



Tanya Bomsta

The Performance of Epistemic Agency of the
Autobiographical Subject in
Terry Tempest Williams's *When Women Were Birds:
Fifty-four Variations on Voice*

In the beginning of *When Women Were Birds: Fifty-four Variations on Voice*, Terry Tempest Williams's mother, a week before her death, bequeaths to Williams her many journals. "I am leaving you all my journals," her mother tells her. "But you must promise me that you will not look at them until after I am gone" (3). Williams promises to wait; one month later, after her mother has passed away, Williams retrieves the many journals and sits down to read through her mother's life narrative. But when she opens the journals she discovers, to her shock, that every single one is blank (4). The remainder of the book is a personal and philosophic inquiry into what this act of keeping empty journals might have meant, and what implications it has for the concepts of voice and silence. Moreover, as a work of autobiographical creative nonfiction, it engages with these newly understood concepts and the revelation of the empty journals with an eye towards self-understanding. The journals act as both a disruptor of Williams's previous conceptions of herself—including her understanding of her own writing, her voice, and her silences—and as a catalyst for seeking self-knowledge. As she investigates meanings and concepts, Williams' character becomes an inquirer, processor, transformer, and creator of knowledges. The investigative nature of her narrative is not merely a process of searching for knowledge, but an act of creating it.

This enactment of the subject as a knowledge-creator can be seen as a performance of epistemic agency through narrative means. In other words, the cumulative effect of the investigative nature of Williams's text is that the narrating "I" (or the character of Williams) performs itself as an epistemic agent. Catherine Elgin defines an epistemic agent as someone who "make[s] the rules, devise[s] the method, and

set[s] the standards” in order to actively shape their beliefs (135). Each of these aspects is demonstrated through various narrative techniques in *When Women Were Birds*—techniques that constitute a performance of the autobiographical subject. Current frameworks of autobiographical subjectivity as performative suggest that we examine the narrating “I” for how it envisions, performs, and represents the textual subject it narrates. Based on Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, autobiographical performativity was theorized early on by Sidonie Smith, who argues that “the interiority or self that is said to be prior to the autobiographical expression or reflection is an *effect* of autobiographical storytelling” (Smith 18). In their comprehensive study of autobiographical theory, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson further describe performativity as a theoretical term that designates “autobiographical occasions as dynamic sites for the performance of identities,” and as a framework that provides “a vocabulary for describing the complex relationship of regulatory discourses of identity to material bodies, as well as autobiographical agency” (214). In other words, the autobiographical subject is enacted through the telling of the story rather than existing prior to it; it is in the nuances of narration, including the interplay between the narrating and narrated “I’s,” where the subject performs its identity and thus, claims its agency. This latter connection of performativity to agency is a useful lens through which to understand how Williams accomplishes the presentation of the self as an epistemic agent. More broadly, it demonstrates how specific narrative techniques contribute to the construction of an agential autobiographical self.

Williams constructs an epistemically agential self in *When Women Were Birds* through several methods, but two of the most significant—significant, in part, because they can be found across her body of work—are her use of theme and form. By the fourth page of *When Women Were Birds*, Williams has already delved into one of her most frequently explored themes: the possibilities within paradox. Her book begins with glaring paradoxes: Journals are meant to be written in, yet they are unwritten; her mother’s request urges Williams to read the journals, yet there is nothing to read. Her consideration of the paradox

of the journals leads naturally into exploring the paradoxical nature of the idea that silence exists in voice and voice in silence. This thematic exploration is then accomplished through Williams's signature lyric form. Williams's writing has been called many things, including "a prose experiment," "nontraditional," "geographics," and "literary journalism." While each of these terms has its place, I use the term lyric form to describe her style and form as an extension of the idea of the lyric essay. In their pioneering work on the lyric essay, Deborah Tall and John D'Agata describe some traits of a lyric essay that also productively describe Williams's prose: it "forsake[s] narrative line, discursive logic, and the art of persuasion," "accretes by fragments, taking shape mosaically," and "move[s] by association." Mary Heather Noble adds that a lyric essay requires "more active reliance on the reader's intuition to complete the narrator's thought" and often uses "white space" as a way to shape the "associative leaps between language and imagery." These are common elements of not only *When Women Were Birds*, but the majority of Williams's body of work. More pertinently, examining her work through the framework of both her thematic explorations and her lyric form demonstrates how these specific formal elements contribute to the performance of the self as an epistemic agent.

Thematic Exploration as Performance of Agential Self

Smith and Watson suggest that autobiographers develop modes of self-inquiry in their work to structure the process of introspection, including structures as broad as genre to as detailed as narrative plotting (90). This mode of self-inquiry is the autobiographical equivalent to Elgin's epistemic agent "devis[ing] the method" to shape belief. For Williams, the thematic exploration of paradox is one of the modes that structures her self-examination. Williams often begins her work with a premise of dualistic opposition, and then goes on to conflate the contradictions inherent within the opposition to create a paradox. For example, this mode of self-inquiry is particularly well-illustrated in Williams's project in *Leap*, where she creates a "landscape of exploration, a place where the reconciliation of opposites is possible" (187). She

refuses to read the painting *El jardín de las delicias* as a juxtaposition of heaven and hell, but reads within those two opposites to create new knowledge about the body, spirituality, and religious heritage. Various scholars have discussed Williams's use of opposites and paradoxes and its effect on the self-examination that occurs in her work. In their study on Williams's use of opposition, Jeannette E. Riley and Maureen K. Schirack argue that the insistence on diffusing dichotomies "creates a transformative source of knowing the world, one's self, and one's community" (60). Similarly, Katherine R. Chandler has noted that Williams's juxtaposition of opposites allows her to discover "previously unimagined possibilities" (666). *When Women Were Birds* works in similar ways to accomplish this type of transformation through the structure of thematic exploration. In exploring the paradox of silence as an expression of voice, Williams states one of her self-inquiries explicitly when she asks, "What is voice?" (18). Her search for this knowledge plays out through a layered structure that incorporates an exploration of several opposites, including voice and silence, public and private, and writing and not writing, each expressed through the phenomenon of her mother's empty journals.

Initially, Williams understands voice as constituting the practice of writing and that which is public; she understands silence as constituting the lack of writing and that which is private. Clearly, as a respected public author, writing is of central and extensive value to Williams's life and her dedication to environmental activism. Writing essays and memoirs has advanced her career and helped save the environment she loves. In addition to her career, writing is also highly valued in Williams's Mormon culture. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints encourages their members to keep journals and to write their life histories, and the writings of prophets and leaders are highly valued. Parts of her identity, in other words, are modeled on her personal, professional and cultural ideologies of the value of the written word. It is in this context that we must understand the blow of the blank journals as a clash of values that Williams contends with throughout the pages of *When Women Were Birds*. The narrative of her culture, her family, and her profession values writing. So how is she supposed to value the unwritten

journals with her initial understandings of what voice and silence mean? If writing is the valued side of this pair of opposites, how should she value her mother, who refused to write her life, who stayed “silent”? What does it mean for Williams’s understanding of her own identity, which has been modeled on this dualistic conception?

Through the very act of suggesting these implied questions through her exploration of paradox, Williams refuses to accept her initial understandings of voice and silence, because of the way that understanding would imply a lack of value in the journals and a limit to self-understanding. This is where Williams’s character begins to claim her epistemic agency. In his philosophical study on epistemic agency, Kristoffer Hans Ahlstrom argues that “epistemic agency [defined here as actions taken to form true belief] is constituted by all the things we do when conducting *inquiry*. We gather information, mull over our data, choose among different methods of investigation, and so on, and in so far as we are doing all of this in an attempt to attain one of our epistemic goals, we are expressing our epistemic agency” (5). Simply by choosing to inquire about, and then to investigate the paradoxical understanding of how voice might be conceived of as silence, and silence might be conceived of as voice, Williams insists on new ways of knowing. She performs the self as the seeker, witness, and creator of these new knowledges.

But it is more than choosing the methods of inquiry and investigation that allows Williams to perform the self as an epistemic agent; she also uses specific narrative means to performance agency. One of these means is her use of a series of italicized descriptors throughout the text that identify multiple, paradoxical possibilities for what the unwritten journals could mean. The first descriptor—“*My mother’s journals are paper tombstones*”—describes two things: first, the “second death” she experiences upon finding empty journals, and second, the disruption of the value of writing: paper becomes a symbol of death and stillness rather than a symbol of life and writing (17). To Williams, a blank, silent journal at first means loss. The potential value of the written life has been squandered. However, the italicized descriptors slowly begin to attest to other possibilities that suggest there is life and voice in silence, writing located in *not*

writing. Perhaps by not writing, her mother was resisting her Mormon culture's prescriptive insistence on what members should do; thus, the unwritten journals could be "*a writer's conceit*" (176) or "*written in code*" (158). Perhaps by not writing, her mother was expressing an emptiness she had never spoken; thus, the journals could be "*a motion circling a void*" (52). Perhaps she left them empty to hide or protect something, so they are "*bleached*" and "*sanitized*," which also may suggest that there is something sacred and personal behind the silent page (174). Perhaps it is a work of postmodernist art, thus they are "*Michelangelo's David*" (177). What is powerful here is the resistance to settling on any one way of understanding, and thus valuing, the phenomenon of the unwritten journals. The journals are more than unwritten, they are more than silence, and they are more than voice. Exploring the space between the opposites of voice and silence suggests that the act of silence inscribes *all* these possibilities. Silence becomes many things: evidence of autonomy in an act of resistance, expression of a lost self, testament to unspoken truths, a work of art endlessly revealing. Because the narrating "I" teases out various paradoxical possibilities, she creates an innovative way of knowing in what might have been the empty space between opposites. By the end of the book, the narrating "I" has collapsed the initial binary distinctions. Writing, not writing, silence, voice, public, and private are all conflated, expressing each through the others, opening each one into multiple possible meanings and values.

In addition to crafting these ideological knowledges through italicized descriptors, Williams also performs her epistemic agency by juxtaposing particular events in her life. The narrating "I" chooses moments of voice and silence to narrate in order to seek deeper understanding about the contradictions that arise between those moments. In one passage, for example, the voice of the narrated "I" is shy, fearful, and intimidated: she sits silently in the meetings of the Wilderness Society Governing Council, and others comment on her lack of engagement and activism (131). Here, the narrating "I" implicates her silent character in the refusal to act, suggesting that silence was inaction. In another passage, the silent voice of the narrated "I" is contemplative, sitting in the desert environment she loves, listening rather than

speaking; the narrating “I” commends this silence as action, one “where our capacity to listen is heightened” (61). In another section, she writes that after one particular theater performance, she “returned home speechless, my eyes wide open” (54), implying again that her silent narrated “I” was listening, watching, and learning: all actions. When she is attacked by a violent man and does not report it, she implicates the silent narrated “I” as violent in endangering other women who may have been attacked by the same man (114). Here, silence becomes a paradoxical form of violent inaction. Much like the italicized descriptors, Williams leaves these moments in juxtaposition with each other without identifying any one of them as having more significance than the other.

What emerges from the explicit gaps and conflicting voices of these narrated “I’s” is a nuanced construction of the self as multivocal, as well as the construction of the concept of silence as being multivocal. Williams’ character has clearly shifted and actively shaped her beliefs: she no longer believes silence is only symbolic of death; she now knows it is a variation of voice. Williams’s subtitle bears this out, suggesting that the project is about more than tracing the development of the artist’s voice; it is to construct and perform the self as a collection of “variations.” In the different voiced constructions of the narrated “I,” we can read the performance of a claiming of epistemic agency: she is conceiving of these variations of voice as multiple and coexisting rather than fixed and solitary, and thus, transforming her understanding of her own voice. Voice, she claims, is not one core expression of one core self. It is only variation on variation, it is “moment by moment” and “born repeatedly” (151). (There are times when Williams does refer to “my voice” as though it is a single unit, but I argue that this is more about the limits of language than an argument for understanding voice as a thing that progresses until it “becomes.”) Ultimately, this complex, interwoven exploration of the paradox of silence as voice and voice as silence is a performance of epistemic agency. The narrated “I” stops being acted upon by the disruptive nature of the journals, and instead chooses to act through creating new knowledge about the self, the journals, and silence and voice. By the end of *When Women Were Birds*, Williams’s character has transformed her

knowledge. In fact, at one point in the middle of the book, she questions whether writing, that part of the opposition that she once valued above the other, is just “wasted time we spend...instead of living,” demonstrating her broader perspective on writing and not writing (60). In the end, however, she does not see one member of the pair as having more value than the other; instead, she binds them in such ways that together, they fuse into a new epistemic framework within which to place her mother’s empty journals as well as the narrated “I’s” own experiences of voice and silence.

Lyric Form as Performance of an Agential Self

Williams’s ability to conflate oppositions and produce self-knowledge from paradoxical truths is, in significant part, a function of the lyric form she chooses. While Williams claims epistemic agency by shedding dualistic oppositions through thematic exploration of paradox, it is the lyric form that structures that very exploration. As noted above, lyric form often “forsakes narrative line and discursive logic,” takes shape “mosaically,” and “move[s] by association.” Instead of discursive logic, the lyric form tends to be structured by associative logic; this type of logic is what Williams’ narrating “I” uses to construct her self-knowledge. Associative logic plays out in the structure of the entire book: Sections are only loosely connected to each other, often by something as small as a word or an image; some sections are brief meditations on a theme, others are full of short, narrative stories, rarely connected by chronology or cause-and-effect plot. The white space between sections, as well as within sections, creates a pause and breath for the reader to latch on to those associations. These associative sections of the book act like mosaic tiles. Just as a mosaic work of art can hold hundreds of microscopic images that create, seemingly impossibly, yet another image, this type of lyric accomplishes something similar: through its loosely-held-together, intuitive, mosaic, and associative form, Williams can hold multiple ideas and paradoxes in tension and productive coexistence with each other. A lyric form tends to resist conclusive truths because without cohesive narrative arc or plot line, the text is better able to wander and deviate from expected narrative

norms such as climax, denouement and resolution. Thus, it allows for a recognition of multiple truths, and multiple ways of knowing.

The italicized descriptors are a unique example of how lyric form shapes a text by mosaic accretion. Appearing seemingly sporadically throughout the text, the descriptors at first may seem like a linear progression of how Williams's character understands the journals. But when looked at holistically, they are strategic building blocks that form an image of all the multiple possibilities of meaning that the narrating "I" has constructed throughout the text. She interprets the silent voice of the journals as "*an act of faith and a choice*," "*vanities*," "*charity*," "*cruelty*," and almost a hundred other ways; each of these is an understanding, a way of knowing something about silence, voice, the journals, and her mother. The statements themselves are never reflected on or explained, but simply appear as ideas that are associated with the text before and after them; in this way, they act as flashes of insight and earned pieces of knowledge. Furthermore, they do not replace each other as we read through the text. For example, when the narrating "I" implies a link between John Cage's *4'33*" with her mother's journals (59), and later describes them as a "*code*" (158), the latter descriptor does not cancel out the possibility of the journals as a subversive artistic performance. They are possibly both: art and code, public performance and private cypher. Possible truths co-exist on the pages, building on rather than replacing knowledge, each one having equal value as they attest to a way of understanding the journals, Williams's mother, and voice and silence. The last italicized descriptor, "*My mother's journals are to be celebrated*," (206) is not the final conclusion that replaces the other possibilities. They are to be celebrated specifically because the narrating "I" has succeeded in creating multiple ways of understanding the act of the journals. The descriptors, then, can each be read as the various knowledges the self has created as it has conducted its inquiry through paradox and form; thus, the very inclusion of these descriptors as part of the autobiographical act is a performance of the autobiographical subject's epistemic agency. They become evidence of a subject who is capable of transforming and creating knowledge. Moreover, because these performances of knowledge co-exist

rather than cancel each other out, they can be read as the narrating “I’s” meta-commentary on the nature of knowledge itself: that it is relational, situated, and multiple.

In addition to the italicized descriptors, Williams also strategically uses blank pages as an element of the lyric form in performing the self. In a lyric form, an intentional blank page or meaningful use of white space is designed to facilitate associative logic rather than only indicating time passage or a new setting. The first and most dramatic blank space appears at the end of section I, directly after Williams details her discovery of her mother’s blank journals. The reader is greeted with twelve subsequent blank pages—in effect, a publication of the contents of Williams’s mother’s journals. Publishing the journals this way gives them voice by allowing the power of their emptiness to speak to the reader. Later in the book, Williams uses blank pages again, but this time it is to silence something. The blank pages create an explicit gap in a short narrative about a young man, Louis, who she and her husband cared for in their home. “Everything about my relationship with Louis has surprised me,” Williams writes. “Here is what I will tell you:” (168). The reader then encounters two empty pages; whatever story Williams contains, she chooses to keep for herself—perhaps to hold it sacred “as a prayer” (208), or perhaps to highlight the difficulty of speaking and explaining some personal feelings. Whatever the intention, in the first instance she uses blank pages to voice and publicize something; in the second, to keep something silent and private. The performance here of the self is particularly interesting, in that she is not so much creating knowledge as she is applying it. The performance here of the self is particularly interesting in that she is not so much creating knowledge as she is applying it. In the first instance of blank pages, the narrating “I” seems to be largely demonstrating what it felt like to her to encounter the silence of her mother’s journals. The pages are a reflection of the shock and emotion of the moment when she views the unwritten journals as a “second death.” In the second instance of blank pages, the narrating “I’s” understanding of voice and silence has transformed; she now employs silence and emptiness to claim power over that death. Through her own mirror act of not writing, she performs the self as an agent capable of transforming previous

knowledge and then applying it. Ultimately, the subject performs her agency in one of the most powerful ways possible: she takes an act once viewed as disempowering, and uses it as an act of empowerment.

Conclusions

While I have focused here on two specific narrative means that demonstrate the performance of epistemic agency, the autobiographical act as a whole is not only a performative act, but an agentic one. “We tend to read autobiographical narratives as acts and thus proofs of human agency,” explain Smith and Watson. “They are at once sites of agentic narration where people control the interpretation of their lives and stories” (54). Reading an autobiography like *When Women Were Birds* through the lens of agentic performativity provides an example of how a narrator might control that interpretation and claim their agency. But there are additional critical possibilities in reading for epistemic agentic performance in autobiography, for it has the potential to inform our understanding of the ever-shifting relationship between reader and writer. If, as Jens Brockmeier provocatively argues, speaking in agentic discourse is the way “we navigate the extended space of our ‘possibility relationship’ to the world and ourselves,” then maybe the act of reading agentic discourse also navigates the possibility relationships between the reader and their world (226). Even as the subject is reformulated epistemically through the autobiographical act, the reader reformulates themselves as well as they shape their beliefs and knowledge through reading. Participating in the autobiographical act through reading becomes its own kind of epistemically agentic act, then, for as readers, we too choose to engage with new possibilities for knowledge, choose new ways to shape our own beliefs, and create new meanings of our own voices and silences.

Works Cited

- Ahlstrom, Kristoffer Hans, "On Epistemic Agency" (2010). *Open Access Dissertations*. 310.
scholarworks.umass.edu/open_access_dissertations/310
- Brockmeier, Jens. "Reaching for Meaning: Human Agency and the Narrative of Imagination." *Theory and Psychology* vol. 19, no. 2, 2009, 213-233.
- Chandler, Katherine R. "Whale Song from the Desert: Refuge without Resolution and Community without Homogeneity in Terry Tempest Williams's *Refuge*." *Women's Studies* vol. 34, 2005, pp. 655-670.
- Elgin, Catherine Z. "Epistemic Agency." *Theory and Research in Education* vol. 11, no. 2, 2013, 135-152.
- Noble, Mary Heather. "On the Lyric Essay." *Mary Heather Noble*, <http://www.maryheathernoble.com/on-the-lyric-essay/>.
- Riley, Jeannette E. and Maureen K. Schirack. "Deconstructing the Language of Opposition: Locating Williams's Erotics of Place." *Surveying the Literary Landscapes of Terry Tempest Williams: New Critical Essays*. Ed. Katherine R. Chandler and Melissa A. Goldthwaite. The University of Utah Press, 2003, pp. 59-77.
- Smith, Sidonie. "Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance." *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1995, pp. 17-33.
- Smith, Sidonie and Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. 2nd ed., University of Minnesota Press, 2010.
- Tall, Deborah, and John D'Agata. "The Lyric Essay." *Hobart and William Smith Colleges*, <https://www.hws.edu/senecareview/lyricessay.aspx>.
- Williams, Terry Tempest. *Leap*. Vintage Books, 2000.
- . *When Women Were Birds: Fifty-Four Variations on Voice*. Sarah Crichton Books, 2012.