

2013

Approaches to Life Narrative: A Scholarly and Creative Thesis

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APPROACHES TO LIFE NARRATIVE: A SCHOLARLY AND CREATIVE THESIS

A thesis submitted to
the Graduate College
of Marshall University

In partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree
of Master of Arts

in

English

by

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Approved by

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May 2013

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express sincere appreciation to my portfolio committee: Dr. Kelli Prejean, Dr. Jane Hill, and Dr. Rachael Peckham. Dr. Peckham has been a tireless advocate for me and my work, motivating and encouraging me at every turn. Dr. Hill has been endlessly compassionate and kind, and I'm especially grateful for her excitement for and appreciation of the work I have done during graduate school. Dr. Prejean has mentored me since my first semester at Marshall, helping me hone my skills as a scholar and writer; she has helped me discover my love for rhetoric and composition, encouraged me in my writing, and has become both an excellent advisor and a valued friend. I know that without these three women, I would not have accomplished nearly as much as I have during my Master's program; they will always be an inspiration to me.

I also wish to thank my friends and fellow graduate students Whitney Naylor-Smith, Stephanie Walker, Shannon DeWitt, and Christie Linger for their continued friendship, moral support, and especially for the many times they reviewed my work.

I also want to thank my mother, without whom I would not be not be getting a Master's degree. Her constant willingness to stay with my children while I spent countless hours studying and in class have not only contributed to my ability to complete my degree, but have also taught me that a mother's support and love for her child are constant and unwavering.

Most of all, I wish to thank my children, Evelyn, Brielle, and Clark. They have proudly displayed my A-papers along with theirs on the refrigerator and patiently listened to me read my work aloud to them. I am profoundly grateful for their sacrifices. They have sacrificed an always-there mother so that I could pursue my educational goals. Their lives are often disrupted by my work, but they have cheered me on endlessly and are my greatest supporters. I am indebted to them, and I hope that I can do as much for them as they have for me.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis includes both scholarly and creative approaches to women's life narrative and rhetoric. The author first analyzes Terry Tempest Williams' recently published memoir, *When Women Were Birds: Fifty-Four Variations on Voice*, through the lenses of writing and rhetorical theory. She examines how Williams' hybrid genre negotiates the boundaries between journaling and autobiographical writing and between silence and voice. She argues that Williams employs a feminist rhetoric in her writing in order to negotiate these boundaries.

The second and third works are personal essays in which the author examines her journals and her marriage. These creative works meditate on the author's own relationship to journaling, writing, nature, and relationships.

INTRODUCTION

When I began graduate school two years ago, I knew very little about English's subdisciplines of composition, rhetoric, and creative writing. I had specialized in literature at my undergraduate institution, so when I came to Marshall and one of my first courses was in composition theory, much of it was new territory for me. It was in that class that I was first introduced to rhetorical theory. As I researched and studied, I quickly came to love rhetoric and wanted to continue learning more about it. I was able to do so when I took an independent study course on feminist rhetorics. The readings and concepts in that course were the most influential ideas that I have encountered at graduate school, and I have been dedicated to studying and practicing feminist principles ever since.

During a course in expository writing, I was introduced to creative nonfiction and wrote two profile essays: one on Portsmouth, Ohio, and another on feminism in Huntington, West Virginia. This course was pivotal for me because it reminded me how much I love to write creatively. It seems a strange thing to forget, but I hadn't written much besides my journals for the seven years preceding graduate school. I began writing more, and the following semester I took a writing workshop and began work on my first personal essay. I have always been interested in life narrative (although I haven't always known it by this term), but most of my experience with it up to that point had been keeping a journal. As I worked on personal essays and studied others' works of creative nonfiction, I decided to research women's life narrative on a scholarly level for my graduate portfolio.

This portfolio includes both scholarly and creative approaches to life narrative and rhetoric. In my paper, "Harmonizing Lives: Life Narrative and Rhetorical Theory in Terry Tempest Williams' *When Women Were Birds: Fifty-four Variations on Voice*," I examine Williams' recent nonfiction book through the lenses of writing and rhetorical theory. I was first

introduced to Williams during my course in feminist rhetorics and wanted to read more of her work. Williams' writing speaks to me on several personal levels. She was once Mormon, as was I; many of her reasons for leaving the Church that she alludes to in her books coincide with my own. She writes, in *When Women Were Birds*, about journals, a form of life narrative that I have engaged in since I was eight years old. She lost a mother to cancer, and I lost a father to cancer; her first name is even the same as my maiden name. Although I haven't met Terry Tempest Williams, I feel a kinship with her—and this kinship is felt through the words of her life narrative.

That's the power of life narrative—its inherent qualities of universality and connection. Phillip Lopate writes that “At the core of the personal essay is the supposition that there is a certain unity to human experience” (xxv)¹. Lopate specifies the personal essay here, but the same is true for all life narrative. When we read another's life, we find parallels between ourselves and the writer's; there are threads of ideas or experiences that connect us. When we read another's life, we read ourselves. In my analysis of *When Women Were Birds*, I examine how these connections are forged through feminist rhetorical theory and how Williams practices and theorizes women's life narrative.

My creative work in this portfolio demonstrates my own approach to the personal essay, a subgenre of life narrative. I include two essays as examples of ways that I re-create my life's experiences on the page. The first, “Death Rites of a Journal,” is especially pertinent for this portfolio because I examine journaling as a ritual of constructing the self. The second, “Erosion,” explores memories through the lens of nature. In its own way, this portfolio as a whole is a sample of my life in writing. The creative works are nonfiction representations of different aspects of my life told through personal essays. The scholarly work is also nonfiction,

¹ Lopate, Philip. “Introduction.” *The Art of the Personal Essay*. New York: Anchor Books, 1995.

and although it does not reference my personal experiences, it reflects my interests, beliefs, and thought processes. Along with my academic and creative interests, this portfolio also represents the critical thinking, research, and writing skills that I have developed over my two years at Marshall. I hope the scholarly and creative approaches to life narrative in this collection will contribute to the conversations about women's rhetorics and women's writing.

PART I:
SCHOLARLY WORK

HARMONIZING LIVES: WOMEN'S LIFE NARRATIVE AND RHETORICAL THEORY IN TERRY TEMPEST WILLIAMS' *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 describes how her 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 journals and sits down to read through her mother's life narrative. But when she opens the journals, she discovers that every single one is blank (4). The shock and surprise Williams feels at discovering the blank journals is the occasion for writing *When Women Were Birds*—she writes in order to understand why her mother never wrote.

At one point in the memoir, Williams notes that her mother hung a quilt square on the wall, explaining to Williams that the square "represents how women piece together their lives from the scraps left over for them" (51). For Williams, this type of piecing together is done through the autobiographical act. She creates her own work of life narrative to find meaning in her mother's journals, and her book thus emerges as an exploration: she writes to piece together her own experiences, the meanings of her mother's journals, and the resulting implications of voice and silence. Judy Lensink has compared women's life narratives to the piecing of a quilt, suggesting that women writers "both tell their truth *and* create female design—a supersubtle design, similar to a quilt's, made up of incremental stitches that define a pattern" (153). As Williams encounters oppositions—including writing/not writing, journals/autobiography, and silence/voice—she must find a way to harmonize disparate ideas, which she does through writing *When Women Were Birds*.

Beginning in the late twentieth century, scholars have demonstrated a critical interest in women's life narratives, studying a range of forms, from diaries to autobiographies to memoirs. They have examined the generic differences between men's and women's life narratives, the ways women construct the self in writing, and how women have found means to write their lives even when it was not socially acceptable to do so. The studies these scholars have conducted thus far, as Martine Watson Brownley and Allison B. Kimmich note, have served to "expand [our] ideas about identity" (xi) and helped us find "issues that are unique to women's texts" (xiv). Interest in women's life narratives stretches beyond the academy, of course. Linda S. Coleman observes that "In the last two decades, life-writing by women, with its immediate yet complex access to everyday life, has gained a wide readership, popular and academic, female and male" (2). As women have gained access to the world of public writing, contemporary forms of life narrative are not only more available, but also sought out by readers and scholars.

The popularity of women's life narratives, inside academia and beyond, suggests their continuing influence on and value for women's lives. As women produce and publish more life narratives, scholarship on those texts will continue to contribute to autobiographical theory, expanding our ideas about identity and generic writing differences. But studying women's life narratives, especially contemporary life narratives, has other valuable possibilities for its practitioners and its readers. Coleman explains the benefits life narrative has for each: "For its authors, life-writing has been the site where the boundaries have been negotiated. For readers, it serves to connect our past with our present, ourselves with other women" (4). Thus, in order to understand how life narrative influences women, we can examine autobiographical texts to understand how the autobiographical act assists women in negotiating difficult concepts or

situations, and we can expand our ideas on what rhetorical strategies women writers use to connect with their readers.

Accordingly, I examine Williams' recently published memoir, *When Women Were Birds*, in order to demonstrate how we can use contemporary women's life narratives to expand autobiographical and rhetorical theory. Krista Ratcliffe has advocated the use of "non-rhetoric texts" to "extrapolate" feminist rhetorical theory (4). She writes: "Extrapolation may prove a rich interdisciplinary resource for rhetoric and composition scholars who are interested in constructing women's and feminist theories of rhetoric" (4). We can say the same for writing theory as well; examining contemporary women's life narratives can offer us insight into feminist autobiographical theory. Williams, as an environmental and feminist activist and a well-established author in the genre of creative nonfiction, is an example of a woman writer whose books attract both scholarly and popular interest. *When Women Were Birds* is her most recent memoir, and in its meditations on silence, voice, and life narrative, we find new ways to think about how women use writing to negotiate the boundaries they come up against in their lives as well as the strategies they use to communicate with other women.

TERMINOLOGY

For this study, I use the terminology that Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson establish in *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. Smith and Watson distinguish life narrative from life writing and autobiography. Life writing is "a general term for writing of diverse kinds that takes a life as its subject;" life narrative is "a somewhat narrower term that includes many kinds of self-referential writing;" and autobiography is a subgenre of life narrative (3). Autobiographical theory is the framework of methods and concepts scholars use to analyze life narrative.

NEGOTIATING BOUNDARIES AND FINDING HARMONY THROUGH LIFE NARRATIVE

After she inherits her mother's numerous journals and discovers, to her surprise, that they are all blank, Williams is compelled to ask, "What is voice?" (18). In the fifty-four sections that comprise her book, she tests various meanings of voice and silence as she explores what it means to write, or not write, one's life. As Williams reflects on the possible interpretations of her mother's journals, *When Women Were Birds* emerges as both a commentary on women's life narrative and a hybrid genre, part autobiography and part journal writing². By shaping the silence of her mother's journals and the voice of her own autobiographical narrative into this hybrid form, Williams complicates the traditional dichotomous relationships between voice and silence and between autobiography and journal writing. Instead of separating each of these pairs, she brings them both (with their traditional binary oppositions) into harmony, demonstrating how they can work together in symbiotic relationships to allow a broader and deeper understanding of women's selves. Through the autobiographical act, Williams pieces together disparate parts of her life, and, in so doing, creates a harmonic whole.

The idea of harmony is central to Williams' exploration of voice, silence, life narrative, and self. In music theory, harmony is often juxtaposed with counterpoint, leading to a separation of the two that dissatisfies many music theorists. Carl Dahlhaus argues against this separation, writing that "harmony comprises not only the ('vertical') structure of chords but also their ('horizontal') movement. Like music as a whole, harmony is a process." This idea of harmony as a process is the guiding methodology of *When Women Were Birds*. Williams' book is a process of discovery and exploration, an attempt to bring disparate ideas and selves into accord with each other. As she contrasts the silence of her mother's journals with her own need

² Although some scholars differentiate between diaries (a consistent, daily record of one's life) and journals (a record of one's life that is not kept daily but more intermittently), I use the term "journal" and "diary" interchangeably in order to focus on the act that they both entail—that of prolonged, contemporaneous life narrative.

for voice, she seeks a way to harmonize the two. She writes that “[a]t the heart of my emerging voice was the belief that nature held the secret to harmony and unity, not just outside us, but inside us, no separation” (54). When Williams looks to nature to find the key to this secret, what she learns is that harmony is both a productive tension and a place of transition, what she terms an “edge”: “Edges are ecotones, transitional zones, places of danger or opportunity. ... When I stand on the edge of the land and the sea, I feel this tension, this fluid line of transition” (20). She continually explores the sense of tension and transition that lies between voice and silence, between versions of the self, and between autobiography and journaling as she considers the meanings of her mother’s blank journals, eventually bringing the discordant ideas in concert with each other.

In order to understand how Williams effectively explores and harmonizes traditionally dichotomous pairings, we must first examine where *When Women Were Birds* fits among the subgenres of life narrative. Smith and Watson identify fifty-two subgenres of life narrative; for this study, the most pertinent ones they identify are journal, autobiography, and memoir. They define autobiography “as a historically situated practice of self-representation” in which “narrators selectively engage their lived experience through personal storytelling” (14). A journal is “a form of life writing that records events and occurrences,” usually contemporaneously (196). Memoir, a term that is often “used interchangeably” with autobiography, is a distinct subgenre because it focuses on the self in relation to others rather than on the “interiority” of the self (198).

When Women Were Birds resists a simple categorization into any of these subgenres. William’s book is closest to (and marketed as) a memoir, a genre that Nancy K. Miller describes as “fashionably postmodern, since it hesitates to define the boundaries between private and public, subject and object” (qtd. in Smith and Watson 198). As a memoir, *When Women Were*

Birds blurs boundaries between the other genres of autobiography and journal. Williams writes her memoir precisely to negotiate those boundaries and harmonize these disparate genres—especially those of journaling and autobiography, the genres on which I focus here. *When Women Were Birds* includes characteristics of an autobiography while also implying the format and hallmarks of a journal. The subtitle's conspicuous number, fifty-four, denotes the number of sections in the book and coincides with Williams' age, which she emphasizes in the first sentence: "I am fifty-four years old, the age my mother was when she died" (3). The immediate link between the number of sections and the number of years of life suggests a metaphorical connection in which each section in the book is representative of one year of her life, thus implying that the combined sections represent a life lived thus far. Although on a smaller scale, a journal also entails this type of representation: one entry represents one day, and the amalgamation of journal entries represents a life lived. Along with the implications of the number fifty-four, the disjointed sections of *When Women Were Birds* mirror the sense of fragmentation often portrayed in journals. Between the ending of one section and the beginning of another, there is rarely a transition or a continuation of thought; as in a journal, each section has its own rationale. At the same time, *When Women Were Birds* conforms to some traditional hallmarks of autobiography. Williams writes from a temporal distance, constructing scenes through memory and reflecting on their significance. The individual sections, although containing an implied connection to the years of Williams' life, are not dated, contemporaneous, or strictly chronological. So although *When Women Were Birds* is not technically a journal, Williams' conflation of journal form with autobiographical intent and practice interrogates the connections and interrelatedness between the two genres.

Journal writing and autobiography have long been juxtaposed in literary theory, a comparison that began with Georges Gusdorf's seminal 1956 essay, "The Conditions and Limits

of Autobiography.” Gusdorf writes that a journal is a “daily reality without any concern for continuity,” whereas autobiography “requires a man to take a distance ... in order to reconstitute himself” (35). Feminist theorists have since challenged Gusdorf’s simplistic division of the two forms, arguing that without the available means to write or publish autobiographies, women’s journals have served as a form of autobiography. Lensink argues that the “diary is resisted [in scholarly studies] because in both form and content it comes closest to a female version of autobiography” (152). Although Gusdorf holds that an “autobiographer strains toward a complete and coherent expression of his entire destiny” (35), we see women journalists making this same attempt in a “female design” in the form of life narrative that has been available to them (Lensink 153). Women writers today have a greater ability to write and publish autobiographies; however, the number of woman-authored, published autobiographies is still quite low in comparison to men’s. Marjanne E. Goozé notes that “women have been and still are prolific writers of diaries, journals, and notebooks, in contrast to many more men who write ... ‘autobiography proper,’” or, in other words, a chronological, published narrative (414). Thus, journals still constitute an important form of female autobiography.

In *When Women Were Birds*, Williams engages with the journal form on two different levels: first, by commenting on her mother’s journals, and, second, by writing in a format that resembles a journal. In this way, *When Women Were Birds* becomes a meta-journal, a text that through its own form comments on women’s life narratives. Her form reflects feminist autobiographical theories of women’s life narratives as both fragmentary and process-oriented. Goozé explains that the format of women’s journals and diaries has been linked “with the fragmented nature of women’s selves and lives” (414-15). She quotes Estelle Jelinek, who writes, “From earliest times, these discontinuous forms have been important to women

because they are analogous to the fragmented, interrupted, and formless nature of their lives. But they also attest to a continuous female tradition of discontinuity in women's autobiographical writing to the present day" (qtd. in Goozé 415). As a meta-journal, *When Women Were Birds* attests to Jelinek's theory in both its form and content: Williams links the segmented structure of a journal with her own discontinuous autobiographical narrative, suggesting that both forms of women's life narrative encompass this fragmentary nature. Williams then comments more explicitly on journaling. She writes that because she records things in her journal, she "experience[s] each encounter in [her] life twice; once in the world, and once again on the page," suggesting that writing itself is a fragmentation, a restructuring of experience (33). Gusdorf theorizes that this type of twice-lived experience belongs in the realm of autobiography: an autobiographer creates a "second reading of experience, and it is truer than the first because it adds to experience itself consciousness of it" (38). In other words, the act of writing requires the author consciously and purposely to re-experience something. By expressing this same idea in the context of journaling, Williams conflates journals and autobiography and argues that women's life narrative is itself a fragmentation of experience.

Williams begins to recognize the ways she experiences a fragmented self early on in her narrative, when she writes, "A rupture was occurring in me" (53). Brownley and Kimmich describe the self as "a person's inner being, identity, or essence" (xii), going on to explain how the idea of multiple selves dominates women's life narratives: "The concept of multiple selves has been a liberating one for many feminist critics because traditional ideas of selfhood go hand in hand with unity, and the notion of a unified, essential self has historically been more appropriate for a man's life than a woman's" (xiii). The difficulty for women is understanding how these multiple selves—fragmentations of the patriarchal ideal of one, unified self—can coexist. Williams' harmonizing process illuminates how women writers negotiate

fragmentation. Harmony, as mentioned above, is a process that combines multiple tones into a pleasing effect; unity denotes only one tone. Williams' emphasis on harmonizing disparate ideas throughout *When Women Were Birds* suggests, through Williams' commentary on and exploration of her mother's journals, that fragmented selves don't necessarily unify to become one, but, instead, that the multiple selves can coexist.

Williams' self is fragmented in three ways in her memoir: she is torn between who she thought her mother was and who the journals say her mother is; she is torn between her own silent self and her voiced self; and, consequently, she is torn between the private reflections of journaling and the public expressions of autobiography. The autobiographical act then functions to harmonize these disparate selves. Domna C. Stanton suggests that women's autobiography (what she terms "autogynography") has "a global and essential therapeutic purpose: to constitute the female subject.... The *graphing* of the *auto* [represents] the conquest of identity through writing" (14). Many scholars agree that in order to "constitute the female subject," an autogynographer must bring her fragmented selves into accord, a process atypical of male autobiography. Stanton notes that "one opposition appeared repeatedly [in studies of autobiography]: men's narratives were linear, chronological, coherent, whereas women's were discontinuous, digressive, fragmented" (11). This point reflects Jelinek's argument that women's journals and diaries are an outgrowth of their fragmented lives. In *When Women Were Birds*, we can see that the autobiographical act—in both journals and autobiographies—allows fragmented selves to harmonize.

In *When Women Were Birds*, Williams first experiences fragmentation through her disrupted knowledge about her mother. Just as writing in her own journals causes Williams to experience things twice, reading her mother's journals also creates a "twice-lived" experience. Her mother died of cancer at fifty-four, and Williams writes, "The blow of her blank journals

became a second death” (17). Williams attests to a close relationship with her mother not only through passages in *When Women Were Birds*, but also through her previous works, such as *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*. She sees her mother as a strong individual, someone whose presence was so powerful that Williams’ father “rarely spoke” because there was “no need” (188). So when she encounters volumes of silent journals, Williams’ understanding of her mother is unhinged. Where she expects to see her mother’s life written out in narrative form, she finds nothing; where she expects to see a shadow of her mother’s life, she finds whiteness. Nevertheless, by the end of her book, after a long process of considering her mother’s journals, Williams does find harmony between a life lived but not written. She expresses this harmony through the short, italicized descriptors of her mother’s journals sprinkled throughout the text. The first descriptor—“*My mother’s journals are paper tombstones*”—not only describes the “second death” she experiences, but also the fragmentation of the *bio* (life/“tombstone”) from the *graph* (writing/“paper”): to Williams, a blank journal at first means the loss of a life lived but not recorded (17). As she explores the relation between life and writing, her descriptors of her mother’s journals become more complex and interwoven. The journals become “*words wafting above the page*” (176), “*a writer’s conceit*” (176), “*a glaring truth*” (174), “*written in code*” (158), “*a motion circling a void*” (52), “*her [mother’s] vanities recorded*” (176), and they “*tell her everything*” (178). These descriptors all point to how, even without words, her mother’s journals are *written*, how even in silence they have voice. Thus, through the act of writing about the fragmentary nature of her mother’s journals, Williams begins to see a harmony between the *bio* and the *graph*.

The fracture between her own voice and silence is the second fragmentation Williams experiences. Discovery of her own voice is prevalent throughout Williams’ memoir. After seeing how her mother’s silent journals belie a strong-voiced woman, Williams examines

herself and recognizes a rupture between her voiced and silent selves. Sometimes, silence is inaction, as in her experience with the Wilderness Society Governing Council, which she was invited to join in support of nature conservation. She sits silently in the meetings, saying nothing, and others comment on her lack of engagement and activism (131). At other times, silence is a place where we find “solitude, where our capacity to listen is heightened by our ability to embrace quiet” (61), as Williams describes in an earlier section of the book. In another section, she writes that after one particular theater performance, she “returned home speechless, my eyes wide open” (54), implying again that silence can mean listening, watching, and learning. By writing about times of silence and times of voice in her life in a form that is non-linear and fragmented, she is able to examine voice and silence as separate entities. Gradually she sees them as interdependent, and silence and voice become more and more intertwined as her narration moves forward.

The act of writing about her mother’s journals eventually brings the two ideas together for Williams: In the beginning of *When Women Were Birds*, silence and voice are more separate and apart. As the writing progresses, they become more intertwined. Her mother’s journals, she writes, “are a love story. Love and power” (154). She further remarks, “Love [does not] have to be all or nothing. Neither does power. What is positive and what is negative is not absolute” (155). Silence and voice are not absolutes either, each having both positive and negative attributes. She sees her own silence and voice in conversation with each other; silence can be dangerous if used unwisely, but it is also a space for potential and learning. By extension, her mother’s journals’ silences are not powerless or voiceless. They are full of meaning, of listening: “Empty pages become possibilities” (155). Williams brings together the fragments of voice and silence sprinkled throughout the text as she writes, demonstrating how silence, both her own and her mother’s, has informed her voice, and thus finds harmony

between her silent self and her voiced self. These meditations not only inform how disparate selves can harmonize, but also inform feminist rhetorical theories of voice and silence, as I discuss below.

The private reflections of journaling and the public expressions of autobiography are a third source of fragmentation for Williams. Carolyn G. Heilbrun has observed that there has been a tradition of difference between women's public and private selves in life narrative: "Their letters and diaries are quite different, reflecting ambitions and struggles in the public sphere and strong personal feelings; in their published autobiographies they portray themselves as intuitive, nurturing, passive, never managerial which, to have accomplished what they did, they inevitably had to be" (19). She attributes this disconnect to the facts that women have internalized "patriarchal standards," and that "the only acceptable models for women 'involve self-deception and yielding'" (18). However, Heilbrun goes on to argue that the women's movement of the 1970s initiated a turn in this tradition of self-effacement, and women began to "discover a form for their uninhibited autobiographical impulses" (23). She further observes that contemporary autobiographies are often "tucked away in other forms, other genres, most of them new" (22). Women often choose these new forms, these mixed genres, like that of *When Women Were Birds*, in order to tell the truth of their lives, rather than relying on the conventions of traditional autobiography. Williams' book is an important and telling example of how women's private and public life narratives both work against and inform each other. Williams seeks to bring harmony to the private and public selves in her meta-journal by blending the public nature of her own book with the private nature of her and her mother's journals.

Williams' autobiographical act harmonizes the private and the public through three methods: the white space she employs, the "publication" of her own and her mother's journals,

and the hybrid genre. The first and most dramatic white 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' mother's journals. Both the white space and the act of authoring a book about the journals allow Williams to make public what her mother had kept private. She also publishes snippets of her own journals as another deconstruction of the traditionally private realm of journaling.

But not all of *When Women Were Birds* is a publication of things kept private; Williams complicates the traditional dichotomy by telling her readers that she purposefully refuses to make known certain things. Again, she uses white space when she describes how she and her husband began to care for a young man, Louis, 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 pages of white, blank space. In the first instance she uses blank pages to publicize something; in the second, to privatize something. Thus, she conflates public and private through form and content.

By conflating private and public, Williams subverts the traditional assumption that private life narrative is somehow of less value than published life narrative. Stanton argues that the very term *autobiography* privileges published writing over private works, and has been "used... to affirm that women could not transcend, but only record, the concerns of the private self; thus, it had effectively served to devalue their writing" (4). By publicizing her mother's blank journals, Williams turns this assumption on its head. She begins her italicized phrases by saying her mother's journals are "*paper tombstones*" (17); but the last phrase says, "*My mother's journals are to be celebrated*" (206), suggesting that the journals are not "dead" works because they are private, but that they deserve public recognition.

Williams also comments on the transcendent and valuable nature of private journaling as she reflects on her mother's journals. She writes that "if we adopt a personalized script, even a secret one, we are released from the need to perfect content. We are freed from our public morality. We can set an honest path of inquiry with our pen" (165). This requirement of "public morality" has, as Heilbrun implies, consistently constrained women autobiographers from "uninhibited autobiographical impulses" (23). Williams promotes both private and public writing that allows women to tell the truth of their lives, without being trapped by patriarchal requirements: "There is an art to writing, and it is not always disclosure. The act itself can be beautiful, revelatory, and private" (166). Of course, even as she promotes private writing, she writes a book that she most likely assumes will be published, given her well-established authorial presence in the field of creative nonfiction. By structuring *When Women Were Birds* to mimic a journal, Williams creates a form that evokes private writing to construct autobiographical, published work. Thus, through white space, promoting the private in a public work, and through her hybrid genre, Williams conflates traditional notions of private versus public, showing how the two can work together to (in)form women's life narratives.

When Women Were Birds provides important insight into how the autobiographical act allows women to negotiate boundaries that they come up against, especially the boundaries between various selves and ways of writing the self. Williams writes that it is "my own hand, with pen in place, [that] bushwhacks through my psyche, cutting through the dense understory of random thoughts" (165). To write our lives is to discover our selves. By writing in a meditative and disjointed form, Williams goes through the process of harmonizing various selves and various forms, and writing theorists can glean ways that journaling and life narrative can be the means women use to understand themselves.

RHETORICAL THEORY AND WOMEN'S LIFE NARRATIVES

When Women Were Birds not only informs our notions of how women negotiate boundaries through life narrative, but also contributes to feminist rhetorical theory as Williams' (re)invented genre interrogates the nature of women's communication, with both themselves and others. By deploying a feminist rhetoric, Williams takes her readers on a mission to map feminist notions of voice and silence, eventually fusing the two concepts and expanding our ideas about what voice and silence mean in feminist rhetorical theory, as well as how that theory manifests itself for women outside of academia.

As a meta-journal, *When Women Were Birds* suggests that writing a life narrative is a process of discovery. Williams' decision to author a faux journal is not arbitrary. The format allows her text to unfold slowly as she searches for meaning in her mother's journals, in turn thus allowing her writing to reflect a journal's "organic text, rather than [an] imposed text that result[s] from a controlling intelligence" (Lensink 154). Rather than offering definitive answers in *When Women Were Birds*, Williams explores possible meanings and significations, a task facilitated by the fragmentary, journal-like form. Stanton observes that "discontinuity and fragmentation constitute particularly fitting means for inscribing the split subject, even for creating the rhetorical impression of spontaneity and truth" (11). *When Women Were Birds* comes across as spontaneous, as exploratory, as a journey rather than a destination explained. In contrast, a traditional autobiography would be more linear and chronological, implying a neat and systematic order of events that lead to a finalized conclusion. Williams' fragmented text, on the other hand, implies a more true-to-life process: that of wondering, testing, regrouping, returning, and exploring.

Williams begins *When Women Were Birds* with uncertainty: she opens her first sections with the confusion and bewilderment that occur when she discovers the blank journals. As she

wonders about meaning and tests her ideas, she later writes, “My voice is born repeatedly in the fields of uncertainty” (151). Her uncertainty is what leads her to understanding; this “rhetoric of uncertainty,” as Patricia Spacks observes, is typical in women’s autobiographical writing and provides a way for women to explore tensions in their lives (qtd. in Heilbrun 18). By ending the first section of *When Women Were Birds* with the question “What is voice?”, Williams sets up her book as a search for an answer rather than the definitive presentation of one. “I do not know why my mother bought journal after journal, year after year, and never wrote in one of them and passed them on to me,” she writes. And then, emphatically: “I will never know” (17). In spite of her admission that she “will never know,” she does not see the search for answers as futile. In an interview with the journal *Brevity*, Williams explains the benefit of the search for answers: “My questions are my paths to the unknown....For me that’s where creativity dwells, that’s where the discovery is, that is where curiosity leads us — to that place of both not knowing and unknowing.” She invites the reader on this “path to the unknown,” to consider along with her many different perspectives on voice, on silence, and on life narrative as she investigates multiple potential answers to her question by sharing memories and insights.

At the same time she explores her own ideas, she also considers her mother’s perspectives on voice, silence, and life narrative through the blank journals. Williams thus engages in what Foss and Griffin describe as invitational rhetoric:

Invitational rhetoric constitutes an invitation to the audience to enter the rhetor's world and to see it as the rhetor does.... Ideally, audience members accept the invitation offered by the rhetor by listening to and trying to understand the rhetor's perspective and then presenting their own. When this happens, rhetor and audience alike contribute to the thinking about an issue so that everyone involved gains a greater understanding of the issue in its subtlety, richness, and complexity. (365-366)

Invitational rhetoric thus seeks to bring rhetor and audience into a type of harmony with each other through mutual understanding and exploration, and it is a rhetoric that Williams employs in both form and content. When Williams retrieves her mother's bequeathed journals, she describes the night she opens them in simple and startling prose: "I opened the first journal. It was empty. I opened the second journal. It was empty. I opened the third. It, too, was empty, as was the fourth, the fifth, the sixth—shelf after shelf after shelf, all my mother's journals were blank" (4). The simplicity of the prose is sufficient to engage the reader's sympathies, but Williams goes further to invite the reader into her experience. As described above, she uses twelve pages of blank, white space to "publish" her mother's journals. The reader, expecting to turn the page to the next chapter, is shocked and surprised when they encounter those unexpected blank pages, and they turn the pages with growing perplexity to find the rest of the text. This predictable reaction mirrors Williams' feelings of shock and surprise when she encounters her mother's blank journals. Williams' form is an example of invitational rhetoric—it invites us to see Williams' perspective intimately, to partake of her mother's journals, and to feel our own reaction to what Williams experienced.

Foss and Griffin write that invitational rhetoric offers an alternative to conquest forms of rhetoric. Although it is not necessarily appropriate for use in all forms of communication, its technique of offering a safe space for interactions can eventually result in the transformation of "systems of domination and oppression.... Invitational rhetoric thus may transform an oppressive system precisely because it does not engage that system on its own terms" (378). *When Women Were Birds* is an example of this type of offering because Williams is not trying to convince her audience that voice is superior to silence or that journaling is superior to autobiography; instead, she uses her autobiographical act to offer an alternative view: that voice and silence can be mutually beneficial, that journaling and autobiography can merge to

find different modes of expression for women. Williams has attested to this desire to find a feminist rhetoric through merging seemingly disparate ideas. In an interview with *Iowa Review*, she says that in writing *Refuge*, “[I]t wasn’t the scientific mind or the poetic mind, but the feminine mind that I wanted to embrace. That was the language I wanted to liberate” (Bartkevicius and Hussmann 9). Certainly Williams accomplishes this “embrace” of the “feminine mind” in *When Women Were Birds* as well, for in her use of invitational rhetoric she engages in a feminist language.

Women’s life narratives as a whole tend to be invitational. Elouise Bell observes that “historically, many published works of men have been rhetorical, that is, intended to persuade. Many personal writings of women have had no such objectives; rather, they have had goals much more complex and interwoven, goals more closely related to the aims of ordinary conversation. Thus the need to listen as well as read” (qtd. in Gooz  415). Williams’ memoir presents a conversation between Williams herself and her mother’s journals. She conducts the search for meaning in her mother’s journals by interacting with those “texts,” even though their pages are blank. Williams comes to see her mother’s journals as having their own voice, their own story to tell. She writes that “*My mother’s journals ask me to turn the page*” (180), indicating that the journals require something of her, that they invite her to consider their perspective. The journals can also “*hear voices*” (175) and “*are capable of receiving my words*” (61), implying that she is in conversation with them, and through that conversation, Williams finds new meanings for and implications of silence and voice. Her own explanation of the benefits of conversation is in line with the goals of invitational rhetoric: “Conversation is a vehicle for change.... We hear our own voice in concert with another. And inside those pauses of listening, we approach new territories of thought” (49).

As Williams engages in conversation with her mother's journals and with the reader, she discovers new meanings of silence and voice, and her audience can accept or discard those meanings. Either way, greater understanding is achieved. Perhaps more important, Foss and Griffin argue, is not that the rhetor and audience expand their comprehension of the issue, but that both rhetor and audience improve their understanding of themselves:

Ultimately, though, the result of invitational rhetoric is not just an understanding of an issue. Because of the nonhierarchical, nonjudgmental, nonadversarial framework established for the interaction, an understanding of the participants themselves occurs, an understanding that engenders appreciation, value, and a sense of equality. (365-366)

Because Williams harmonizes disparate parts of the self (the voiced self with the silent self), she arrives at a greater understanding of the self as a whole, harmonized force. The vehicle for this harmony is her use of invitational rhetoric; without conversing with these journals, without the ability to explore and test ideas in a safe space, that harmony may have been thwarted. Her audience also is better able to understand their own voices and silences because she invites them on the journey with her. Williams observes during her interview with *Terrain.org* that "A book is a sustained exploration of ideas that can meander, circle, and deviate through story.... A book becomes a companion. The words between covers create an intimacy with the reader." Williams uses invitational rhetoric to forge an intimate relationship with her reader, taking the reader along with her in her exploration of silence and voice.

There has long been a division between voice and silence in feminist rhetorical theory; at times scholars and writers have privileged voice, at other times silence. The most recent turn has been toward voice. Anne Dalke has observed that contemporary authors such as Adrienne Rich, Tillie Olsen, Audre Lorde, and Sandra Gilbert have "insisted on the dangers and oppressiveness of silence, on the urgent need for women to find an authentic means of expression" (463). She continues, noting that, by contrast, in the early twentieth century,

writers such as Gertrude Stein, Ellen Glasgow, Willa Cather, Zora Neal Hurston, and others “offered quite another view of silence, a more positive and suggestive one: they described it not as a void, but as fullness” (463). This division and argument over the privileging of silence or voice is problematic at best. Certainly, Audre Lorde’s “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” is a well-known and powerful speech that illuminates how silence can disempower us. She argues that silence can “immobilize us” (44), and there is no doubt that, at times, this is true. Helen M. Buss concurs: “To write/speak is to empower the self” (111). At the same time, Jane Parpart argues that the “silent performance of resistance ... reminds us that voice is not the only form that empowerment... can take” (7). She goes on to explain that in situations and places where women are forbidden from speaking out, silence can be an effective mode of demonstrative resistance.

The scholars who argue for and against silence all make excellent points and expand our notions of what voice and silence—as opposites—mean for women today. But privileging one over the other is antithetical to feminist goals of mutual cooperation for positive change. It is the combination, the merging of the power of voice with the power of silence that will most effectively demonstrate how both can be used to resist forces of inequality, discover women’s selves, and understand women’s development.

Several recent scholars have taken on this harmonizing approach to theorizing voice and silence. Peter Elbow writes, “The usual opposition we see is of writing/silence/absence and speech/voice/presence. Post-structuralists like to emphasize the division here, but I want to say that silence can be as present as voice, that silence is a part of voice, or even maybe has *voice*” (179). Elbow’s conflation of the two demonstrates their interdependent nature. Anne Ruggles Gere also shows how the two seemingly opposite concepts should not be separate and apart from each other: “Instead of seeing silence as speech’s opposite, we can conceive of it as a

part of speech, located on a continuum that puts one in dialogue with the other ... Recognizing silence as part of speech eliminates the dichotomy between the 'truth' of speech and the 'lie' of silence" (206-07). Susan Sontag is another theorist who takes up a position of mediation between the two: "'Silence' never ceases to imply its opposite and to depend on its presence: just as there can't be 'up' without 'down' or 'left' without 'right,' so one must acknowledge a surrounding environment of sound or language in order to recognize silence" (367). She continues that "Without the polarity of silence, the whole system of language would fail" (372). We can't have one without the other; they are dependent on each other to exist.

When Women Were Birds is ultimately an echo of these latter theorists, a pushing forward, through invitational rhetoric, of theorizing silence and voice as harmonic, interdependent concepts. Williams continually comments on the interdependent and non-hierarchical nature of voice and silence. "To withhold words is power. But to share our words is also power," she writes, acknowledging the utility of both silence and voice (18). Williams takes the theory of silence further by mining the ways in which silence and voice can be both positive and negative. Like Parpart, who wrote that "To privilege voice over silence and secrecy as evidence of empowered agency ignores the transformative potential of a complex mix of choices" (9), Williams explains, "When silence is a choice, it is an unnerving presence. When silence is imposed, it is censorship" (25). One of the most significant experiences of silence for Williams is when she agrees to go into the woods with Joseph, a carpenter she meets while she is doing fieldwork in a wilderness camp in Idaho. Although she barely knows Joseph, she agrees to accompany him on a walk; when they have travelled far from the base camp where she is staying, Joseph pulls out an axe and turns on Williams, attempting to drive the axe into her skull. Williams escapes, but says nothing to anyone about what happened. Later, she regrets her silence, saying, "When I hear about a young woman who has disappeared, possibly

murdered, her body never found, I think about Joseph and the violence of my silence” (114). Here, Williams’ reluctance to speak is the type of disempowering silence that Lorde and other scholars argue against. But in other parts of her narrative, Williams theorizes silence as a place of rejuvenation and strength. She discusses John Cage’s musical work, *4’33”*, at length, suggesting that “Perhaps the silence Cage is honoring is the stillness we seek in the natural world, born of solitude, where our capacity to listen is heightened by our ability to embrace quiet” (61). She expounds on this idea in an interview with *Brevity* by explaining that for her, “It’s always the listening.... It’s inside listening that I recover what I have forgotten. In silence and in stillness, my voice dwells.” Not only does silence produce space to listen—a crucial element of feminism; it is also necessary to find one’s voice.

For Williams, voice also can be both positive and negative. At the end of *When Women Were Birds*, Williams reflects on her own writing and how it has taught her that, sometimes, voice isn’t as powerful as silence:

I thought I was writing a book about voice. I thought I would proclaim as a woman that we must speak the truth of our lives at all costs. But what I realize with Louis walking behind me is that I will never be able to say what is in my heart, because words fail us, because it is in our nature to protect, because there are times when what is public and what is private must be discerned. There is comfort in keeping what is sacred inside us not as a secret, but as a prayer. (207-08)

At the same time, Williams recognizes the power of voice, stating, “In a voiced community, we all flourish” (119). She writes that she gave up certain things in life, such as having children, in order to find her voice, signifying its overarching importance for her. She describes how voicing concerns in writing brought about environmental and political change, again suggesting the necessity of speaking out. But her belief in the power of voice is always balanced with her belief in the power of silence, and her mother’s journals act as a place where both are harmonized. Silent, white pages are both “*the power of absence*” and “*the power of presence*”

(26). Her mother's journals are "*a palindrome, to be read in either direction*" (40), or, in other words, a site where multiple ideas can flourish and interact.

As Williams considers her own voice and silence, she recognizes not only the dependency voice has on silence, but also how her voice is dependent on her relationships with others. Although Williams experiences a fragmentation of self when she discovers the empty journals and when she realizes that there is a split between her voiced and silent selves, her autobiographical act reconciles these split selves. Williams also elaborates on how her own voice—and, by extension, self—have been influenced by the women around her: "I knew my capacity to speak was in direct relationship to the women I descended—ascended—from" (50). She explains further: "My mother gave me my voice by withholding hers, both in life and in death. Mimi gave me my voice by proclaiming hers: directly, honestly, and at times, shockingly" (150). She begins seeing voice as not a singular, self-made entity, but as a creation through multiple sources. For Williams, voice is more chorus than solo.

This idea of multiplicity in the discovery of the self invokes women's autobiographical theories of the self. Scholars have noted that a central feature of women's autobiography is defining the self in terms of others. Stanton has observed that, unlike traditional autobiography, "The female 'I' was thus not simply a texture woven of various selves; its threads, its life-lines, came from and extended to others. By that token, this 'I' represented a denial of a notion essential to the phallogocentric order: the totalized self-contained subject present-to-itself" (15). Williams sees her voice, too, as emerging from others and from herself; after she ascribes the emergence of her voice to her mother and Mimi, she says, "I believe my own voice continues to be found wherever I am being present and responding from my heart, moment by moment" (150-51). She theorizes voice as a collective yet unique part of self, echoing Irigaray's observation that "language isn't formed on a single thread, a single strand or

pattern. It comes from everywhere at once.... Why only one song, one speech, one text at a time?" (85).

Williams' narrative reflects this multi-voiced harmonization as she engages with her mother's journals and uses invitational rhetoric to encourage others to consider their own experiences even as they consider hers. She invites us to rethink our notions of the rhetoric of voice and silence as well as how women communicate through narrative.

CONCLUSION

In theorizing voice and silence as interrelated and harmonic principles, Williams echoes many contemporary scholars in a beautiful and accessible creative nonfiction text—and this is where the power of *When Women Were Birds* lies. It is *not* an unapproachable or purely scholarly work based on theory alone. Williams grounds her theories of voice and silence in personal experience and then invites the reader to explore that experience with her and take away from it what they will. She follows bell hooks' admonition that feminist theory should be rooted in experience and should be accessible to all. hooks writes:

It is evident that one of the many uses of theory in academic locations is in the production of an intellectual class hierarchy where the only work deemed truly theoretical is work that is highly abstract, jargonistic, difficult to read, and containing obscure references It is especially ironic when this is the case with feminist theory. (64)

She continues, "[W]riting—theoretical talk—[is] most meaningful when it invites readers to engage in critical reflection and to engage in the practice of feminism" (70). *When Women Were Birds*, as a creative work of nonfiction and an example of invitational rhetoric, invites its readers to consider one woman's lived experience and engage in feminist thought and theory through well-written, intriguing, and accessible prose—an accessibility that makes Williams' memoir a valuable contribution to women's life narrative and rhetorical texts and relevant for

scholarly study. When feminist ideals and theories are published in mass-produced, engaging, thoughtful texts, principles of feminism are spread beyond academia to influence women's everyday lives.

As a contemporary example of women's life narrative, *When Women Were Birds* demonstrates not only how we can continue to expand the field of women's autobiographical theory by examining texts for their contributions to writing and rhetorical theory, but also how women today speak and relate to each other through writing about their lives. As we make space for not just reading these types of works, but also listening to the voices and silences of these writers, we can piece together the boundaries we encounter in our theory and in our own lives.

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PART II:
CREATIVE WORK

DEATH RITES OF A JOURNAL

I'm considering burning my journals. I've been reading them, and it is apparent that they have been dead for some time now. Maybe I should bury them, but cremation seems more fitting.

I walk into the kitchen to find the matchbox, and pick up my first journal, the brown one, the one with gold capital letters across the front that declare simply: JOURNAL. I open its hardbound cover. *January 6, 1991.* My eight-year old self writes, *Today Peanut Butter died. She was my model horse, my favorite. The dogs chewed her up.*

I remember the little horse. Toffee brown, small, her front leg bent at the knee. Teeth marks covering her plastic body.

I gave her a funeral. I put all the other horses around Peanut Butter, and wrote her a gravestone: "This horse died by the chewing of two deadly dogs."

Peanut Butter lies on her side, surrounded by a circle of toy horses, a strange variation of Stonehenge on my green carpet. There's a sacred moment of silence as the horses hang their heads. I allow them to grieve and watch over them like a benevolent goddess.

I can see it clearly, standing over my journal, the match in hand.

I look at my other journals, stacked neatly on the table. Maybe I should wait. Maybe, I think, I need to prepare my journals for their departure from this world. Maybe I should read them one more time.

Everything deserves its last rites.

Death

I've been reading my journals, and it is like watching my own death from a distance. I live in the afterworld of the present. I read through 1,652 pages of entries, spanning 22 years,

covering over 8,000 days. I watch people and places come and go, my life ebbing and flowing, my self in constant flux. Not that I could see the changes as I wrote. Writing my journals was a daily chore; reading them is a journey into my afterlife.

I open the brown journal, the first one, and read a talk that I gave in church on Father's Day when I was ten, two years before my dad was diagnosed with leukemia. *I'm grateful for my dad because he always comes home and plays with me. He calls me Worm and I call him Snake, and he makes me laugh.*

I open the green journal, the fourth one, and read about my religion, Mormonism. I had been born into the Church, baptized when I was eight, and almost every page references the Church in some way. *I need to stay on the right path, I warn myself. I can't imagine my life without the Church. It's more important to me than anything else.*

I open the white journal, the seventh one, the one where I record my engagement. *Brandon and I are so in love, I gush. We always want to be happy, and we both believe that by staying true to the Church and keeping our covenants and always doing what's right, we will be forever in love.*

I already know the endings to these stories—I wrote them. But I read on, compelled by the way I wax and wane, a moon trapped in orbit.

When I am nineteen, I write: *It's been seven years since Dad died. That feels like forever. I can't even remember how it was before that.*

And I still can't. I was twelve when my father died, and although there are a few years of entries before his death, they seem like they're from someone else's life.

When I am twenty-seven, I write: *I just can't invest myself in the Church anymore. I go because I hope it's true; I go because I'm afraid it's true. I go because I'm in a state of inertia.*

Eventually, I won't go at all. I will leave Mormonism, and its importance in my life will dwindle into extinction.

I read my journals and realize the girl who wrote those entries no longer exists. It's a record of a life that no longer makes sense; if they were full of truth, insight, a past that somehow meshed with my present, maybe I'd keep them. But they are separate and apart from me, yet a part *of* me; a fictional book about a girl I once knew.

I turn to the blue journal, the eighth one, skipping the early years of my marriage, on to the turbulent middle. *It's not that I completely regret marrying Brandon, I read, but, it's been seven years. And everyone who depressed us when we were engaged by saying "oh, it will change," was right. We're no longer starstruck. It takes work. Work and more work. I just wish-- oh, what's the use of wishing.*

I watch myself die, over and over again.

Obituary

The journals, twenty-two years old, have been dead for some time now.

They were born on January 6, 1991 to their author, and spent most of their youth in New York. Later, the journals lived all over the United States, including Utah, Iowa, Ohio, and West Virginia. They also visited France and Canada.

The journals were employed as a listener, a mirror, and a friend. In their spare time, they enjoyed reading, and had a great love for colored inks. The motto they lived their life by was, in their own words, *Time has a way of morphing everything.* They are survived by their author and her children, and will always be a part of their lives.

After cremation, ashes will be scattered in the flowerbeds at the library.

In lieu of flowers, written donations can be sent to a journal of your choice.

Embalming

I've been reading my journals, and it is like visiting a wax museum. I see myself at ten, at twelve, at twenty-two, each self a still life, a wax figurine. They are lies, these figurines; they pretend to be alive, but if you look too closely, or touch them with your fingertip, you'll see the colored paste and scar the delicate surface.

In the white journal, I find waxen words, entries that have been cleaned up and disguised. *It's been a hard week. Brandon and I went through a difficult experience, but it's much better now.*

The rest of the entry is silence. I cradle the journal in my hands, rocking the words in their sleep. I know exactly what the experience is: Brandon admits to me that week that he has a sexual addiction, that he has been looking at porn and going to strip clubs and lying about it. But I can't find the courage to tell my journals, so year after year, I only allude to it, coding it in elusive words. I lie in silence and omission. Years pass quietly and I read: *Brandon has not been doing well at certain things, and I am becoming very frustrated to deal with a problem that has been going on for more than two years now. I am tired of it, and tired of having no one to talk to. But I digress. Today I went to see a movie...*

A few years later, I find an abandoned attempt: ~~*For the past few years Brandon has been*~~

I put down the white journal and pick up the brown one again. I received it as a gift from my church leaders when I was eight, shortly after I was baptized into the Mormon church. There is a note from my teacher inside the front cover. "Your journal is your personal scripture. You should record here your daily dealings with God as you prepare to return to His presence." Keeping a journal is a priority among Mormons, especially women. We were supposed to maintain a record of our lives for our posterity, so our children and grandchildren would know how we lived and what we believed. In other words, we were supposed to live exemplary lives,

write about them, and leave a legacy of righteousness in our journals for our posterity. So, long before my first child was born, I began lying to my offspring.

Lie: To tell an untruth. To intentionally misrepresent. To purposely omit. To deliberately add in false information. To knowingly mislead.

I page through my journals and tell myself that I lied for my posterity, that I omitted things for their sakes, because I didn't want them to be discouraged or disappointed.

But I know that too is a pretense. I lied for myself. I obscured the truth because to write it was to admit some sort of failure in my marriage and religion, to write the truth was to reveal a part of my life that I did not want to believe in. I was afraid that if I wrote it, something would tear apart.

Lie: To exercise self-preservation.

After death, it is said that a body is embalmed for three reasons: sanitation, preservation, and presentation. The embalmer washes the body with a cloth and cleanser, to rid it of any disease or infections that might pass on to the living. She empties the veins of blood and refills them with embalming fluid, to prevent decay and putrefaction. She closes the eyes and mouth and paints the face with life so that the body, on its last display, will look picturesque—like something it once was, but is not.

And so I embalm myself in words. My handwriting paints the page, dressing it in words and dates and phrases. I sanitize my husband's addiction so that my offspring won't be stained; I omit things to preserve my ideals from decomposing. I present an image of myself that is lifelike, but not entirely. A wax doll.

Lie: To embalm.

Sometimes, I don't even tell you things. What if I read some ridiculous paper-thought of mine years from now and say, like King Lear, "Oh, what a fool I've been!"

I see my point. But at the same time, to not write is sometimes just as foolish. Not writing leaves me no recourse but to stew and wilt in confusion and anger.

Lie: To de-compose.

I have to travel forward six years before I finally stop lying to my journals about my marriage. I am twenty-eight. *For the past few years, Brandon has been struggling with a sex addiction. He first told me about it eighteen months after we were married. I was completely devastated. I hardly knew what to think or feel. I felt—I feel—betrayed, and I can't trust him anymore.*

The admission is late, but it is honest. I watch the loops and curves of my penmanship and see some signs of life, an embalmer's touch on a corpse. I close the cover and shroud my life in cardboard and cloth.

Wake

It's strange when you read your journals from twenty years ago. You laugh at yourself, the way you gave one of your toy horses a funeral after your dog chewed it up, the way you kicked a boy who was trying to impress you by showing you something gross, the way you couldn't stop talking about him for days after. Then you begin to cry as you read how you had to stay with your sick father in his room for seven and a half hours one day to care for him. He had leukemia, and your mother was working, and you cry for yourself because no twelve-year-old should have to be burdened with something so heavy; you cry for yourself because you didn't realize those seven and a half hours would be some of the last you would ever spend with your father, and if you had only known it then, how much more you would have written than just: *It was a long day.*

You look at your journals where they lie on the kitchen table and regret what you wrote and what you didn't write. You read about the time you argued with a friend about religion, telling her that she *would be unhappy because she didn't have the truth*. You are mortified, and you see now that you were judgmental and arrogant, but of course, you can't go back. Your journals are finished. But you also remember the other pages, the ones where you redeem yourself. *Maybe I tended to negate other religions' experiences*, you say. *Maybe I haven't seen quite as clearly as I thought I did*. You look at your journals where they lie and think of all the times you asked them, *May I confide?* And the journals always sat ready, waiting, acquiescent, never complaining, never telling you what you should think or what you should do.

You realize that you are two people at once. You're reading yourself, but a self who is both you and a total opposite of you. You are twelve years old in New York, catching frogs and playing in the creek in the backyard; and then you are thirty, and you look up at your little home in West Virginia, six hundred miles from where you just were. You are displaced; you don't know where you are, but somehow you know how you got here. But nothing here, now, seems real. Where is your father? Where is Brandon? Two men who were each a part of your life for more than ten years, and now they don't know you, and you no longer know them. But you see your journals lying there, and it is real.

You read the day you went to your father's viewing. You waited until everyone had left the room so that no one would invade your last moment together. You looked at him in the casket, lying there in peace. You put your fingers on his embalmed hand, and felt cold. You said your last goodbye and uttered a final prayer.

May you who read this forgive me of my faults, and find some sort of inspiration here, whether it is from my mistakes or from my triumphs.

Eulogy

I've been reading my journals, and it is like being a pallbearer for my memories. The journals are the coffins, the urns, and I place my memories inside them, outside me, and I carry them away.

I write, at first, because I am told to. My journals are my duty. *I don't always feel like writing in here, I say when I am eight. But we are supposed to keep a journal, and I think it's better to write every day.* I miss days of course, sometimes a few months at a time, but I keep writing.

Later, I write to gossip about my own life. My journals are my friend. I tell them about my dating problems, my ideals about love. *I want my future husband to be kind, educated, handsome, romantic.* Then I get married, and I write to talk about the life I am supposed to have, concealing the parts that don't conform. My journals are my judge.

When I finally tell my journals about Brandon's addiction, I write to confess. My journals are my priest. *I've stopped myself from writing this for a long time, and I shouldn't have. I'm sorry I didn't tell you before.* I begin opening up completely; I write to discover myself. My journals become my counselor. *There's this big, wonderful change in me,* I write, a few months after I get divorced. *And it started when I began telling you everything.*

But year after year, there is one reason I always write: to remember. I write eulogies for my memories, so that I won't forget how I feel at ten, at twelve, at twenty-two. Occasionally, though, I wonder if there should be some bigger purpose. *Why write something if no one is going to read it? Isn't that the point of writing?*

But then, why have I kept a journal since I was eight years old? For me. No one but me. I record events, people, and feelings so that I can experience them again and make sense of them. I re-create things on the page so that they are no longer inside of me, but outside, an object of

examination. And then, after I examine them, they are carried away. I write to recollect my memories, but also to forget them.

I am a eulogist. I write to remember these things. I write to lay them to rest.

Cremation

I'm considering burning my journals.
Swiping a stick across red bumps
of a matchbox,
holding the blue-gold flame
to the black scrawl of words.
I'd watch as the paper curls,
as the black burn spreads
an eclipse over the page.
The words silently protest
darken
crumble into flakes.
The hardbound covers would wither, blaze
all of it
to ash.
Then my journals would be nothing
but a pile of dust.
I'd dip my fingers into carrion,
pinching soot
between my thumb and forefinger,
grinding them together.
I'd brush the darkened tips
across my cheeks
and
wear my past
as war paint.

Scattering Ashes

I've been reading my journals, and it is like seeing a burning branch turning to dust turning to dirt turning to grass. When I write, the ink in the pen is born from the journal's ashes. Every time I read my journals, I burn them. Every time I read them, I rewrite myself.

EROSION

“Come on, it’ll be fun.”

“I really don’t want to.”

We stand on the top of a fifty-foot boulder jutting over the Red River, the July sun heating the sandstone so that we have to shift our feet to keep our soles from burning. Brandon has already jumped off three times, doing backflips off the rock and plummeting into the deep, murky waters below. I had watched him from the other side of the river as I sat on the rocky bank, the cool water lapping my feet, squinting to make out his tall, lean frame as he walked to the edge of the boulder with his hands on his hips. He had looked down, said something to a guy in red swim trunks standing near him, and then backed up a few steps and stood still. Suddenly he ran two great long strides and jumped, vaulting his body into the nothingness of air, tucking his head and knees into a knot, turning midair once, twice, then straightening into a long line with hands pointed down, down, down, until he sliced the Red River open and it parted and drank him in.

He popped up three or four seconds later, ten feet from where he had gone under, and swam across the river toward me. His arms were tan and muscled, and he cut through the water almost lazily. “Impressive,” I said, smiling as he emerged dripping and gleaming and stood next to me.

“It’s your turn now,” he replied, reaching down for my hand.

He’d already tried twice to get me to go up with him. But jumping off rocks into deep rivers wasn’t my sort of thrill. I preferred reading a book on the sand, wading into the water whenever I got too hot and feeling the riverbed shape itself between my toes. But I knew Brandon. He wouldn’t stop pestering me unless I followed him up the steep climb and threw myself into the river.

“Well, I’ll climb up there with you,” I said, “but I’m not going to jump.” I put my hand in his and he pulled me up, and we stepped back into the water and swam across to the path winding up the boulder.

We had arrived at Red River Gorge the night before. It was our anniversary, and we’d decided to rejuvenate our eight years of marriage by leaving the kids with my mother and taking a two-day trip into Kentucky. The Gorge was deep in its summer brooding, the rocks hot and the river warm, the sugar maples and pin oaks heavy with green. I wanted to think of it as a sultry summer heat, but in reality it was just muggy, the weight of the season clinging to our bodies like a sweat-drenched t-shirt. The nights were cool though, and we slept uncovered in a log cabin as moonbeams washed over our bare skin. It was unusual, for us, to sleep without clothes, without layers of cloth or blanket. But there was something about being so close to nature, something about the rocks of the gorge that shot out of the earth and the river with its primal rush that made us shed what lay between us.

But the moon disappeared and in the morning the sun took over, dappling our bed with unflattering light and pushing us off our pillows and into our clothes. After we dressed and before the heat began to blanket the gorge, we hiked to Dark Hollows, one of the Gorge’s natural stone arches, where the intense wind was still at work sculpting its masterpiece. As we walked under the shade of the rock ledge and through the opening, I placed my hand on the inside of the arch and felt the cool, smooth underbelly of the rock. I loved the arches—they were structures of grandeur, but they had an air of modesty about them, as if they knew their beauty was at the mercy of the elements. In another million years, the wind and the rain would

carve them so hollow that the rock would collapse, and the arches would be nothing more than a few broken pebbles scattered on the earth.

After we left Dark Hollows, we went rock climbing up Scrambled Porn, a sixty-foot crag with two deep horizontal cuts that divided the rock wall into three bulky, offset sections. Brandon twisted the rope into a figure eight through my harness as I stood next to the sandstone wall, and then he stepped back to belay me. I reached around the rope and laid my hands on the rock. It was cool to the touch, rough and unforgiving, so different from the smooth arch I had felt that morning. I ran my hand over the holes and divots, searching for a handhold, the eroded edges passing beneath my palm until I found a small ledge. I grasped it and heaved my body upwards, lifting my foot to stand on a precarious narrow shelf, clinging to the rock and shaping my soft flesh to the unyielding stone.

Brandon had taught me how to rock climb when we first started dating, nine years earlier. It was the first of many hobbies he would rope me into over the years. After the rock climbing came woodworking, which I found tedious and time-consuming; then there was clogging—Brandon had been on our university's dance team, so I too learned how to dance. He taught me how to shoot rifles and pistols, a useful enough skill but a painful one when I hadn't pulled the shotgun tight enough to my shoulder. There had been tennis—fun, but I never did win a game against Brandon—and dirt biking, which was terrifying when I'd had to speed down treacherous hills just to keep up with him. There was skiing too, which I particularly disliked. I kept falling into Utah's famous powdered snow, my ski mask hiding my freezing, frustrated face, but I got up again and again because I wanted to impress him. It was as though he were filling me, forming me, connecting with me through climbing and shooting and dancing and skiing.

I could only remember one hobby of mine that he had tried. He had read a novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*. He enjoyed it, but had never picked up a book of fiction since.

“Just climb,” he had instructed me when I encountered my first crag nine years ago, “and don’t touch the rope.” So I had climbed, as I was climbing now, clutching jagged lips of weather-beaten rock as it clawed my calloused hands.

The rock walls I climbed always seemed to have character, although I had a hard time deciding exactly what that character was. On one hand the rock seemed passive, oblivious to the miniscule life form attempting to make its way up her rough body. On the other hand she seemed cold, merciless, able to flick me off with one trick handhold or unmount me with the shock of a spider who made its home in one of her dark, recessed holes. And when on occasion I fell from her weathered face, I thought perhaps she was angry, maybe at the wind that wore her away, particle by particle, with its harsh gusts and mild breezes. Or perhaps she was still outraged by the Red River, which had cut its path through her 310 million years ago and shaped her against her will as the water forged its way through canyons and centuries.

Perhaps too, then, she was irate with me. For even as I climbed her ashen cliffs, little pieces of rock were brushed away by my white-chalked hands. Erosion is usually defined as a force of nature—the wearing away of earth by water and air. But it is a human force too, a corrosion achieved by hands and words and silence, action and inaction and apathy. I could feel, as I inched my way up the bottom third of the crag and onto the torso, the ragged, sharp surface that had been torn up by the wind and the water. I could see the silvery veins running wild through her sandstone skin, the bits of rockdust caught in gossamer webs, the eyehook steel bolts hammered deep into her sides by rock climbers wanting to scale her towering terrain.

When I finally reached the top, I stood on the ledge and looked out over the miles and miles of sandstone cliffs that extended in either direction, and then I looked down at Brandon, a speck on the ground. I was sixty feet above him, but we were still connected by the rope, a literal lifeline. I had come to enjoy rock climbing over the years—one of the few hobbies he had wanted me to learn that I actually liked—but still hated coming down from the top. Some people say it is all about trusting the person who is belaying you: he holds your life in his hands. And this is true. But it's also about trusting the rope. It's the only thing connecting you to your belayer as you step faithfully off the edge of a sixty-foot cliff into nothingness. Rock climbing ropes are strong—they can hold hundreds of pounds—but they too can erode, they too can wear away, especially if left out in the sun, the wind, the rain, and if you slip and the tension is too great, the rope can snap in two and you will fall like a rock from the sky and return to the earth from where you came.

Of course, we had checked our rope before we climbed, so when I held my breath and stepped off Scrambled Porn, Brandon and the rope held me, and I sailed down the rock wall, kicking off the face to pick up speed, breaking off little shards of rock with my shoes.

We climb out of the river and onto the dirt path that leads around the back of the boulder, pushing branches and brush out of the way as we scramble up the natural stone steps on the east side of the rock. There are a few other swimmers standing on the top when we make it up, and I follow Brandon to the edge. Leaning over slightly, not wanting my feet to get too close, I peek at the quiet water fifty feet below me. It is a long way down. And I don't particularly like swimming.

“Come on,” Brandon says, “it'll be fun.”

“I really don’t want to,” I reply.

“You’ll regret it if you don’t—trust me, it’s a rush.” He smiles, encouragingly, pestering me with his expectations.

I step closer to the edge and look down again. There is no rope connecting us here, now, and if I jump I will have to hope that I don’t end up getting lost in the maze of water and drown.

I look over my shoulder at Brandon, who has backed up to give me room, anticipating a response that I don’t want to give. The rock is hot and grey, and there are bits of dried, brown moss dying beneath Brandon’s feet. I look down at my own feet and see rockdust, divots, holes, and I wonder how much of this rock has already disappeared into the wind, how different it must be compared to what it once was. The sun scorches my back and the heat is making waves in the air in front of me, and suddenly I can see us, Brandon and me, standing on this promontory of weathered earth, and it is disappearing, waning, eroding, it is wearing away beneath us, and so I jump.

APPENDIX



Office of Research Integrity

March 25, 2013

Tanya Bonsta
Teaching Assistant
Department of English
Marshall University
C11 265

Dear Ms. Bonsta:

This letter is in response to the submitted thesis abstract titled "Piecing Lives Together: Finding Harmony, Expanding Theory in Terry Tempest Williams's *When Women Were Birds: Fifty-Four Variations on Voice*". After assessing the abstract it has been deemed not to be human subject research and therefore exempt from oversight of the Marshall University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The Code of Federal Regulations (45CFR46) has set forth the criteria utilized in making this determination. Since the information in this study consists solely of a textual analysis it is not considered human subject research. If there are any changes to the abstract you provided then you would need to resubmit that information to the Office of Research Integrity for review and a determination.

I appreciate your willingness to submit the abstract for determination. Please feel free to contact the Office of Research Integrity if you have any questions regarding future protocols that may require IRB review.

Sincerely,

Bruce F. Day, PhD, CIP
Director
Office of Research Integrity

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