This book is as much the memoir of a birder as it is a family history or an environmentalist's bioregional history. The interactions between people mostly take place while on birding trips or birds are the topic of their conversations. As Williams details the troubles of bird populations faced both with man-made habitat destruction (à la the burrowing owls), and natural habitat destruction due to the flooding of the Great Salt Lake and the resulting inundation of shoreline habitats, the orientation of the

book is clearly one where human interest is not the only one taken into account. In that regard, *Refuge* is classically an environmental text, activist in its advocacy for the non-human and its demand that humans take responsibility for their actions.

However, beyond this advocacy is a deeper understanding that human interest is not only to be balanced by natural interest but that, inasmuch as humans are an integral part of the environment, there is only one interest to be cared for. Reflecting on the relationship between mother and child, Williams writes, “Her womb is the first landscape we inhabit” (Williams 50). As with the idea of conversations manifesting in the land, she draws a kind of magical connection between the human and the natural, a connection of correspondences where what happens in one world happens in another. Considering her mother’s struggle with cancer and her own suffering at watching her mother suffer, Williams switches immediately to writing about a barn swallow caught on a barbed-wire fence which she tries to untangle but dies anyway. She writes, “Suffering shows us what we are attached to—perhaps the umbilical cord between Mother and me has never been cut” (Williams 53). This technique of shuttling back and forth between family and nature confuses distinctions on purpose, such that the reader is compelled to see the barn swallow as a metaphor for Williams’ mother and to see Williams’ mother as a metaphor for the landscape to which Williams is still attached, inhabiting it as she inhabited her own mother’s womb.

In a similarly painful scene, Williams asks her grandmother Mimi to help her understand a dream she has had about eggs. Williams explains, “The hollow eggs translated into hollow wombs. The Earth is not well and neither are we. I saw the health of the planet as our own.” Mimi, one of the generation of angry iconoclastic women Sandy identified early in the memoir, listens and turns away for a moment: “I could not help but notice her distended belly, pregnant with tumor. ‘It’s all related,’ she said. ‘I feel certain’” (Williams 262-263). Williams draws the same web of correspondences here, where an egg in a dream implicitly connects to the real eggs of the shorebirds she spends so much time writing about and to the terrible image of her own grandmother as a kind of egg “pregnant with tumor.” “It’s all related.”

In his book on ecology and phenomenology, *Spell of the Sensuous*, the anthropologist David Abram recounts how, when he was doing field work on magic in Bali, he stepped out of his hut and found himself for a moment completely enveloped in stars. Fireflies floating in the starry sky and above the rice paddies reflecting the starry sky completely obliterated the horizon and any ability to separate the world into its distinguishable parts (Abram 3-4). For Abram this was a watershed moment in his research, in which he came to understand that “most indigenous tribal peoples have no such ready recourse to an immaterial realm outside earthly nature” (Abram 15). Matter and spirit are co-extensive, forming one space. Williams, too, by consistently shuttling between the natural calamity of the Great Lake’s flooding and the man-made calamity of her family’s cancer creates a firefly-like effect that obliterates the distinguishing line between family and place, human and non-human, and suggests that the tumor growing in her grandmother’s uterus, the empty space in the eggs of her dreams, and the ruined nesting areas on the shores of a flooding Great Salt Lake are not separate but manifestations of one unified place. With this as her world-view, Williams is therefore staking out a concept of “self” in memoir that is larger than the individual. Like Stein and like Johnston, she seems to be pointing towards a self that is composed of the other, in this case of family, plants, animals, place.

Agricultural writer Wes Jackson, in *Becoming Native to this Place*, argues that sustainability must begin with agriculture and sustainable agriculture must begin with the figure of the “homecomer,” who must “go someplace and dig in and begin the long search and experiment to become native” (Jackson 97). Jackson argues that environmentalism cannot happen in the abstract but must be rooted in intimate knowledge of place. Like Johnston coming to know himself through the nose of his dog and the song of starlings overhead, Jackson’s homecomer becomes defined by where she is. Williams’ memoir, in its shuttling between the human and the environmental, between the unnatural and the natural, constructs a self that is meaningless outside of its context, a self that cannot be “out of place” but is instead “at home” because it *is* home. In *Refuge* the world’s “great lung” “forces” in radioactive fallout, misogyny,

rising lake levels, and migrating birds and “calls forth” from Terry Tempest Williams a dying mother, anger, bird counts, and family stitched into the lakeshore and desert of Utah.

Like Kapil, she traces the contours of pain in a self intersected, vivisected by uncontrollable forces. Here, however, rootedness in place offers Williams a method by which to articulate a self of community. By the end of *Refuge*, the Bear River Wildlife Refuge which was first threatened by the rising water and then flooded, has reemerged. By the end, Williams has similarly been threatened, drowned, and emerged from her sorrow and rage at her mother’s death. However, her re-emergence is not merely into equanimity but with rage in hand as an advocate for not just her family, Utah women, or birds, but for the entirety of her “refuge.” The final scene of *Refuge* is a vision Williams has of “a clan of one-breasted women” overrunning a military facility. When an officer calls for reinforcements, one of the women responds, “We have... we have—and you have no idea of our numbers” (Williams 289). The arc of the narrative of *Refuge* (and perhaps of its writing?) is one from sadness to rage, as the wise Sandy knew early in the book in that car-ride. Williams has constructed a self-narrative in which all the earth seems to gather and emerge through her voice by the end. In the vision an officer finds pen and paper on Williams and asks, “And these?” “Weapons” she replies (Williams 290). When the guards drop the protesting women in the middle of nowhere in the desert, “what they didn’t realize was that we were home” (Williams 290). Williams finds herself in her world and her world in her voice. This is the voice of the loving witness, of the fractured and diasporic bursting across the whole world, of the “forgotten” animal insisting on its wordless address, of the whole world speaking.

Conclusion: Self as World Speaking

This reading charts a course through ways of self-narration that lead to an expanded view of just what might comprise the self when it tells its story. Gertrude Stein’s playful twist on the nature of autobiography opens up spaces to consider how the individual and the other sustain each other. Bhanu

Kapil's baffling lyric project interrogates how the individual is shot through with the world and how selfhood emerges as a kind of furious kaleidoscopic explosion. Devin Johnston's essays map the spaces where self becomes constituted by that which it denies. Terry Tempest Williams' memoir creates a magical correspondence, a matrix, through which self emerges as a unified landscape, a "refuge."

Ultimately this is meant not merely as a philosophical exercise, but such experiments in how to understand and narrate the self are more importantly ethical stands and activist cries for justice, even if justice is just the ability to exist through enunciation. In this vein, this line of argument for a reevaluation of what "self" gets to narrate itself, is an ecological argument for learning to hear the wordless address of the world which Derrida advocates for, lest humans forget that even when their backs are turned, the world still watches—and speaks. Nonfiction writers are so attuned to consider the stories they tell as expressionistic utterances from within that it may be hard to allow that perhaps what they bring forth into the world is really "called forth" by the exigencies of our existence, and that in that "calling forth" they speak not so much their own lives as the life of the world. Expanding the self, exploding the self, admitting the self, mourning the self and many other modes are so many tunes humming up out of the "great lung."

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