

Bodily Writing:
Creating in the Anthropocene

by

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Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the accompanying thesis by Darby Elizabeth Williams has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors in Environmental Humanities.

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*For my mother, who taught me to love words and
her mother, who taught me to fly.*

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Preface: Becoming Medusa

*You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her.
And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing.*

-Helene Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa*

Let's start at the very beginning. Genesis, that is. You're likely familiar with the story. God created the Earth: the darkness, nothingness, and water first, then light, and day and night, and the heavens, and the land, and the plants and animals, and finally, on the sixth day, from the soil and in His image, God created Man. After Man had the pleasure of naming the animals and as such, claiming them under his dominion, God decided that it was a good time to give Man a companion. And so, from man's rib, God created the woman and the Man got to name her as well. God saw this all, and he also saw that it was good.

If you're familiar with this story, then perhaps you already know with what comes next. In Chapter Three, the cunning serpent tempts the woman with a forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge and she compels Man to eat it with her, thus condemning human and snake kinds to lives of toil and pain. Maybe you too have wondered why it had to be these two: woman and serpent. These two creatures have been shunned for their cunning, their desires, and their bodies for thousands of years for exchanging a fruit – sometimes a pomegranate, often an apple.

...

There was a serpent that lived in my grandmother's backyard when I was in grade school. Every day my grandmother would tend to her garden and her trees: roses, and redwoods, respectively, and she would report back an update on the snake.

My grandmother would gather my sister and me around her kitchen table and her back would hunch as she leaned in, pale blue eyes vibrant as she told us the stories of the snake: where she had seen it that day, what it was doing, how it moved so gracefully. She suspected it was eating the rats that lived in her woodpile, and for that, we all concurred the snake was a very agreeable neighbor.

But many people were afraid of snakes, she explained to her young granddaughters. California Mountain Kingsnakes, after all, have markings that disguise them as venomous creatures. The coral snake, which the king strongly resembles, is indeed venomous but their kind didn't live anywhere near our home in Northern California. But anyone who cared to distinguish the two could remember that though both snakes have red, black, and yellow coloring, coral snakes have red bands with yellow rings on either side, while kingsnakes have red bands with black rings on either side. The kingsnake puts on the appearance of something more terrifying—Batesian mimicry is the scientific word for this type of performance. Despite their disguises, kingsnakes are harmless to humans. Humans who didn't care to know the snake would be quick to fear it. My grandmother cared to know, though, and so to her, the kingsnake was a friend. This we knew, but we would come to understand just how violently other people did not share this outlook. It had been a snake and a woman, after all who together beguiled man into participating in original sin.

One Sunday afternoon, I went to the yard with her to care for her roses. Back by the shed from behind a pile of rocks, the striped snake emerged.

“Well, hello,” Grandmother greeted the serpent with the gentle remnants of a Texas accent. I’ve never known serpents to speak English but I’m sure if it could, it would have answered her. The snake’s forked tongue flicked out and then back into its mouth as it tasted the air. My grandmother’s clear eyes were set on the undulating serpent. I breathed in the air between them, yearning to know them both.

“See how it likes the rocks.” My grandmother was addressing me this time. She crouched down to my level and the snake emerged further, as if to validate my grandmother’s lesson. “The snake needs a home just like we do. We live in a house and it lives in the rocks.” She showed me how to be near the snake and speak with it.

We three sat there for a silent moment, trying to understand each other and imagining our ways into the body of the other. What was it to be a snake? What was it to be a woman?

When Grandmother got up to retrieve her garden clippers, the snake returned to its crevice, and I began to understand.

...

I started to understand because I was beginning to become a woman as well. I was in the fourth grade and my hair had only recently become a tangle of curls. This stark change was a first sign of coming puberty. As my once golden and silky hair grew in coarse, dark, and wild, I shrank away. It was the early 2000’s and silky, sleek hair was the pinnacle of feminine beauty. I hated my head for changing its mind, for making me less like the idealized, manufactured women I saw on magazine covers and TV. Curls

were not acceptable. Curls were the stripes of a kingsnake, the disguise that made the creature threatening to those who didn't try to know it. So, with a sizzling flat iron, I insisted on taming it.

But my grandmother knew better. She had been getting perms since she was a girl. Her mother wanted her to be Shirley Temple. She wanted the freedom and the education that her four brothers had. So, they compromised: she got a head full of curls, and her mother let her read and write to her heart's content. She knew that hair was both a source of terror and of power and so she allowed her short, naturally straight hair to be transformed into twists and turns. She showed me that of our hair, we could be afraid, or we could dance in its wildness and laugh with it as it led the way into spirals. I could straighten each strand, but the hair remembered its writhing wildness and would joyfully spring right back when exposed to any moisture.

The story often goes that when girls become women, they lose some wildness. My scalp protested this narrative. I was beginning to understand my grandmother's kinship with a kingsnake: we three were to be dangerous and joyful.

...

Genesis isn't the only ancient story that has taught us to be dubious of the connections between women and snakes. Medusa is said to have been one of three sisters—gorgons, mythical creatures that inspired fear and dread. Throughout myth, academia, and even pop culture, Medusa has been depicted in various ways, but it is generally accepted that she is a terrifying mortal, winged beast of a woman mixed with animal parts, in particular and most famously, her head is adorned with coiling serpents instead of hair. But she wasn't always this way; Roman poet Ovid tells us that Medusa

was once a beautiful young maiden who was raped by Poseidon on the floor of a temple dedicated to the goddess Athena. In turn, Athena turned Medusa into the snake-headed monster. We know this story: when a woman is wronged by a man, the fault lies with her, and she must be punished. Even Athena knew this, but maybe she also knew that with the serpent, Medusa could find power. So, Medusa became both beast and woman: dangerous.

Medusa is strange. She is not entirely woman but not entirely anything else either. Her body exists in the liminal space between species. She has been portrayed as terrifying, but perhaps she, like Eve, deserves a better story.

...

In order to get to my grandmother's house, the street first passed by the back of her yard before winding around to her driveway. You could see the yard before you arrived home. It was on this turn that I saw the snake for the second and final time. On the way home from school, I saw its bright coloring first and yelled for my mother to stop the car. I hopped out, hoping to share another moment with it, and my mother and sister followed shortly behind. But as we drew nearer, it became evident that the snake was not moving. It was on the wrong side of the fence and its head was lying a few inches from its body, severed right below the ear canals. Bright white, black, and red, red, red. Where the executioner, who we assumed to be a neighbor, had roughly sliced through the snake's neck with the spade of a shovel, he left behind bits of rust nowhere near as scarlet as the snake's blood.

Silently, the three of us backed away and loaded back into the car. We made our way 'round the last bend: past the creek, the downed tree, and the neighbor's curly wrought iron fence, to my grandmother's home.

Mother sent us to work on homework at the kitchen table, but we watched as, with hushed urgency, she explained what we had discovered on the road. Grandmother simply shook her head and spoke to herself as she did, whispering secrets that only she could hear. She was devastated and full of resentment but she would never show it. My mother asked my grandmother whether she would like to discuss this murder with her neighbors, but my grandmother thought it was better to leave it alone. After all, she reasoned, it was an honest mistake.

But it wasn't. And we all knew it. The truth was we couldn't confront him because in his eyes there had been no misdeed. In his eyes, the strange thing, the thing to be suspicious of would be my grandmother's attachment to this snake. Tradition tells us, after all, to be afraid of the connection between woman and snake. We knew that this was the world we lived in, but we also knew he had no business killing things he did not understand. We could not right the wrong that had been done, but we could give the snake a proper burial. And we did. We glued ribbons to an old cardboard shoe box because what good was a funeral without decorations?

To retrieve the serpent, my sister and I had to clamber over the fence. With limber young arms, we carefully scooped the limp body of the serpent out of the prickly oak leaves. The kingsnake's skin was thinner than I imagined it would be. Tissue paper perhaps: fragile and delicate. We touched it gently. The spines on the fallen leaves clung to its scaly skin so we painstakingly removed them before placing the body and severed

head into the shoe box. We passed the cardboard casket back through the fence. With a spade, we broke through the dry clay-rich soil of my grandmother's yard and honored the serpent below a pear tree with a branch of apple grafted on: a creation as mutant and unnatural as Medusa herself. We disguised these final rites as a performance for "the children's peace of mind." But in all honesty, my grandmother needed to bury the serpent as much as we did.

She was stoic when we buried the snake but we knew this was only so her granddaughters would see her strength, and see that feeling pain and bearing it silently was part of being a woman. Part of the protest was in a dignified funeral. I wanted to scream because she could not. I wanted to march over to the neighbor's door and give him a piece of my young mind, but sometimes silence is as powerful as words.

She needed to teach us that this was the plight of the woman and the snake together. We never had enmity. The myths of women and snakes wrote them to be dangerous. After all, the myth writers had looked more like the snake's executioner than any of us. We were too afraid to look at the Medusa and the connections between women and serpent because we thought we had betrayed man. But he betrayed us too. He sliced off our heads without looking at us, without imagining his way into our worlds.

Our bodies and our minds twist and turn. We move in ways that seem impossible. We touch each other and we create each other. Connected in mind and body, the woman and the snake rewrote their sins in an old fruit orchard. My girlish body was beginning to become woman in the form of coils on my head. And there we were: three generations of women, a mutant fruit tree, and a snake put to rest. We were wild in a backyard. We were

mismatched like the tree. The words of myth said we were dangerous together and so we found ourselves to be kin.

Introduction: Origins

The origin of a thought is never in one place. Ways of thinking about and understanding the world evolve over generations. Though these ways of thinking are difficult to pin down, origin stories can reveal the roots of a tradition of thought. The stories we tell again and again are the ones we begin to believe. The language we use to tell these stories begins to make up the world around us; semiotic traditions become material traditions. Historian Lynn White, in his 1966 lecture entitled “The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis,” posited that the origin story presented by Christianity and Western society’s subsequent interpretation of it have led to the environmental crisis of the modern era. His idea was and remains extremely controversial, but it is one of the foundational works that shaped the modern environmental movement. His idea pointed out the systems of writing, belief, and practice that the Western world has practiced in order to maintain power over the “other.” He explains,

Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen. As early as the 2nd century both Tertullian and Saint Irenaeus of Lyons were insisting that when God shaped Adam he was foreshadowing the image of the incarnate Christ, the Second Adam. Man shares, in great measure, God's transcendence of nature. Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions (except, perhaps, Zoroastrianism), not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends.¹

We can understand Christianity today not only as a religion practiced by certain humans but also as a dispersed set of ethics, practices, and beliefs that shape our world. White

¹ White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967), 1203.

critiques the effects these ideas have had in leading to “our ecologic crisis.” Not only did this interpretation of Christianity posit that humans (more specifically, male humans) were separate from and greater than nature, it rendered the non-human world empty. White argues that in making nature and culture binary categories, Christian sensibilities effectively rendered the non-human world dead. The world, under this ideology, was blank, a *tabula rasa*. Man, by naming his dominion over the animals, asserted himself as the closest to God and therefore was entitled to do what he willed with his dominion. Woman sits below man in this hierarchy of dominion because she was created as an afterthought and gets named by Adam just as the animals do. She does not get to hold dominion because she is under man’s dominion.

The woman’s *body*, under this narrative, is, like the animals, under the dominion of man. Her body belongs not to her but to the man—literally, in the sense that she was made from his rib. In this model, women are reduced to their physical bodies, naturalized, and are often regarded as dirty or not as close to the superior culture of men. In the dualistic division of nature and culture, gender is also represented through a binary in which women are associated with nature and men are associated with culture. Culture, in a patriarchal world is more valued, and therefore must conquer nature. With the non-human world rendered dead, the world is Man’s to conquer. White explains of a so-called dead world: “By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects.”² That is, the world according to Christianity is blank, and it is up to humans to make of it what they will or rather, *he* wills. This is dominion.

² White, 1205.

The stories we have told ourselves for thousands of years rely on the narrative that humans hold dominion over the non-human. These narratives of dominion rely on a hierarchical view of the order of things. In this hierarchy, God was at the height, followed by man because they were originally made in God's image, then the woman because she came from man's body, then animals, plants, and finally, minerals.³ Dominion might have come from Christianity but hierarchy has been around at least since the Classical period. Plato's ladder also helped humans to distance their thinking from the material worlds in which they lived. Today, that hierarchical thinking has developed into a means of suppressing all those humans, non-human animals, plants, and material things that don't sit at the very top of that ladder. One problem with this model is that the vibrant world is far more complex and dynamic than this linear, hierarchical thinking would have us believe. This kind of thinking relies on firm divisions between categories, and facts that are rational and linear. The problem is that we live in a world where it is increasingly difficult to think in these terms.

Lynn White first problematized this narrative as a way of perceiving the environment and humans' relationships to it, but we can continue to see how, even fifty-four years after White's declaration, the dominion narrative continues to reign hegemonic, permeating our relationships, our language, our writing, and our ties to the world. The origin story is not the only thing that needs to be addressed. The power structures that interpret and enforce the interpretation of the origin story must be reconstituted. This is why writing must not only reimagine the stories our society tells

³ Humans in this model are subsequently divided by gender identity, race, ability, etc.

itself over and over again, it must fundamentally reimagine how our society structures itself. The words we write have the ability to change the worlds we have been given.⁴

In this thesis, I hope to complicate and reimagine the narrative that White proposed was the root of the ecologic crisis of our time.⁵ In the Anthropocene, our interactions with other species and objects become increasingly important. Humans have always been a part of the natural world, and our interactions with the non-human world are what have defined us as human. How can we rethink this hierarchical view of these interactions to be more respectful of the things we interact with? I propose a material feminist response to this hierarchy because women have been naturalized and reduced to their physical bodies for so much of human history. By empowering female voices, and including embodied feminine writing in the canon, we can begin to reclaim our bodies and retell the stories of our origins. This feminine rethinking will challenge hierarchical thinking by considering the other not as empty but as complex, and at times beyond human understanding. Though we may never know the world of our fellow earthlings, we can see that our relationships are reciprocal, not hierarchical. To take a feminist and interspecies approach to retelling these stories, I will use the central ideas presented by Donna Haraway in her 2008 book *When Species Meet* as well as H el ene Cixous' 1976 work, "The Laugh of the Medusa" translated from the French "*Le Rire de la Meduse*."

Cixous, in her radical essay "The Laugh of the Medusa," calls for a radical new age in literature: an age of feminine writing. Women must write themselves and their

⁴ Terry Tempest Williams, *When Women Were Birds*, 224.

⁵ My proposal is certainly not the only alternative to the dominion narrative. One such example is the idea of stewardship. We see stewardship everywhere as a responsible way of interacting with the non-human world, but is it actually solving the problems created within the framework of the dominion model? Hierarchies of humans over nature and some humans over others are still held within this stewardship model. We can think of foundational thinkers in the American environmental movement like John Muir, Aldo Leopold, and Gifford Pinchot.

bodies, Cixous argues, because writing has previously been the domain of the patriarchy. She explains that “Nearly the entire history of writing is confounded with the history of reason, of which it is at once the effect, the support, and one of the privileged alibis. It has been one with the phallogentric tradition. It is indeed that same self-admiring, self-stimulating, self-congratulating phallogentricism.”⁶ Cixous critiques the phallogentric narrative that tells women they can either be as dark and dangerous as the Medusa or as empty as the abyss. This naturalization, Cixous argues has led women to see themselves as either empty or monstrous, an “antinarcissism” that teaches women to distrust their own voices and hate themselves for what the patriarchy has told them they are.⁷ This antinarcissism has separated women from their bodies because the naturalized woman is shamed for her bodily desires and functions. This shame and rejection of the body has silenced women for generations, Cixous argues. Women’s bodies have been silenced just as much as their voices have been throughout literature. This phallogentricism is what led to a hierarchical vision of the world; reconstructing the world through feminine writing then, will topple this hierarchy. Cixous calls for a movement in writing: this moment must be both a social movement (a literary one) and also physical (a movement of the body). Cixous says of the woman, “there is always within her at least a little of that mother's milk. She writes in white ink.”⁸ Cixous means this both in the bodily and the literary sense: she evokes the nurturing, mammalian act of nursing one’s young, but she also insists that feminine writing is fundamentally different from masculine writing

⁶ Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 879.

⁷ Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 878.

⁸ Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 881.

because women do not colonize a page the way patriarchal writing does.⁹ In emphasizing this bodily act, Cixous reminds us that we are in fact, mammals.

Writing as a female movement, she expresses, should come out of the woman's body as a means of reclaiming that body but also because, despite what she has been taught about the dangers and the shame of the female body, the body is where her power lies: in sexual desire, menstruation, pregnancy, and motherhood. *An écriture féminine*, means that

women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reverse-discourse, including the one that laughs at the very idea of pronouncing the word 'silence'...¹⁰

This writing is playful and embodied; it laughs in the double meanings of words like impregnable. It breaks down boundaries and brings about a new dance of bodies and language. In *l'écriture féminine*, women's bodies and their writing are not separate. In semiotic terms, the woman's body becomes the signifier. Women's words shapeshift, metamorphosing, taking on *double entente*. Women's writing includes the many different ways that women experience their sexualities, breaking the rules of the phallogocentric world that silences women's bodies. Cixous calls for women to write in such a way that does not allow their bodies or their voices to be silenced.

Cixous uses the figure of the Medusa to illustrate the importance of the female body. The Medusa, she points out, has been used to separate women from their bodies, to say that the embodied woman is a terrifying monster: dirty and associated with unruly

⁹ I wish to acknowledge that not all lactating humans necessarily identify as women and that not all women lactate. Gender is, as Judith Butler says, a performance.

¹⁰ Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 886.

nature instead of man's refined culture. But the Medusa, Cixous argues is not a beast; "you only have to look at her to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing."¹¹ Cixous begs us to reconsider what has been made of the Medusa. The story goes that in looking at her, men are instantly turned to stone, so they refuse to look. The same story has been told of women and their bodies. We are told to ignore them. Cixous urges us to ignore these warnings. The Medusa is not a death sentence; the woman's body is not her demise, it is her strength. In looking at the things we have been forbidden, we find they are joyful and full of beauty.

The story of the Medusa is a dramatic one to choose. Her body is not only woman, but animal as well. Perhaps the Medusa conjures deep fear in the patriarchy because of the hatred that a phallogentric system harbors for the relationship between women and snakes. Freud would have had us believe that the Medusa's serpent-laden head terrifies women because she reminds her of her lack of phallus. Cixous refutes this: women are not afraid of lacking. The snake is more than a symbol for phallus; it is a non-human animal, making Medusa's body a dissolution of species boundaries. She is not entirely woman, and she is not entirely serpent. The body of the Medusa, is one that woman and animal become one as they swirl and confound the logic and reason-based boundaries of the phallogentric hierarchy. This is the multiplicity of experience that can be written by women. Cixous celebrates the multiplicity of experiences and bodies. "In one another, we will never be lacking," she encourages. This call is meant to unite

¹¹ Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 885.

women, but when read in conjunction with Donna Haraway's *When Species Meet*, it begins to take on a more interspecies meaning.

This meeting of woman and animal leads us into our understanding of Donna Haraway's argument in *When Species Meet*. In the book, Haraway predicates her argument on the idea that "there is a promising autre-mondialisation to be learned in retying some of the knots of ordinary multispecies living on earth."¹² By reimagining the quotidian interactions that humans have with other species, we can begin to imagine alternative ways of being. Haraway expresses the importance of the coming-together between species; it is in these moments that the human truly forms. She explains, "Species interdependence is the name of the worlding game on earth, and that game must be one of response and respect. That is the play of companion species learning to pay attention."¹³ Paying attention means that we look critically at all ways we interact with other species. The world we are a part of is created through our interactions with our fellow beings; this is co-constitution. If feminine writing hopes to break down and remake the world, this rewriting must extend beyond the human and bridge the terms nature and culture. By otherworlding, we can make sense of our own bodies and acknowledge the significance of the bodies of other species. Though these categories become complicated and the ties blur the lines between creatures, the individual does not stop mattering. Haraway explains "Individuated critters matter; they are mortal and fleshly knottings, not ultimate units of being. Kinds matter; they are also mortal and fleshly knottings, not typological units of being."¹⁴ Kinds, for Haraway refers to the idea

¹² Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 3.

¹³ Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 19.

¹⁴ Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 88.

of categories or types. Categories like dog, woman, or protist are still real and important to acknowledge but they need not be sorted by type. She resists the word “unit” because it reduces an individual to one, and not the interactions of many.¹⁵

Haraway is thoughtful in language because, as Cixous points out, language and bodies are connected. Words help in creating our worlds. Terms like “otherworlding” and “becoming with” are fundamental to understanding Haraway. Gerunds, verbs functioning as nouns, become active practices of both the body and the pen. Gerunds are active objects, verby nouns. Otherworlding helps us to actively look and write more deeply into how we touch other beings. Worlding is an ongoing act because worlds are constantly becoming and dying and being created again. Our interactions never cease. We are constantly becoming with other critters in the world and so we are constantly worlding, but in order to be more thoughtful about how we world, we can world with the other; we can practice otherworlding. Becoming with is likewise active and connected to the body, a performance of many species. Haraway makes incredibly active sentences with her terms. Her creations are gerunds; they are active. She makes her words an act of the body. She writes from her body as Cixous encourages, but she takes it one step further and writes from the places where her body meets the bodies of other beings. She plays with language as Cixous does, creating new words as she imagines new ways of being.

¹⁵ “Surely,” you’re thinking, “if she is talking about animals, language, and French philosophy, she must be talking about Derrida.” Luckily, Haraway has already done that. Though Derrida played an important role in laying the foundations of thinking about animals as more than symbols and in thinking about how the double entendre can be a playful but also meaningful way to use and subvert expectations in writing, his ideas do not get at this other-worlding idea from Haraway. In *When Species Meet*, Haraway thanks Derrida for his contributions to the cannon but critiques, “but with his cat, Derrida failed a simple obligation of companion species; he did not become curious about what the cat might actually be doing, feeling, thinking, or perhaps making available to him in looking back at him that morning”(20). Derrida is helpful in leading us past the animal as object, but he does little when he gets there. As Haraway points out, we must respect and reciprocate in our interactions with the other species we wish to consider (20).

The Medusa laughs and Haraway encourages “mortal play.”¹⁶ Both of these images encourage joy and lightness in the serious work they are doing. This project should not be drudgery—writing should be playful; otherwise it can come dangerously close to rationality. Play and laughter allow the thinker to push past what they know to find other ways of seeing and being.

The world that we humans and non-human beings live and exist within is a complicated one filled with strange combinations, unusual ways of seeing, being, sharing. Play can be wicked and evil, it can be good, it can make us uncomfortable, but it is the space where we can deconstruct hierarchies. Both Haraway and Cixous are willing to hold the world up to the light and problematize the ontological patterns we have taken up and also to bring about laughter within that work. Haraway ends a particularly heady sentence with a reminder that writing is meant to be playful: “Woof...” she exclaims.¹⁷ Cixous, likewise subverts the readers’ expectations. She is heady, brilliant, and unafraid of sharp candor but she is also playful: she asks her reader to think about sex, mythical creatures, and laughter. She uses double meanings like *voler*, meaning both to steal and to fly.¹⁸ She breaks the rules of phallogentric language. Both authors subvert the idea of the “angry feminist” by writing through joy and playfulness while also pointing out societal flaws. This is the joy of interspecies play. Playfulness challenges the rationality of hierarchy.

I have posited that these issues began with Christian views of nature. The inclination of a project like this would appear to advocate an abandoning of religion;

¹⁶ Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 19.

¹⁷ Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 7.

¹⁸ Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 887.

however, condemning religion is not the goal. Donna Haraway encourages in *The Cyborg Manifesto*, “blasphemy protects one from the moral majority within, while still insisting on the need for community. Blasphemy is not apostasy.”¹⁹ We do not have to abandon religion to rethink how it has shaped us, or to rethink the ethics that it shaped. In fact, it would be against the point of this project to say that a renunciation of religiosity is mandatory to rethink hierarchical understandings of the world. Cixous explains that the project of feminine writing “doesn’t annul differences but stirs them up, pursues them, increases their number.”²⁰ The desire to annul differences is the goal of secularism. Secularism erases a multiplicity of experiences and a community. This project hopes to acknowledge and amplify a multiplicity of experiences and celebrate the interactions of a community (and perhaps one that includes more species than previously thought). I propose that we do not attempt to erase, instead we should keep religion as long as we keep irreverence. Since we wish not to throw it away, we have the opportunity to strikethrough it and reimagine it. A multiplicity of experiences and a confusion of Donna Haraway’s “kin and kind,” does not mean destroying faith; it means rethinking it.²¹ We should not throw religion away; we should blaspheme it. We should reimagine its origin stories.

These origin stories are still shaping our world but we can undo them by making our writing a constant creation. Cixous explains that, “The fact that this period (the period governed by phallogocentric values) extends into the present doesn’t prevent woman from starting the history of life somewhere else.”²² Cixous has charged us with creating in a

¹⁹ Haraway, *Manifestly Haraway*, 5.

²⁰ Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 884.

²¹ Haraway, *Manifestly Haraway*, 17.

²² Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 893.

difficult time, one where feminine creation is not valued and often silenced. Though Cixous published these words in 1976, we are still living in a phallogocentric world, as made clear by the climate crisis that can in many cases be traced back to what Cixous describes as a “biblico-capitalist” society. What does it mean to start the history of life somewhere else? What can we imagine? What can we do with origins in this moment? We can revise linear thinking by rethinking linear time in order to make the present more creative. To undo this linear, phallogocentric thinking, I will propose a manifold “becoming with” through a feminist reimagining of time that focuses on the body and the matrilineal thinking through cyclical spirals that signify constant creation, rather than linear origins. Time must be blasphemously rethought because linear time is fundamental to a hierarchical, progress-driven world. Linear thinking is not pregnant with possibility; it does not help us to rewrite our interactions and bodies. Cyclical spiral time helps to answer Cixous’ call to constantly create in writing.

Both theorists suggest we rethink our present. How can we begin to rethink our origins in order to radically reimagine our present? In language, as Cixous and Haraway suggest, we can play in the semiotic and material worlds of words. Literature, an experiment in language, presents one mode through which we can begin to question the boundaries of what it means to be a being, a vibrant physical object. To think outside of myself and topple hierarchical thinking, I have looked to literature, specifically literature that is written in *l’écriture féminine* and is concerned with interspecies meetings. Stories and the language used to express them have the capacity to challenge our perceptions of the strict lines that construct reality and they can lead us to see how species and gender can be fluid and difficult to pin down. This is what Donna Haraway calls the “material-

semiotic nodes or knots.”²³ Signs and meanings shape the material world and vice versa. In language, we can make our material world. And through our material bodies, we can write. We must give birth to a new way of thinking about ourselves and the environment—literature is an opportunity for that objective. But how do we go beyond inviting non-human animals into our world? How can we snag an invite into theirs? Or rather, see where our worlds overlap? I will use literature as a mode of “retying the knots” that connect us.²⁴ I will engage with the literary works of three women: Yoko Tawada’s *Memoirs of a Polar Bear*, Jesmyn Ward’s *Salvage the Bones*, and Terry Tempest Williams’ *When Women Were Birds*. These three works are notable for their focus on motherhood and connections between women and non-human animals, and out of these aspects, their ability to tell embodied stories. Literature is a place where language can play, where the strange can become familiar. Through a study of these works, this thesis will flatten hierarchies through an eco-feminist lens with the intent of undoing the idea that certain natural things are more valuable than others and that some humans are more valuable than others. This is all predicated on the understanding that environmental injustices are intimately tied to the issues of women, people of color, people who have been traditionally othered by a linear, colonial power structure. There is no easy or simple solution to the current crises of the world, but any approach that hopes to be successful must be intersectional. These three texts illuminate the ways that women and animals interact to break down rational, patriarchal binary views of nature/culture, woman/man, and animal/human.

²³ Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 4.

²⁴ Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 3.

Salvage the Bones by Jesmyn Ward tells the story of Esch, a young teenager who realizes she is pregnant as her motherless family prepares their home on the Mississippi Gulf Coast for the arrival of Hurricane Katrina. The novel explores the importance of embodied experience and the relationships between violent motherhood in the realms of human, canine, and storm. Through Esch's experience of violence in Hurricane Katrina, she begins to understand herself as a mother. In the text, Ward, herself a survivor of Katrina, uses embodied writing to reimagine the ties of nature and culture.

Yoko Tawada's *Memoirs of a Polar Bear* tells the story of three generations of polar bears living in a human world. As the name would suggest, *Memoirs of a Polar Bear* contains polar bears who write memoirs, who write autobiographies with humans, and who grapple with relationships between animals and language. The book imagines what polar bear thinking is; it uses writing to imagine the embodied world of the polar bear. The voices of each section: female polar bear, human woman, and male polar bear, flip the polar bear from object to subject and call these categories into question. The bears challenge the reader's expectations of how animals should interact in human society; they challenge convention. The first two generations are female polar bears and circus performers turned writers. The last bear is a polar bear in the Berlin Zoo who is raised by a zookeeper. The novel takes a strange turn when the reader realizes that the second and third generations of literary bears are based on real bears that actually live in the Berlin Zoo: Tosca and Knut. The line between fact and fiction becomes fuzzy, furry, and challenges rational thinking. The interactions between non-human animals and humans explore the possibilities and the complexities presented in the moments when species meet and the possibility of bodies that writing can create.

Terry Tempest Williams' *When Women Were Birds* is a lyrical work of non-fiction that explores the importance of feminine writing from empty space and the spaces where women and birds come together. Williams was raised Mormon and tells us that Mormon women are expected to do two things: have children and keep journals. Her mother, Diane Dixon Tempest did both. When Tempest died at the age of 54 from breast cancer that Williams believes was caused by living downwind of the Nevada Nuclear Test Site, Williams inherited the journals her mother had kept throughout her life, shelves and shelves of them. They were all blank. Williams, from these blank pages, writes about women's voices, an intimate relationship with birds, and the nature of subverting expectations and challenging convention to find one's own voice. The work explores what it means to have a voice as a woman and is a piece of writing out of an absence of writing, an *écriture féminine*, as Cixous would posit.

Motherhood flows through these three texts: they are written in white, through a variety of bodies. They fill pages with bodily writing despite the phallogentric tradition of silencing the bodies and voices of women writers. In finding their own voices and bodies, these texts also give acknowledgment to the bodies and voices of the non-human, they give birth to other worlds. The mother asks us who we are in relation to the world and she reminds us that we are not separate; we are of a larger system, in which we are being created and we are creating. Motherly writing subverts our expectations of what is natural and what is human. She topples hierarchies. She prepares us for a violently changing world. *L'écriture Feminine* challenges the silence of both, pressing women to write through their bodies. It is through this type of writing that patriarchal systems can begin to be dismantled. I will argue that through a tradition of embodied feminist writing, an

environmental ethic that dismantles hierarchy can begin to acknowledge the worlds of the non-human and the non-white-male.

We cannot change the fact that we interact with other humans, other species, and with the non-living (but nonetheless vibrant) material world. We are, after all, fleshy beings. These interactions are what make us human, what make us present on this planet. What we can change is how those interactions happen, how we conceptualize them and how we respond. This project proposes a way to go about rewriting our ties to the vibrant world we are constantly creating and by which we are being created.

Part I: Violent and Viscous Mothers in *Salvage the Bones*

*And what a rueful beauty was lent the women at times when they were pregnant and stood, hands involuntarily resting on their large bellies, in which there was a twofold fruit: a child, and a death. Did not the replete, almost nourishing smile on their faces, free of all else, come from their intermittent notion that both were growing?*²⁵
– Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*

Introduction: Bodies and Katrina

When asked in an interview why she chose to write about Hurricane Katrina, author Jesmyn Ward explained “I lived through it. It was terrifying and I needed to write about that. I was also angry at the people who blamed survivors for staying and for choosing to return to the Mississippi Gulf Coast after the storm. Finally, I wrote about the storm because I was dissatisfied with the way it had receded from public consciousness.”²⁶ When Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast in 2005, it revealed the structures of racism and economic injustice present in the United States and forced Americans to reckon with their relationships to the non-human world. Published six years after the disaster, Ward’s novel brings Katrina into the literary present. *Salvage the Bones* tells the story of Esch Batiste, a fifteen-year-old girl who is pregnant, motherless, and trying to come to terms with her future as she, her three brothers, and their father prepare for Hurricane Katrina from their home in the fictional town of Bois Sauvage on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Motherhood, from early in the book, is inherently violent—as the narrative opens with China, Esch’s brother’s prized fighting pitbull, giving violent birth to a litter of puppies. This scene sends Esch into a moment of recollection of her own

²⁵ Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, 11.

²⁶“Jesmyn Ward on *Salvage the Bones*.”

mother's traumatic death after giving birth to Esch's youngest brother. The thing that kills Esch's mother is the thing that makes her a mother. Esch's world is bloody, brutal, and unforgiving; she begins to recognize herself as a mother in the wreckage created by Katrina.

Esch's violent world brings to the page the dark realities of the climate crisis: environmental injustice, racism, and the bones of a changing world. The Batiste family is black, and living in extreme poverty in the rural South; though no story is universal, in the book, theirs can represent the voices of those who have been marginalized throughout American history and especially in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. *Salvage the Bones* suggests that Hurricane Katrina touches and becomes a part of the bodies of Esch and her family; these ties are an opportunity to pick through the sludgy wreckage to understand motherhood as it relates to animals and the storm itself. As Haraway suggests, "becoming with" is a dance with the non-human.²⁷ Though Katrina is not a living thing, "becoming with" is still relevant to the connections between humans and hurricane. Katrina's destruction made for a "becoming," or rather a birth. *Salvage the Bones* is a story of resilience and new beginnings in a world reduced to bones. In the absence of a traditional, biological mother, Esch finds mothers in unusual spaces: the body of her brother's fighting pit-bull China, the Greek Tragedies of her summer reading, in the destructive and violent, spiraling winds and waters of Hurricane Katrina, and her own young body. Creation is destructive; birth is violent. Katrina rears her ugly head; Esch dares to look her in the eye, and together they become in the world of violent mothers.

²⁷ Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 3.

Medea: Violent Mother

Just as Hélène Cixous appropriates the classical myth of Medusa to make an argument for feminine writing, *Salvage the Bones* uses the classical myth of Medea to tell the story of the scorned mother and the power of the “savage” woman. Medea, like Medusa, is wild and unruly. Both are violent. Cixous explains the wild woman:

We're stormy, and that which is ours breaks loose from us without our fearing any debilitation. Our glances, our smiles, are spent; laughs exude from all our mouths; our blood flows and we extend ourselves without ever reaching an end; we never hold back our thoughts, our signs, our writing; and we're not afraid of laughing...we are everywhere.²⁸

Cixous likens women to storm, subverting the expectation that they must be well behaved. Likewise, the storm Katrina boldly “broke loose” through the man-made levies, holding back nothing. Cixous notes that women have been naturalized in the Western tradition as a form of repression, but she subverts this and makes storminess part of the women’s strength. Cixous’ image becomes a flood as her description of women’s storminess builds, and builds, “never reaching an end,” and flowing with blood and laughter. Medusa, like the stormy women, is visceral and laughing. Cixous points to the taboo in the blood that flows from the female body and she sees both the pain and joy of the embodied woman. Like the storm, the mother is everywhere, she envelops and creates but she also destroys and breaks free of expectations. In *Salvage the Bones*, feminine writing becomes a deluge as the mother finds her strength and destroys everything in her path while giving birth to a new life. The mother will not be ignored, and neither will the storm. When Esch’s brother Skeetah’s dog, China has given birth to puppies, Skeetah is told China will not be strong enough to fight. In response, he retorts, ““You serious?

²⁸ Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 878.

That's when they come into they strength. They got something to protect.' He glances at me, too, but I feel it even after he looks away. 'That's power.'"²⁹ Skeetah's pride in and love for China points to how motherhood through its vulnerability and love but also its violence, becomes a form of power. China is a fighting dog, an animal prized for her brutality, but she is also a mother. These violent and nurturing natures of motherhood, in Skeetah's eyes, are not disparate; they are tied to each other. Like Cixous' ideas of stormy femininity, China's savageness is heightened in her role as mother, and it is in this "breaking loose" that China finds strength. China becomes, like Medusa and Medea, a wild and almost mythological being in her strength.

When Esch discovers that she is pregnant, she looks to China, a canine mother, and Medea, a mythical mother, as a roadmap for what it means to become a mother. As Esch prepares for the storm, her mind is captivated by stories from Greek mythology, part of her summer reading assignment. Esch keeps returning to the lovestruck Medea as she pines after the unkind and unavailable father of the fertilized egg growing inside of her belly. The story of Medea evolves from one of a lovestruck young woman, to a woman scorned as her husband deserts her, and finally one of a violent mother who murders her own children. This filicide is a desperate and tragic act, but Euripides, in his play about Medea, depicts the murderess as heroic by giving her the support of the gods and a highlighting her cunning mind. Medea ascends over her betraying husband from a chariot sent by Helios to save her after her murderous rampage. She triumphs, "touch us you cannot, in this chariot which the Sun has sent to save us from the hands of enemies."³⁰ Euripides uses the favor of the gods and Medea's intellect to present the scorned woman

²⁹ Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 96.

³⁰ Euripides, *Medea and Other Plays*, 1321-22.

as a hero despite the fact that the violent and cunning mother is so antithetical to all classical expectations of what a mother should be. Euripides' depiction of Medea is divisive. Medea's *deus ex machina* escape is controversial because the gods intervene only to set human affairs right. Why would Euripides validate this woman who doesn't seem to embody any of the ideals that an Athenian mother is expected to? And yet, the gods favor Medea as she makes her escape in a chariot pulled by dragons. Esch sees this tension and she understands Medea as a heroine. Medea is terrifying and violent, and it is through this brutal rage that she finds her power.

Esch sees the parallels between her brother's prized dog and her favorite Greek heroine. In the Batiste family's hectic preparations for the storm, China snaps and kills one of her puppies and Esch's father accidentally slices off a finger. In this moment, blood seems to be the only thing that makes sense. Esch looks toward the only mother figure she can find and observes, "China is bloody-mouthed and bright-eyed as Medea. If she could speak, this is what I would ask her: *Is this what motherhood is?*"³¹ Esch makes sense of China's filicide by placing her in conversation with the Greek tragedy. Is motherhood murder, she wonders? China becomes like Medea, a heroine driven to desperate acts, taking away the very life she created. Esch comes to see motherhood as violent because in every birth, there is the promise of death. The mother creates life and she has the power to take it away. These iconoclastic mothers break through expectations and dissolve. Esch looks to a non-human mother for guidance, finding kinship with a fighting dog.

³¹ Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 130.

After the storm has passed, China and her remaining puppies have disappeared into the flood, the Batiste family's home is destroyed, and they have no food or clean water left. Esch and her brothers walk through the destruction in search of any salvageable remains. She picks up small pieces of the rubble and plans to make them into something new, a reminder of the storm. She explains:

I will tie the glass and stone with string, hang the shards above my bed, so that they will flash in the dark and tell the story of Katrina, the mother that swept into the Gulf and slaughtered. Her chariot was a storm so great and black the Greeks would say it was harnessed by dragons. She was the murderous mother who cut us to the bone but left us alive, left us naked and bewildered as wrinkled newborn babies, as blind puppies, as sun-starved newly hatched baby snakes. She left us a dark Gulf and a salt-burned land; she left us to learn to crawl. She left us to salvage. Katrina is the mother we will remember until the next mother with large, merciless hands, committed to blood, comes.³²

Like Medea and China, the mother Katrina is a murderous one.³³ Esch sees that Katrina's "chariot was a storm," as though Katrina was sent by the gods of Olympus. She destroys and leaves in a *deus ex machina* flurry, pulled by a force so powerful, it must be divine intervention. Esch and her brothers are born anew, after the storm. The mother is ravaging, in her wake are her children, turned savage: scrappy and resilient. The children left behind must learn how to salvage what is left and make a life out of it. Esch is creative too; she knows that if this wreckage is a death, it must be a birth as well. The bump growing in her belly and the mobile that she plans to create from the wreckage prove it. The Batiste family knows how to move forward in the wreckage. Katrina rendered them savage, a word bearing a striking aural resemblance to salvage. They do so

³² Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 255.

³³ In seeing the non-human world represented as a feminine figure from Greek Mythology, we remember James Lovelock's Gaia Hypothesis. But *Salvage the Bones* suggests that if the non-human world is a mother from classical literature, she is not the idealized goddess Gaia, she is Medea: violent, confusing, and powerful.

on their knees, crawling, fighting to find a way in the world. But Katrina also left them recreated. Esch picks up the pieces from the wreckage, and dreams of creating a mobile: creation out of destruction. The mother Katrina is violent, and Esch sees the connection between Katrina and the murderess mother Medea, riding away in a chariot of a storm. In her flood waters, there is a bloody birth. China and Katrina become violent mothers in the preparation and the aftermath of the storm. They find the same power that Medea found when she murdered her own children.

When Esch and her family emerge, newly hatched in the rubble created by Katrina, Esch sees into the connective tissue she shares with the storm. The storm becomes “the mother we will remember” or “kin,” in Haraway’s terms.³⁴ Esch sees this “otherworld” in the eye of the storm: a vacuum from which a spiral of water and wind emerges. She anthropomorphizes the storm, but she does so in order to give it power and to see outside of the agency of humans and into the interactions between human and other. The non-human world becomes not only animate but deeply personal, a member of the family. Esch needs her own body to be heard when she insists “he will look at me” while, during a sexual interaction, the emotionally abusive father of her unborn child, realizes she is pregnant and deserts her.³⁵ Despite his unwillingness to care for her, Esch demands he *look at* her. Likewise, the body of the storm demands the human gaze. Esch sees the mother in Katrina. Katrina, Esch, China, Medea: these mothers (or not-yet-mother) learn to demand the respect they deserve. Like the Medusa, they ask us to look them in the eye. The female body has the power to make change in both creation and destruction. Katrina as a mother points out the violent injustices present in the Gulf

³⁴ Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 6.

³⁵ Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 146.

Coast. From the wreckage, the bones, the perceived emptiness of the “dark Gulf and a salt-burned land,” Esch creates with the pieces left behind. From the darkness, they are “newly hatched baby snakes,” ready to become unwieldy, savage beasts in the bones of the world Katrina created.

Katrina becomes intimately tied with the Batiste family. She is terrifying in her destruction and comforting in her role of familiar violence that begets creation. Recognizing Katrina as kin makes her a part of the bodies of the Batiste family. Being a part of their blood means being a part of their story. The blood and water inherent to Katrina are part of her motherhood. Katrina was unexpected and strong in the way that China is, the way that Esch is. When non-human nature is family, we can connect to it more and it does not become a thing that must be conquered. When the mother becomes violent, she need not be beaten down, but related to and seen.

Katrina’s destruction is also her creation and thus, in Esch’s eyes, she is a mother. Like Medea, Katrina threatens the lives of her children when she is not respected. Esch’s understanding of the Medea story reveals a side of motherhood that is brutal and violent and that doesn’t make her evil and shouldn’t make her “other.” The apotropaic trope of the man conquering the beastly woman and taking her power becomes subverted—it is in the woman’s beastliness that she finds her own power. This is not a solitary power; the men in Esch’s family come to support her and show the tenderness and resilience of familial love. The power rests with the mother. Mother is no longer simply a giver of life when the storm comes. She can take it away as well. The Anthropocene threatens in this way: the possibility that what has been created can be destroyed; it is a strange time of

violent mothers. Esch asks the men in her life to look at her in the face, to see her femininity, to see her struggle and her strength.

Katrina illuminated in the American consciousness the physical and racial violence that can emerge from a changing climate. Philosopher and gender studies expert, Nancy Tuana set out to write a chapter for the book *Material Feminism*. But after Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, she explains “I knew that I had to rewrite my essay for this volume...for in witnessing Katrina, the urgency of embracing an ontology that *rematerializes the social and takes seriously the agency of the natural* is rendered apparent.”³⁶ Katrina blurs the lines between nature and culture and demands we acknowledge the agency of the non-human. Nancy Tuana asks her reader to “look at Katrina.” And invites us to “[See] through the eye” of the storm. To look into the eye of the storm and the mother, is to think in terms of becoming in a complex web of tangled connections and to begin to understand the ways that humans destroy/are destroyed and make/are made with the non-human world.

The Viscous Porosity of Motherhood

When Hurricane Katrina touched down on the Gulf Coast in August of 2005, it wreaked havoc across Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana with 115 mph winds and water levels twenty-five feet above normal, but the hurricane itself was only a small part of the horrors of the disaster. The natural disaster came to be broadly accepted as an “unnatural disaster” for the institutional racism that it revealed within the United States.

³⁶ Nancy Tuana, “Viscous Porosity,” 188.

This is the type of injustice that climate change has revealed, is currently revealing, and will continue to reveal. We can't think about the Anthropocene without considering disproportionate violence against certain bodies. Katrina certainly revealed the extent of the violence that a climate crisis created by a racist society perpetuates against black people and other historically marginalized groups.³⁷ In *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, Kathryn Yusoff posits that when thinking about the current geologic epoch (commonly referred to as the Anthropocene), we must think about it as originating, not with a single moment, but with the continued acts of violence like the Atlantic Slave Trade, chattel slavery, the genocide of colonialism, industrialization, and the ongoing violence upon the other in a "settler-colonialist present."³⁸ She details the origin of the Anthropocene,

The Golden Spike is not an abstract spike; it is an inhuman instantiation that touches and ablates human and non-human flesh, inhuman materials and experiences. It rides through the bodies of a thousand million cells; it bleeds through the open exposure of toxicity, suturing deadening accumulations through many a genealogy and geology.³⁹

The Golden Spike, both the geological term that refers to a certain point at which one epoch can be divided from another and the railroad spike that ceremonially marked the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad, is not just an abstract idea; it is a material thing and it must be considered for its physical and bodily violences. Geology gives power to the hierarchical structures: it says that humans as a whole have caused this shift in climate, letting the blame fall largely across all humans. This is misleading; Yusoff

³⁷ This work hopes to acknowledge the multitude of patriarchal and colonialist structures of power and the traditions of violence, racism, sexism, xenophobia, homophobia, environmental injustice, violence toward non-human that have delivered us to our current predicament but I wish to acknowledge that as a white person writing an academic paper, I cannot fully represent every one of these issues within this piece. I wish to come at it from an intersectional feminist lens.

³⁸ Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, 26.

³⁹ Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, 60.

points out that the origins of this geologic epoch lie in the numerous violences against people of color and indigenous populations (I will argue that this is also violence against women and against non-human animals) and that “origin” continues to occur in the present. This violence is created by the patriarchal, racist systems of thought and of the toxic residues they leave behind. The Anthropocene and the conception of geology, through its proclamation that this is the epoch of *anthropos*, is a continual violence against bodies.⁴⁰ This violence in the way of social evils becomes especially clear in Katrina because, as Nancy Tuana puts it: the hurricane, in its racial and class violence, was “climate change rendered not simply believable, but palpable.”⁴¹ Katrina proves that the physical and bodily worlds are deeply political. Katrina and the violence of the Anthropocene make us think in terms of bodies and violence. Literature, as an embodied practice should take up this corporeal thinking. *Salvage the Bones* does just this.

The fluidity of motherhood and the fluidity of a hurricane run together in the novel as a pregnant and motherless Esch interacts with China, a fighting dog who has just given birth to a litter of puppies, and prepares for a storm that she comes to identify as a mother. Before the storm, Esch explains, “Bodies tell stories. This is what I realize when I burst in on Skeetah in the bathroom in the morning, bladder full with early morning pregnant pee, and see him standing in front of the mirror. Skeetah is shirtless. He is tracing cuts across his stomach with two fingers, the way he checks China’s mouth after a fight for tears, missing teeth: lightly, sensitively.”⁴² Esch tenderly blurs the lines between

⁴⁰ Many thinkers have proposed alternate names for this time that address more directly the disproportionate blame that is placed on all humans in the name Anthropocene. Such names include: Capitalocene (for the power systems of capitalism), Donna Haraway’s Chthulucene (for the tentacular, earthly, interconnectedness that it suggests). For the sake of clarity, this project continues to use the term Anthropocene though the term is imperfect.

⁴¹ Nancy Tuana, “Viscous Porosity,” 188.

⁴² Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 146.

bodies in the bathroom: Skeetah's scarred body, China's that is both used for fighting and recently given birth, and her own, pregnant body. The scars of their tough life in Bois Sauvage (literally Savage or Wild Woods) play out on the bodies of Esch's family. But this moment is also deeply intimate and full of caring. Esch emphasizes her brother's love for his dog in his gentle touch and exposes a vulnerable moment in her pregnancy as she tries to hide it from the men in her family. Esch emphasizes that experience can become part of one's physical being through the wounds on Skeetah's abdomen and her own pregnant body. Katrina leaves scars through violence, but also reveals truths. It is in the flood waters of Katrina that Esch's family finally learns of her pregnancy when her clothes are no longer baggy but clinging, wet to her full stomach. Katrina not only revealed structural racism, the scars left by a billion golden spikes of the Anthropocene, it physically left its mark on the bodies of its survivors. The marks that Katrina left are not always visible though. The invisible and viscous nature of the chemicals and waste that lingered after the storm left long lasting marks on the humans who lived in its aftermath.

These invisible violences blur the line between human and place through the confusion of human and storm. Tuana explains,

My witnessing of Katrina is a call to transform feminist theory and practice by abandoning all traces of ontological divides between nature and culture. It is a plea to better understand our being in the world. The viscous porosity I have asked you to attend to involves recognizing the interaction of nature-culture, genes-environment in all phenomena, not just the phenomena of sex or of race.⁴³

By "viscous porosity," Tuana references the in-between state of fluid and solid and the ways that the boundaries of things are not set but porous. Water, and blood flow between generations of humans and storms, blurring the lines of how we make kin. The waters of

⁴³ Tuana, "Viscous Porosity," 209.

Katrina literally flow with the blood of the Batiste family as they fight for their lives in her waters. She becomes their kin, as the lines between nature and culture become disrupted. Katrina has been discussed at length in relation to climate change but also in relation to the concept of an “unnatural disaster,” meaning that the outcomes of the storm were unjust and inequitable because the storm struck an unjust society. Communities that were poor and home to higher populations of people of color, suffered more than wealthy, white communities.

This viscous porosity is important when talking about the relationship between motherhood and storm because milk is a fluid that connects bodies and blurs the lines between mother and child, and human and environment. Tuana emphasizes the porosity of plastic and the effects of the waste that was exposed from PVC plastic factories on the Gulf Coast after Katrina. As the carcinogenic toxin, dioxin—a byproduct of PVC manufacturing—concentrates in breast milk, it turns a form of intimate nourishment into a form of violence. The body, Tuana explains, is viscously porous as breast milk and PVC make clear. As a pregnant Esch walks through the rubble after the storm, the reader can imagine the porosity of her skin interacting with the sludge left by the storm and the toxicity of the chemicals, sewage, dead bodies left behind by the flood. Esch’s pregnant body envelops and transfers fluids and nutrients from mother to fetus. The pregnant woman’s body is porous in how it interacts with the fetus through a porous placenta and the transfer of nutrients but also in how it interacts with the world around it, through porous skin that collects the violent refuse (particularly in the form of PVC chemicals) from the world outside of her body. Tuana leads us to see the violence of the storm as Esch picks her way through the wreckage, more toxic than she could know. Esch is

victim to the violence of the storm and she cannot escape. Bois Sauvage is her home; she has nowhere else to go. She unwittingly becomes the medium for the “unnatural” disaster’s violence against her unborn child.⁴⁴

The hope for new life and the power of family and motherhood in a violent world gives the reader hope for Esch and her family as they prepare for the storm. Esch’s story is particular to the female body. Cixous writes of pregnancy, “Oral drive, anal drive, vocal drive—all these drives are our strengths, and among them is the gestation drive—just like the desire to write: a desire to live self from within, a desire for the swollen belly, for language, for blood.”⁴⁵ In the taboos of pregnancy, Cixous explains, that woman can see her own body in relation to the body of the other growing within her. Woman has creative and destructive desires. The desire for blood that Cixous notes could be interpreted as a desire for family, blood relations, a desire for menstruation, or perhaps even a bloodthirst. Blood is inseparable from the female body, especially in the act of giving birth. The call of violence is certainly illuminated as Esch begins to think of the storm as a mother. But as she begins to think of herself in this context, Esch’s pregnancy and sexual desires are an important aspect of her creative strength. The book ends with Esch and her brothers sitting in the forest, waiting for China to return after the storm. After experiencing the violence of the storm, the violence of motherhood, Esch knows that when China returns, “she will know that I am a mother.”⁴⁶ Through the violence of the ravaged Gulf and her creation from it, Esch begins to recognize herself as a mother.

⁴⁴ The term unborn child is used here because Esch wishes to not to terminate her pregnancy and she frequently refers to the fetus as “the baby.” Otherwise, fetus or fertilized egg are terms that empower a woman’s choice.

⁴⁵ Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 891.

⁴⁶ Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 258.

So, it is in the violence that the storm enacts against her body, that Esch begins to see herself as a mother. She understands the violence and the savagery of a viscously porous birth. In the end, Esch, herself has experienced the violence of motherhood.

Becoming Storm

As we think about Katrina as a mother, how do we reckon climate change with motherhood? *Salvage the Bones* flips the script: climate change is no longer a human attack, a male attack, a transgression against the naturalized idea of woman as “mother earth.” Katrina (as an indicator of a violently changing climate) is a mother. She nurtures, she creates, she destroys, she acts upon her children, she is intimately tied to their bodies, she is part of them, and her viscous waters mix with theirs.

The naturalization of women becomes evident when Esch’s father explains what is coming to his children as he prepares their home for the coming hurricane five days before the storm touches down. He laments, “The storm, it has a name now. Like the worst, she’s a woman. Katrina.”⁴⁷ After the storm, many people responded by calling the storm “that bitch Katrina.” The anger and hatred toward the storm becomes tangled with anger and hatred toward women. The storm becomes a bitch and woman becomes a storm—both are vilified. *Salvage the Bones* challenges this vilification of the intertwined woman and storm. *Salvage the Bones* relabels the storm from bitch to mother, reclaiming the storm but also reclaiming the feminine and the dog. Katrina might have been a bitch, but the bitch in *Salvage the Bones* is a powerful mother dog who is filled with

⁴⁷ Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 214.

complexities. The images of storm-mother, dog-mother and teenage-girl-mother subvert the word bitch and reclaim it as mother. Katrina finds a middle ground between the beautiful and benevolent Gaia, and the “bitch.” She is a violent mother who rears her children but has the power to undo them. She leaves the children who survive to salvage in the wreckage. Though she is violent, she is intimately tied to her children. The storm becomes more than “that bitch Katrina.” She becomes “the mother we will remember.”⁴⁸

When thinking in terms of the storm, Esch thinks about the cyclicity of storms. The memory of the mother Katrina lingers “until the next mother with large, merciless hands, committed to blood, comes.”⁴⁹ Esch remembers the stories her mother told her of the last bad storm, Camille. Esch remembers Elaine, a category three hurricane from her childhood. But she only has the memory of her mother’s story of the last category five. Esch explains; “during Elaine, Randall and Daddy had slept. Skeetah had sat on the opposite side of Mama, opposite me, and she’d told us about the big storm when she was little, the legend: Camille.”⁵⁰ Hurricanes are a part of life in Bois Sauvage; the Batiste family has a long history in the place and so, they have a long history with storms. Esch cannot help but think of her mother when she thinks about the storms, linking her family and the hurricanes, the generations and their storms. Time moves in cycles with the generations of mother and the storms. The moments of the storms collapse together as Skeetah and Esch remember what their mother told them about Camille and brace themselves against Katrina. It is also in this moment that Esch imagines the child growing inside of her, who reaches for her and “gives me that name as if it is mine:

⁴⁸ Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 225.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 218.

Mama.”⁵¹ The name is not Esch’s yet before the storm. After the violent storm, Esch declares herself a mother. This identity is not a simple one but one that challenges expectations, inspires creation from violence, and helps her to claim her own agency as she acknowledges the agency of the non-human in the violent world.

⁵¹ Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 219.

Part II: Writing, Language, and Milk: Mammalian Mothers in *Memoirs of A Polar Bear*

Introduction

Three generations of polar bears take center stage in Yoko Tawada's confounding and boundary blending work, *Memoirs of a Polar Bear*. In the story of each generation, polar bears and humans exist in entanglements that highlight the complex ties between non-human animals and humans. This muddling of categories is a deeply embodied and literary act for the bears who grapple with language and the legacy of writing through each generation. The book is formatted in three sections, one for each generation: a former Soviet circus performer who writes an autobiography; her daughter Tosca, a circus performer who becomes-with her trainer, Barbara, to write a biography through shared dreams; and Tosca's son Knut, a young polar bear in the Berlin Zoo who gains international fame and becomes a poster child for fighting climate change. These bears are not allegorical of the human experience; they are polar bears in their thoughts, their physical senses, their longing for snow, their language, and in the fact that two of them, Tosca and Knut, were actual polar bears. In this bearishness, Knut, Tosca, and the first polar bear play in linguistic styles that are both particular to and estranged from their own bodies. In *Memoirs of a Polar Bear*, reality and fiction are blended, allowing for categories like species and nature to become less rigid in definition. The reader questions

what is real and what is fiction, what is human and what is animal, and what is natural and unnatural. Set primarily in circuses and zoos, the novel takes readers into these liminal spaces where human and non-human animals share strange, fraught, beautiful, and surprising interspecies relationships. The novel is full of subversive encounters: polar bears making political statements, queer interspecies romance, non-human animals who read Kafka, and polar bears who achieve international stardom. It is in precisely this strangeness that Tawada's novel can easily be interpreted through Haraway's understanding of how we should conceptualize the interactions and intra-actions where species meet, and it is through the tactile and bearish bodily writing that the novel fits with Cixous' *L'écriture féminine*.

Memoirs reverses and plays with the tradition of objectifying animals in literature by inviting humans into the complex inner lives of the polar bears, acknowledging their capacity for wildness while deconstructing what it means to be wild and domestic. The bears live amongst humans and constantly interact with them, and though the bears have distinctly non-human ways of being and thinking, the novel cannot help but project human practices onto the bears. "Isn't this just anthropomorphism?" asks the critic. Sure, but Jane Bennett explains in *Vibrant Matter*, "We need to cultivate a bit of anthropomorphism—the idea that human agency has some echoes in nonhuman nature—to counter the narcissism of humans in charge of the world."⁵² So perhaps we imagine a bit of our human sensibilities into our reading of the three generations of polar bears and perhaps this is a helpful practice in breaking down the binary that Donna Haraway critiqued when she coined the term "natureculture."⁵³

⁵² Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Duke University Press, 2010), xvi.

⁵³ Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 15.

If Derrida says that animals are good to think with, then humans, as animals, must be included. We must be able to think with ourselves and make ourselves strange. In *When Species Meet*, Donna Haraway explains that to know ourselves, is to know that we are a set of interactions with other species. She quotes new materialist thinker, Anna Tsing: “Human nature is an interspecies relationship.”⁵⁴ She means that humans are only humans in their interactions with other beings. That is, the other life forms that we interact with are fundamental to our existence. For instance, Haraway uses the example of the billions of microorganisms in the human body. She explains,

I love the fact that human genomes can be found in only about 10 percent of all the cells that occupy the mundane space I call my body; the other 90 percent of the cells are filled with the genomes of bacteria, fungi, protists, and such, some of which play in a symphony necessary to my being alive at all, and some of which are hitching a ride and doing the rest of me, of us, no harm... To be one is always to *become with* many.⁵⁵

The human body itself, Haraway suggests, is composed of only about 10 percent of what is generally thought of as human. Bodies are, to Haraway, a dance of many species, a microcosm, an ecosystem. Haraway asks her readers to rethink the ties they share with other species. In reconceptualizing ourselves and our bodies as fundamentally connected with (or becoming with) others, Haraway suggests that we attend to these ties in an active ontological process. We are fundamentally tied to other species. How can we reconceptualize the ways in which we make those connections? Perhaps Tawada’s novel (or is it a memoir?) is a good place to start.

Motherhood is one area in the novel where species become intertwined. These mothers take on unexpected and often fraught forms: an author who cannot remember her

⁵⁴ Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 19.

⁵⁵ Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 3.

biological mother and writes her progeny into being before their physical births, two mothers who have strained relationships with their own mothers and allow others to care for their children as they seek queer relationships and success in their careers, and a baby rejected by his mother, only to be raised by a male mother of another species. The polar bears and the humans in *Memoirs of a Polar Bear*, like the mothers in *Salvage the Bones*, constantly subvert the reader's expectations of what a mother should be. Is motherhood creation? Is it feminine? Does a mother have to prioritize her child? Does a mother have to be the same species as her child?

Milk and sugar have imagery that carries throughout the text, as eating becomes both a means of coming together but also a way of experiencing alienation. In thinking of milk, we return to Cixous' quote: "Even if phallic mystification has generally contaminated good relationships, a woman is never far from "mother"... There is always within her at least a little of that good mother's milk. She writes in white ink."⁵⁶ Phallic mystification has certainly contaminated many of the relationships of the three generations. The white of milk matches the white of the bears and the snow they long for, a sort of familial bond. These foods help polar bears and humans to become companions, or as Haraway calls them, "messmates," for the complex ties that humans and non-human animals have in sharing food.⁵⁷ These fraught relationships are the outcomes of a phallogentric (and as Haraway reveals, an anthropocentric) model of society, but it does not change the importance and the power of mothers as a unifying force between women and non-human animals. None of the mothers in the novel are perfect; they are all deeply flawed, but they all carry within their bodies (and sometimes outside of their bodies), the

⁵⁶ Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 881.

⁵⁷ Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 4.

nourishment and love of a mother's milk. The mother bears both write in "white ink" in the sense that they are mammals and they are generative, but also in the sense that they write from their polar bearishly white bodies.

Motherhood in *Memoirs of a Polar Bear* is bodily and surreal; it is, as Cixous encourages, written in mammalian milk. The melting together and fluidity of reality and fiction in this text make the motherly writing all the milkier. That is, in blurring categories, the novel acknowledges a different way of conceptualizing the world through the literary worlds of material semiotic polar bears. The novel plays in the realm of the taboo and subverts expectations. The naturalized woman, like the violent woman in *Salvage the Bones*, cannot be reduced to evil or easily dismissed. In fact, the novel suggests that a polar bear is just as far from or related to nature as a human. It is difficult to naturalize women because all mammals seem to be in a strange dance of natural and unnatural in the book. Blurring these natureculture lines is necessary in the world of the three polar bears—a clear divide between nature and culture begins to lose its meaning when bear and woman are so inseparably bound. *Memoirs of a Polar Bear* emphasizes that the categories of woman, animal, human, and mother are still significant but not nearly as rigid as once believed. It acknowledges the weight of these categories while still blurring them. The first polar bear acknowledges the boundaries of these categories when she says of Kafka, a metamorphosing writer, "he did know what I mean when I say that no one can ever act entirely according to his own free will."⁵⁸ The bodies we inhabit that are both materially and semiotically constructed are limiting. We are still subject to the confines of categories and in this, we are not entirely free. This is especially true for non-

⁵⁸ Tawada, *Memoirs of a Polar Bear*, 63.

human animals who are generally considered non-verbal. But the categories do not have to be so rigid; Tawada gives the polar bear the power of language. Through embodied writing, the novel blurs the lines of what it means to be human and what it means to be animal; it flattens hierarchical thinking and leads us down a path that makes strange what we claim to know.

Motherly Writing

In Part I, “The Grandmother: An Evolutionary Theory,” writing literally becomes a means of birthing and of becoming. Language for the first polar bear is a creative endeavor and the words as they are written are a way of bringing things into being. The unnamed autobiographer and former circus performer explains of her process: “Writing isn’t particularly different from hibernation. Perhaps I made a drowsy impression, but in the bear’s den of my brain, I was giving birth to my own childhood and secretly attending to its upbringing.”⁵⁹ Because the bear does not remember her childhood until she puts it on the page, her childhood comes to life for her and the reader when she writes it. Through writing, she becomes her own mother and seems to write herself into being. She feels like writing is hibernation because mother bears often give birth while hibernating and tend to their cubs until they emerge in the spring. Writing is a nurturing act for the bear who cannot remember her biological mother. She explains that she writes to “attend [to her] upbringing,” a maternal approach to writing. Writing becomes the first polar bear’s way of birthing worlds. Though body and language are tied if we take *Memoirs* to

⁵⁹ Tawada 15.

be written in a certain interspecies *écriture féminine*, these ties are often fraught. Cixous writes “a woman’s body, with its thousand and one thresholds of ardor—once, by smashing yokes and censors, she lets it articulate the profusion of meanings that run through it in every direction—will make the old single-grooved mother tongue reverberate with more than one language.”⁶⁰ The pressure to write in one unified voice and language, according to Cixous destroys the multiplicity of voices and comes with the suppression of female writer in a phallogentric model of literature. The mother tongue becomes an oppressive monolith. Woman is more than her mother tongue; her body and her experiences are far too complex. Birth is painful and language is an area of great strife to an Arctic-Russian-German-Canadian polar bear. The pressure to have a “mother tongue” weighs on the bear who cannot remember her own mother and grapples with what it means to have a motherland when you are born in a place where your species is not native. Should she write in Russian? German? In some bearish language of the North Pole? She asks her literary agent:

“What’s my mother tongue?”

“The language your mother speaks.”

“I’ve never spoken with my mother.”

“A mother is a mother, even if you never speak with her.”

“I don’t think my mother spoke Russian.”

“Ivan was your mother. Have you forgotten? The age of female mothers is over.”⁶¹

Motherhood and identity are already fraught for the polar bear whose autobiography is about her traumatic upbringing in a circus in Soviet Russia. Ivan was her trainer who used beating and physical punishment to train her for her acts. If, as her agent proposes, Ivan was the first polar bear’s mother, her relationship to motherhood would be fraught,

⁶⁰ Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 885.

⁶¹ Tawada 51-52.

indeed. But to a polar bear, it seems, human languages are flexible and fluid. The polar bear, as Cixous proposes of human women, writes in a multiplicity of language. The language of the bear, therefore is capable of much more than the limits of a mother tongue. Language is deeply personal but it can also be alienating, especially when considering the relationship between animals and language. This is all given weight, of course, by the fact that the book in question was originally written in German by a Japanese author and was later translated into English.⁶² The tensions of language between animals and humans in the novel is not all that different from the tensions of language from human to human or from one language to another. The female polar bear has the capacity to write in a profusion of languages because she is not one thing and because, as a polar bear, human language is foreign to her. Human language has made her an object but through her own writings, she subverts this relationship. An interspecies *écriture féminine* allows for a multiplicity of languages and voices, including those of the non-human. The violence of a forced “mother tongue” brings about the silencing of the feminine mother. Her editor wishes to confine her, to define her by her “mother tongue” but the first polar bear resists this classification; she challenges the idea that one’s identity could be reduced to a single language.

After watching a boy on a bike, she is reminded of her past in the circus and in seeing how he uses his body to steer the bicycle, the first polar bear begins to steer her writing into the future, challenging linear expectations of time. Just as she writes her

⁶² Here it becomes important to note that though the English translation of the text is quite beautiful and well done, the title was translated more for marketing purposes than to stay true to the original German *Etüden im Schnee*. The German title has resonance in the importance of snow and also music or play whereas the English translation has resonance in another financially successful title: *Memoirs of a Geisha*. In a twist of cruel irony, the translation of the title mirrors the first polar bear whose writing is published and unfittingly titled “Thunderous Applause for My Tears,” though polar bears, as she points out, cannot cry. Fact and fiction blur in strange ways.

childhood and raises herself through her writing, the first polar bear does the same of her descendants. The theme of writing as birthing becomes fully fleshed out when the unnamed polar bear literally writes her progeny before they have been born. She writes from her body and from the bodies that will come from hers, explaining “I won’t write about the past, I’ll write about all of the things that are still going to happen to me. My life will unfold in exactly the way I’ve set it down on the page.”⁶³ Her own life – and later, the lives of her daughter and grandson – come into being through her creation of words through pen on paper. Time, through writing, becomes non-linear. The generations unfold onto the page outside of normal time. Writing becomes her way of being a mother – of writing from her body and creating through her words. Hélène Cixous refers to this type of writing as specifically feminine, an *Écriture féminine*.⁶⁴ This writing not only challenges what it means to be a mother or what writing should be, it challenges a concept of time as one only travelling in one linear direction. Writing allows for the polar bear to write forward in time and experience what is yet to be.

The world of the polar bear writer and mother is one that makes the polar bear closer to human, and at the same time, takes care to acknowledge the differences between the two. This view of the polar bear asks the readers to step outside of human subjectivities and think outside of themselves. It is through writing her future, her unborn child, and her grandchild, that she creates them; writing for the mother bear is a bodily experience, one that makes way for the becoming of new lives. This writing is an embodied experience, the grandmother explains:

Out of relief, I sighed, threw myself into bed and let my ear sink into the pillow. I lay there like a croissant, embracing Tosca, who had not yet been born. She was

⁶³ Tawada 69.

⁶⁴ Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 875.

still part of my dream as I gently slept. One thing was certain: one day my daughter would stand on a theatre stage, dancing the lead to Tchaikovsky's *Polar Bear Lake*. Later she would give birth to a son who would look so adorable that everyone would immediately want to cuddle him, my first grandchild, Knut.⁶⁵

The physicality of bodies is not to be ignored here; as the grandmother bear embraces her unborn progeny, Tosca is literally inside of her mother as an unfertilized egg. The first polar bear does not just lie on a bed, she lies "like a croissant" because food and nourishment are so tied with the body and with motherhood. This is Cixous' idea that feminine writing is done in "white ink."⁶⁶ The first polar bear writes from her body and in her writing she creates life. This is a style that subverts expectations and pushes the boundaries of time and body.

Woman and Bear: Companion Species

This writing is not all beautiful; in writing her progeny, the first polar bear seems to claim them under her dominion as, like Adam, she names them. Writing becomes both liberation and entrapment. The first polar bear is just the beginning of complex and painful yet beautiful relationships with mothers and writing in the novel. Part II: "The Kiss of Death" is concerned with the life Tosca, a circus performer like her mother. Though Tosca seems incapable of conversing with humans as her mother could, she and her trainer, Barbara are able to communicate through their shared dreams. In these dreams, language becomes amorphous. Barbara, who narrates most of the section, explains as the two sit on an iceberg in a shared dream:

⁶⁵ Tawada 73

⁶⁶ Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 881.

And there in the darkness, the grammars of many languages lost their color, they melted and combined then froze again, they drifted in the ocean and joined the drifting floes of ice. I sat on the same iceberg as Tosca and understood every word she said to me. Beside us floated the second iceberg with an Inuk and a snow hare sitting on it, immersed in conversation.⁶⁷

Language, in the shared dreams of the bear and the human, is still present but loses its usual form; like the landscape, it melts and freezes, allowing for humans and animals to have a fluid conversation in a shared tongue. These dreams take place in a location that might be a “natural” home to a polar bear, occurring in a time and place that aren’t logical, but that instead point to the ties between human and animal as language and landscape melt together. In melting these ties, Tosca and Barbara create an interspecies language.

In these dream moments, Tosca and Barbara develop a loving relationship where they intimately share their traumas and wishes. Tosca explains that she struggles to find her own identity as hers has already been written out by her mother. She laments, “My mother wrote her autobiography... She never gave up writing...I, on the other hand, can’t write anything at all,” Barbara questions, “Why not?” Tosca answers, “My mother described me as a character in her book,” to which Barbara promises: “Then I’ll write for you. I’ll write your life story so you can escape from your mother’s autobiography.”⁶⁸ Writing, in this case, has both set a mother free and consequently trapped her child. Barbara promises to write Tosca’s story for her, thus liberating her from the literary bear her mother made of her. Tosca seems to be literally trapped in the text, pointing to the human practice of making animals into literary metaphors and symbols. Through their

⁶⁷ Tawada 98.

⁶⁸ Tawada 109-110.

interspecies connection, Barbara and Tosca transcend these limitations: melting languages and freeing each other from expectations.

The woman and the polar bear become, in these connections, what Donna Haraway describes as “companion species.” Haraway details her interactions with her canine companion, Cayenne, who licks her in the mouth. She says:

We have had forbidden conversation; we have had oral intercourse; we are bound in telling story on story with nothing but the facts. We are training each other in acts of communication we barely understand. We are, constitutively, companion species. We make each other up, in the flesh. Significantly other to each other, in specific difference, we signify in the flesh a nasty developmental infection called love. This love is a historical aberration and a naturalcultural legacy.⁶⁹

Haraway views this not only as a conversation between dog and woman in movement and action but also through the communication of cells and DNA, chemical receptors: their bodies converse. Woman and dog become together in moments like this. Haraway uses the term “oral intercourse” to push the boundaries of what is allowed between species. A queering of these types of relationships, a love that is an “aberration” to conventional ideas of how animals and humans should interact. Haraway and Cayenne exchange information in their oral intercourse and they begin to become with each other. This becoming with is a type of communication. Haraway uses “signify” to point out the role of semiotics in all this physical interaction: bodily action becomes a form of language between the two. Haraway’s understanding of her relationship with the dog she has trained helps to illuminate how Tosca and Barbara constitute each other in subversive ways that have been forbidden between species. Like Haraway is to Cayenne, Barbara is Tosca’s trainer, but in both situations it seems that this training is reciprocal between animal and human—Haraway explains, “we are training each other.” The woman and

⁶⁹ Haraway 16.

polar bear begin to become companion species in Haraway's sense that they make room for each other inside of themselves and in that interaction, they begin to bring each other into being. The word "companion," Haraway explains, has resonance in sharing food, and carries sexual undertones.⁷⁰ Tosca and Barbara achieve this level of companionship when they literally begin to become with each other and blur the lines between their bodies and voices.

After Barbara has promised to write Tosca's life, she realizes the story she has been telling has primarily been hers.

"That's all right. First you should translate your own story into written characters. Then your soul will be tidy enough to make room for a bear."
"Are you planning to come inside me?"
"Yes."
"I'm scared."
We laughed with one voice.⁷¹

Woman and animal join together to become a queer in-between being that would surely make a patriarchal thinker quake in his boots. Barbara's promise to write Tosca's biography becomes her writing her own autobiography so that she has room inside of her for Tosca. The sexual connotations of this conversation are ripe with Haraway's ideas of how companion species can begin to blur the lines of what is traditionally acceptable. Though it might not be accepted by the outside world, Barbara and Tosca's relationship is perhaps the most beautiful interaction within the three parts: "she is beautiful and she is laughing." Cixous' image of the Medusa becomes relevant here as she is also a mixture of woman of animal who terrified men but Cixous renders her as filled with laughter, laughter because she has reclaimed her interspecies body. This joyful moment between

⁷⁰ Haraway 17.

⁷¹ Tawada 138.

Tosca and Barbara is surely sexual as the circus act they dream up together is a shared kiss. Their “Kiss of Death” act, in which Tosca eats a sugar cube from Barbara’s mouth becomes not only a deep act of trust between the two female animals but also a sensual and radical act of love. Haraway calls this kind of interaction, “Queer messmates in mortal play, indeed!” Haraway calls these relationships queer because they do not fit in with the types of relationship that are condoned under a patriarchal vision of the world. This is a romantic and deeply meaningful relationship between a human woman and a female polar bear. The mortal play is the acknowledgment that in their act, “The Kiss of Death,” Tosca is risking being seen as violent against a human. Is it the fear that the audience has of the polar bear that is unexpectedly more dangerous than the wild animal who is kept in captivity?⁷² The audience might see this intimate moment as an attack, thus subjecting Tosca to death, as is the practice with animals in captivity that are considered dangerous to humans. The moment is subversive as it looks at the ties between circus trainer and circus animal in new and unexpected ways. Breaking bread together sometimes means rotting your teeth on sugar cubes but the coming together of these species seems to be a radical act not only of the body but also within a capitalist society.⁷³ These two female creatures share sugar, and they also share the pain of being woman and being animal, as well as the pain of making room for another inside of oneself, of queer sexual spaces. Tosca and Barbara’s romantic and emotional connection is what gives them power and voice, as Tosca and Barbara begin to laugh in one voice.

⁷² We have seen many cases like this, most recently and famously, the Gorilla Harambe was killed when a child entered his enclosure. It was not the violence of the Gorilla that was deadly, but rather, the human response.

⁷³ Sugar surely has some resonance in the love and longing expressed for snow and milk throughout the text but it also points to a capitalist system of oppression and violence (sugar trade with its roots in slavery and ecological as well as bodily destruction) and also acts as a tool for training.

In each of their lives, both women are mothers but forego raising their own children, thus subverting expectations of what mothers should be. Barbara believes that her husband is too violent for their child to be near the two of them. For this reason, her daughter lives with her mother.⁷⁴ Tosca, like Barbara, does not bother too much with the raising of her own child. She “entrust(s) Knut’s care to another animal. This wasn’t an easy decision, but because of my literary work I didn’t have enough time for him.”⁷⁵ Instead of raising their respective children, Tosca and Barbara focus on their own careers and on their queer interspecies relationship. They do away with the expectations of motherhood to pursue bonds with another species, thus protesting a patriarchal, hierarchical expectation of the mother.

At the end of Tosca’s section of the novel, she writes that she will “conclude this biography” emphasizing that Barbara is still the author of the piece even after Tosca has signed her name as author with a pawprint. But then she explains that rather than Barbara writing Tosca’s biography, Tosca is now writing Barbara’s, or is it the other way around? The line is blurry and their bodies are so interconnected that it is hazy who is writing whom into being. The woman and the polar bear are distinct but the line is fuzzy; they become one but that one is a multitude. They perform together in trust and strange knowing, and they share a sugar cube, one mouth to another: “queer messmates in mortal play, indeed!”⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Tawada 146.

⁷⁵ Tawada 164.

⁷⁶ Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 19.

Bearing the Burden of Climate Change

Though the novel blends the line between human and polar bear, understanding the cultural significance of polar bears is fundamental to understanding the importance of blurring these lines. For a novel about animals set in Berlin and Russia, it is entirely unsurprising that bears should be the animal of choice (think Soviet Bear, and the bear on Berlin's coat of arms). Polar bears are a deliberate choice for the novel: they are particularly relevant in today's iconography of climate change. The polar bear has become shorthand for the violence of a changing climate. Material cultural thinker, Ursula Heise, in her book *Imagining Extinction*, explores the various cultural meanings of extinct species and species on the verge of extinction. She explains of polar bears:

Perhaps no other species has received so much public attention over the last decade: polar bears have featured prominently in and on many environmental organizations' accessories, calendars, commodities, and promotional materials. With 20,000 to 25,000 individuals distributed over nineteen different populations around the arctic, the polar bear has become one of the flagship species of conservation... it is not tied to a particular national or cultural community, but usually signals global ecological crisis.⁷⁷

Polar bears, Heise argues, have become the spokesbeings of climate change in popular culture. They are a ubiquitous symbol of the climate crisis to the human onlooker. In the novel, the last bear in a long line of performers, Knut, plays this role for the Berlin Zoo. As a doctor at the zoo points out, "I dream that one day Knut will be like Joan of Arc, holding a huge SAVE THE EARTH banner in his hand and leading a massive demonstration."⁷⁸ The polar bear can be a beautiful predator, an adorable cub, a strong mother, or an animal that suffers as its traditional home disappears. But it can also be a

⁷⁷ Heise, *Imagining Extinction*.

⁷⁸ Tawada 210.

means of entertaining humans and grabbing their attention through performance. Thus, polar bear becomes as much a performance as gender. The doctor mentions Joan of Arc, a woman who dressed like a man, performing gender. The polar bear, to the hierarchically thinking human world, becomes a symbol of the disappearing ice caps and Knut even comes to believe this symbolism, thinking that he is the only thing keeping a climate Armageddon at bay.⁷⁹ *Memoirs of a Polar Bear* plays with this reduction of polar bear to symbol; it imagines the complex inner world of three different polar bears while also acknowledging that polar bears must grapple with the meanings that are placed onto them by an anthropocentric society.

After Knut, the real bear in the Berlin Zoo and the third bear in the novel, died of a seizure and subsequent drowning in his enclosure in the Berlin Zoo in 2011, Natural History Museum commissioned his lifeless body to be stuffed for display.⁸⁰ This action turned the once live bear into an object and harkened back to the plush stuffed toy Knuts that the Zoo sold during the peak of Knut's fame.⁸¹ Does a taxidermied animal lose its nature? Its wildness? Rachel Poliquin, in *The Breathless Zoo*, a material culture critique of taxidermy, writes that "taxidermied animals carry their deaths with them."⁸² In a certain way, Knut's death carries the death of his endangered species but it is also simply the death of one polar bear in a zoo. What happens when a polar bear who represents climate change dies in captivity? A taxidermied bear is simultaneously nature and culture: animal, subject and object. In stuffing the bear, it becomes denatured, it loses the

⁷⁹ Tawada 227.

⁸⁰ "A Stuffed Polar Bear Won't Do for Berlin's Fans of Knut - The New York Times."

⁸¹ Tawada 232.

⁸² Poliquin, *The Breathless Zoo*, 10.

threat of a wild animal; it is tamed, rendered a domestic object but it also places wild animal into human sphere, thus further confusing the line between nature and culture.

For the literary Knut, the great irony is that he is used as a symbol for climate change but he is not directly suffering from the melting ice caps in the Arctic; instead, his suffering is caused by his lack of identity (partially in response to his “unnatural” male, human mother, and partially in his alienation from the Arctic).

Since Knut does not live to produce any progeny and he could not anatomically bear children as a male, he does not need to worry about being a mother as much as being mothered. After Tosca rejects him as her cub, Knut is raised and nursed by a human man named Matthias. As her editor told his grandmother, “The age of female mothers is over.”⁸³ Separating the bears from what is “natural” is confusing and painful for them. A female mother is natural and so her loss is confusing and traumatic. But it is also through this challenging of categories that each polar bear creates beautiful performance through writing and on stage. But Knut knows that he is a polar bear and that his ancestors are bearish and not *Homo sapiens*. He meets these ancestors in his dreams, embodied as a singular “Snow Queen” who explains: “I am not only your grandmother, I’m also your great grandmother and your great-great-grandmother. I am the super-imposition of numerous ancestors. From the front you see only a single figure, but behind me is an infinitely long line of ancestors. I am not one, I am many.”⁸⁴ These generations of mothers all lined up in infinity are terrifying but remind the young bear that his being is the product of generations upon generations of mothers.⁸⁵ There is tenderness and safety

⁸³ Tawada 51-52.

⁸⁴ Tawada 214

⁸⁵ The Snow Queen that visits Knut is a nod to Hans Christian Andersen’s work by the same name. Andersen’s Snow Queen is cruel and makes a young boy who she kidnaps spell the word eternity out of

but there is also pain in this relationship. The Snow Queen is as harsh as an Arctic landscape. The Snow Queen as the infinite mother serves as not just one thing: she connects Knut to his bearish nature but also encourages his family legacy of performers. She is terrifying and but she also connects Knut to his polar bear kind from which he has been estranged as an animal in a zoo.

In the case of Knut and Matthias, motherhood becomes about giving a part of oneself to one's child. Knut describes that Matthias is "a true mammal, more than many of his sort, because he gave me suck: he fed me not only milk but part of his own life. He was the pride of all mammals."⁸⁶ In Matthias's case, motherhood isn't any one thing, it isn't exclusive of gender or species; rather it is a fluid state of selflessness and becoming. But it is also clear that Knut sees his relationship with Matthias as physically draining the life from his male human mother, and the relationship leads him to feel separated from his ancestors. The relationship is complicated: loving but fraught.

Further complicating this dance between natural and unnatural, are Knut's final moments. In his death scene, Knut plays in snow, twirling in the cyclical language of gently falling snowflakes. Time becomes confused as Knut notices that the colors and light he sees "no longer knew if they were experiencing a dawn or a dusk."⁸⁷ His world spins as he does and in his seizure, he sees snow: "Snowing! The flakes spin as they fall. Snowing! One more flake. Snow! And another. Snow! There was no end to it."⁸⁸ Time becomes non-linear as Knut spins in spirals, his words cycling through a repetition of joy

ice. The eternity of generations in the Snow Queen and Knut's development of language (he learns to speak about himself as subject after an encounter with the Snow Queen) are sure nods to Andersen's Queen.

⁸⁶ Tawada 226.

⁸⁷ Tawada 251.

⁸⁸ Tawada 252.

for the snow. These twirls seem to be almost a dance; the audience at the Zoo is watching him die. As he spirals in this final performance, Knut seems to fall out of linear time in his death. As he repeats and repeats his delight in snow, the reader thinks he is joyfully returning to his “natural” habitat in his death. Instead, Knut explains that “the snow was a spaceship.”⁸⁹ A spaceship is perhaps the least “natural” thing. Knut’s death is a coming together and juxtaposition of natural and unnatural. Tawada constantly questions what the distinctions between natural and unnatural are. Is an animal natural? What about a zoo animal? Are humans natural? What about a human who dreams in communication with a polar bear? Is that super natural? After all, as an unexpected vision of Michael Jackson says to Knut in his dying moments before the snow dance, “You don’t have to worry about what’s natural and unnatural. Just live your life as you please.”⁹⁰ Is this a warning coming from a hallucinated celebrity who famously dangled his own child out of a window? Are we meant to be deeply suspicious of a dead man telling a dying polar bear to live how he wishes? Or should we take comfort in his message? Is Michael Jackson to be taken seriously here: should we stop worrying so much about what is “natural” and embrace the strange and boundary breaking world we live in? The answer seems to be a bit of both: our world is fraught with strange ties, and unexpected kinships (or spaceships?).

⁸⁹ Tawada 252.

⁹⁰ Tawada 244.

A Multiplicity of Motherhoods

Femininity, animality, and motherhood have never meant just one thing. As

Cixous points out,

there is, at this time, no general woman, no one typical woman. What they have in common I will say. But what strikes me is the infinite richness of their individual constitutions: you can't talk about a female sexuality, uniform, homogeneous, classifiable into codes-any more than you can talk about one unconscious resembling another.

Feminine writing then should account for a plurality of experiences. *Memoirs of a Polar Bear* shows that categories like mother, polar bear, and woman cannot be essentialized. But at the same time, this multiplicity is in a constant dance with societal expectations of categories. These three generations of polar bears have such vastly different stories to tell; they are not monolithic in their polar bearishness. They complicate the boundaries between categories.

Part III: Blank Pages, *L'écriture féminine*, and Spirals in *When Women Were Birds*

Introduction

When Diane Dixon Tempest died from breast cancer at the age of fifty-four, she left the journals she had kept throughout her life to her daughter, Terry Tempest Williams. When Williams went to read the words her mother had left her, she found that every journal was filled with blank pages.⁹¹ Out of the empty pages that her mother bequeathed to her, Terry Tempest Williams wrote *When Women Were Birds*, a genre-defying, lyrical quasi-memoir that tells the story of a woman coming to terms with the death of her mother and the birth of her own voice. The text is structured as fifty-four variations (one for each year of her mother's life) on mourning mothers, mourning blank pages, and mourning a loss of connection with the non-human world. While it is elegiac, it is also a celebration of women's voices as they dance with secret writing, silence, and blankness.

Williams takes on Hélène Cixous' call to "Write!" in the style of *l'écriture féminine*, and through this embodied writing, she dares to play in the complex ties of enmeshment between women and birds. She proclaims her voice as a unification of language and body while drawing attention to the complex and varied struggles of women and non-human

⁹¹ Williams, *When Women Were Birds*, 2.

beings. Williams writes from her own body, the bodies of the women before her, the landscape she calls home, and the worlds she comes to understand through the connection she shares with birds. This intimate relationship that Williams has with the land is complicated. Williams explains: “Cancer. So much cancer. Nine women in my family have all had mastectomies, and seven are dead.”⁹² Williams identifies these tragedies in her family’s history as a direct result of their living downwind of the radioactive fallout from the Nevada test sites. The invisible violences of the nuclear age rewrite the DNA of the bodies of the women in Williams’ family. Their world quite literally shapes them. Their one-breasted bodies tell the story of their landscape, of the decision the U.S. government made when they decided that the desert was empty enough to set off bombs of prolonged suffering. *When Women Were Birds* exists in the tradition of Cixous and in conversation with Haraway: it centers around the voices of women and what it means to find voice out of a legacy of silencing, and it celebrates the moments of interaction and intra-action between a woman and the avian creatures with whom she shares a secret understanding about what it means to be alive.⁹³

The absence of words in Diane Dixon Tempest’s journals is Williams’ complex inheritance. To find voice out of the silence of the women and beings before us requires that we write from our bodies. But to write from one’s own body also means writing from the moments where that body becomes confused with the other and becomes human out of its inter/intra-action with the non-human.

⁹² Williams, *When Women Were Birds*, 138.

⁹³ Intra-action is a term coined by Karen Barad uses it to emphasize the mesh-quality of the bodies that “intra-act.” Haraway uses both intra- and interaction to describe a kind of cat’s cradle game of becoming with.

Writing out of Emptiness

What do we make of the world we have been given by our mothers? What do we make of the blank pages that are passed on to us? In her mother's empty journals, Williams inherits the silence of generations of women before her who have been shamed for their bodies and simultaneously excluded from the canon while still forced to write. Cixous explains that in writing, women "have been driven away as violently as from bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal."⁹⁴ Cixous believes that silencing women and keeping them from their bodies is fundamentally connected. In the Mormon tradition, this comes in the way of overt religious expectations. Williams explains, "In Mormon culture, women are expected to do two things: keep a journal and bear children."⁹⁵ In dictating that women must do these things, women lose their agency and their choice in the matter. They are alienated from body and from writing through the expectation of a patriarchal society. In the Mormon tradition, women are ironically expected both to write (in the form of journals) and to be silent (to not challenge convention), thus fundamentally separating their bodies from language. When women claim their voices they unite their physical bodies and their language. Williams finds her voice in writing as she steals words back from the phallogocentric world.⁹⁶ When she writes from her body, her words topple the hierarchy where man has conveniently placed himself at the top. Women have been silenced and left out of the canon to preserve a corrupt power structure. Williams' mother's blank journals can be

⁹⁴ Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 875.

⁹⁵ Williams, *When Women Were Birds*, 48.

⁹⁶ Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 876.

interpreted as a vestige of this tradition of violent silencing but they are also a protest of the expectation for Mormon women to write and be silent.

What does it mean to write from blank pages? Kathryn Yusoff in *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* addresses the dangers of projecting emptiness onto the other. She explains “as land is made into tabula rasa for European inscription of its militant maps, so too do Indigenes and Africans become rendered as writ or ledger of flesh scribed in colonial grammars”⁹⁷ Colonialism and genocide come out of a perception that the other is empty or blank. An assumption of blankness makes it easy to use the other as an object both physically and in language. The idea of a tabula rasa means that the language of the colonizers becomes what is written onto the “other.” This is exactly the type of phallogentric language that Cixous urges us to overcome. This justification of violence and silencing has been made across the “new world” and tells the story of much of the settlement of white people across the continent.⁹⁸ This is where the dominion narrative becomes especially clear. The justification is that if a landscape or a people is unfamiliar to the phallogentric/Eurocentric human, it is his will to make it his and hold dominion over it. Women become associated with land as a form of naturalization and so as the man asserts himself over the blank landscape, he does the same with women’s bodies, mandating she have children.

As an inheritor of Mormon traditions, Williams is surely familiar with the idea that God told man to make the desert bloom. Terry Tempest Williams writes from the

⁹⁷Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, 33.

⁹⁸ Deseret, the area in the Intermountain West that Mormons consider to be their homeland, is not exempt from this narrative. This tabula rasa has been assumed, in the context of Williams’ life, onto women, onto birds, and onto the desert landscapes of Utah. Great Salt Lake is an example of a big white space that has come to be perceived as blank and useless despite the vibrancy of life that it supports and the dramatic and often violent outcomes of its fluctuating water levels.

Utah desert and from the Great Salt Lake, a landscape that is often thought of as a barren wasteland, a place that is not traditionally productive, that is perceived as empty until filled by production, much like the female body. She explains “in the emptiness of this beloved landscape that has embraced me all my life, I hold my mother’s journals as another paradox, journals without words that create a narrative of the imagination.”⁹⁹ Mother and desert and journals are all perceived as empty but all nurture and embrace Williams and invite her to write from her body. Women’s writing has been seen as empty for generations as phallogocentric thinking has simultaneously shamed her for writing and forced her to write, separated her from her body, and thus told her that she could not write from it. It is difficult to write words when you exist inside of a female body or a body that does not belong to the values of the phallogocentric model. Cixous parallels the suppression of female writing with the suppression of female sexual pleasure:

And why don't you write? Write! Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it. I know why you haven't written. (And why I didn't write before the age of twenty-seven.) Because writing is at once too high, too great for you, it's reserved for the great—that is, for "great men"; and it's "silly." Besides, you've written a little, but in secret. And it wasn't good, because it was in secret, and because you punished yourself for writing, because you didn't go all the way; or because irresistibly, as when we would masturbate in secret, not to go to attenuate the tension a bit, just enough to take the edge off. And then as soon as we come, we go and make ourselves feel guilt—so as to be forgiven; or to forget, to bury it until the next time.¹⁰⁰

Women have been made to feel shame for having bodies and desires. There is a bodily desire to write, just as there is one to feel pleasure. Cixous connects the silencing of women’s writing to the silencing of women’s bodies and sexual desires. This silencing is

⁹⁹Williams, *When Women Were Birds*, 228.

¹⁰⁰ Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 876-877.

the tradition of literature that women write out of; it is made material in the journals of Diane Dixon Tempest.

Out of this silencing is the strange contradictory fact that women are expected to keep a journal and bear children. Williams' mother technically did both. It is the way that she subverted the expectations that were placed on her. She followed the rules and she broke them, she transgressed. Williams details, "My Mother's Journals are a creation myth. I am writing the creation story of my own voice through the blank pages my mother has bequeathed to me. Transgression is transmission."¹⁰¹ She writes her body from the blank pages she was given. She proves that blank is not really blank; it is the possibility to imagine, to be radically empathetic, to try, and see things in a new way. Writing out of blank pages proves that the space or tabula rasa was never empty to begin with. Williams is subverting the idea that white space is empty. She says we can write in milk and blood because "milk and blood live together."¹⁰² In this she refers to the dance of the woman's body, the burden of a woman's choice (and she emphasizes that it must be a woman's choice) whether or not to be a mother. She means that her mother's journals are yes, a symbol of the silencing of women, but they are also a protest of the system that told her that her only value was in writing journals and bearing children. White space was once a symbol of blankness. Williams finds it to be a symbol of power as well. She explains, "We all have our secrets. I hold mine. To withhold words is power. But to share our words with others, openly and honestly, that is also power"¹⁰³ Williams finds power in writing and in unknowable connections with birds.

¹⁰¹ Williams, *When Women Were Birds*, 97.

¹⁰² Williams, *When Women Were Birds*, 104.

¹⁰³ Williams, *When Women Were Birds*, 16.

The blank pages are not what we expect them to be; they are not one thing. Williams finds that in creating her own voice, she finds the contradictory messages and lack of messages in her mother's journals. The journals are enigmatic. They demand to be thought about. They are subversive; they transgress what journals are supposed to be. Her mother's transgression of the rules of a Mormon woman get passed on to Williams who writes numerous journals but never bears a child. Instead, at the age of fifty, she adopts a twenty-four year old son, Louis.¹⁰⁴ This is not the way the Mormon Church intended her to be a mother. By breaking the rules of the Mormon tradition while still technically following them, Williams's mother did deliver a message; she broke the rules and passed that subversive act on to her daughter.

Stealing in Flight

Writing from blank pages also acknowledges that there are things that remain a secret that we may never know. There are other ontologies beyond human comprehension. Just as the rationalization of colonialism imagined land and indigenous peoples as blank pages, animals have largely been seen as blank, or as Descartes believed, simply programmed machines. For Williams, these others are birds. Her voice seems to evolve in tandem with her relationship to the avian creatures. Williams provides no answers for why this should be because there aren't any that are rational. Her connection with birds is as mysterious as her mother's blank journals. This unknowableness does not make it insignificant.

¹⁰⁴ Williams, *When Women Were Birds*, 184.

Williams chronicles her life and her voice by the moments she has shared with birds: her grandmother's copy of the Peterson Field Guide to Western Birds, the owl who warned her of the danger of an evil man, the peregrine falcon who cut her face with its wing—a brush with death, the albino robin she saw as a child, the white birds she dreamed of after she suffered a stroke, memorizing the birdsongs of Salt Lake with her grandmother as a map of home, the spiral of birds: *Red Swirl*, an art instillation that reminded her of the uncertainty of life and the velocity of words. Birds brush up against her life in mysterious ways that cannot be known but they seem to point to the power of voice. They encourage her to use words to fly.

As explored in *Memoirs of a Polar Bear* and *Salvage the Bones*, women and animals have been lumped together as less-than in this hierarchical system that relies on binaries, but this association can be a place of power if used subversively. As Cixous explains,

Flying is woman's gesture—flying in language and making it fly. We have all learned the art of flying and its numerous techniques; for centuries we've been able to possess anything only by flying; we've lived flight, stealing away, finding, when desired, narrow passageways, hid crossovers. It's no accident that *voler* has a double meaning, that it plays on each of them and thus throws off the agents of sense. It's no accident women take after birds and robbers just as robbers take after women and birds.¹⁰⁵

Women and birds take flight and steal. These actions are deeply embodied and they subvert expectations. Cixous encourages women to steal back the power of language, and with it, to soar. We use our bodies and we know them in ways that men never could; this is our flight, this is how we use language—it is unknowable but it is liberating. *Voler*, the act of both stealing and flight, destabilizes the world; it upends. Perhaps, in the transgression of upending, we can topple the hierarchy of dominion as well. Women and

¹⁰⁵ Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 887.

birds can have double meaning in the same way that Cixous uses *voler* to mean both “to steal” and “to fly.” Williams heeds this advice, stealing words from another. She explains of a quote for which she gives no credit, “These are not my words. I plagiarize. I will not tell you who wrote them.”¹⁰⁶ Because *voler* is an act of the body, it must include the bodies of the non-human as well.

Animals, especially in literature, have come to be symbols of human expectations. But women know that we are not blank and neither are the birds. We are Medusa: the beautiful coming together of woman and animal. Williams reminds us of this coconstitution: we make our bodies out of the white pages and our bodies make us. It is time for the other to get to decide what gets written on these pages. We have the opportunity to write it in birdsong, that is, in a way that acknowledges that we are not human without our interactions with the non-human. Writing out of emptiness is a practice in Haraway’s otherworlding, imagining out of what has, under the dominion narrative, come to be seen as empty. Writing out of emptiness is the alliance of animals and women.

Williams is writing a Haraway-esque “becoming” because she focuses on the mundane, the subversive acts of daily life and not just the obviously profound. She finds this unusual connection with the other in her reading of Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*. Like the first bear in *Memoirs of a Polar Bear*, she doesn’t see Gregor Samsa’s strange predicament as particularly out of the ordinary. She explains that “what seemed strange on the page...seemed not only plausible to me, but desirable.”¹⁰⁷ Samsa finds himself to be contemptible in his beetle-ish form but Williams sees the value in metamorphosing

¹⁰⁶ Williams, *When Women Were Birds*, 97.

¹⁰⁷ Williams, *When Women Were Birds*, 56.

into an insect because she does not find the beetle to be abject. Transformation, and the relationship to the other is important to Williams because she exists on the periphery of Mormon life; her parents, as she explains were “never orthodox” in their relationship with religion.¹⁰⁸ Williams, in turn, is unorthodox in her relationship with animals.

Williams and her avian companions seem to be co-conspirators in creating the world that Williams writes from. In Haraway’s terms, “animals are everywhere full partners in worlding, in becoming with. Human and nonhuman animals are companion species, messmates at table, eating together, whether we know how to eat well or not.”¹⁰⁹ Coming from a hunting family, Williams eats birds and turns their feathers into art, a confusing but constitutive act.¹¹⁰ Williams asks of her title “Were we? Are we still?” What she means by calling this work *When Women Were Birds* is as unknowable as the birds, but Williams dares to imagine. Through this title, she writes into an in-between space of bodies to better understand the worlds of women and of birds.

Time in Spirals

Williams comes to terms with her own mortality in front of “a spiral of birds,” an installation by artist Julia Barello.¹¹¹ The birds become confused with the human as Williams takes a closer look and sees that the birds’ form are made of MRI and X-ray images. Williams sees this as a visual reminder of her own MRI from a recent doctor’s visit where she learns she has suffered a stroke and there is a tumor in her brain that threatens to burst at any moment. Human and bird, the temporal cycles of birth and death,

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 301.

¹¹⁰ Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 30.

¹¹¹ Williams, *When Women Were Birds*, 221.

and creation and violent destruction seem to swirl together into the shape of a spiral. She explains that her brain condition could kill her, render her incapable of speech, “Or I can simply go on living, appreciating my condition as a vulnerable human being in a vulnerable world, guided by the songs of birds. What is time, sacred time, but the acceleration of consciousness? There are so many ways to change the sentences we have been given.”¹¹² As Williams looks at the spiral of birds, she thinks about the velocity of consciousness in the passage of time, she thinks about transformation and the creation of new sentences from the old. These sentences are both the pronouncements of our being (rulings) and the grammatical amalgamations we use to make meaning. This project is a way for Williams to change the sentences she was given: the sentences of her mother’s blank journals, the sentence of her medical prognosis, the sentence of a woman raised in the Mormon Church who does not fit into the church’s expectations of a woman. The spiral of birds and the velocity that they suggest introduce a novel way to think about time.

A spiral is infinite possibility. It is limited to its path but in both directions and in each moment, it is infinite. Motherhood is spiral time. Williams emphasizes this with her poetic declaration:

I am my mother, but I’m not.
I am my grandmother, but I’m not.
I am my great-grandmother, but I’m not.¹¹³

Williams repeats this aphorism throughout the work. It appears for the first time in the context of her coming to terms with her own variation of being a woman born into the Mormon tradition. The second time, it references the possibility of voice that her

¹¹² Terry Tempest Williams, *When Women Were Birds*, 224.

¹¹³ Williams, *When Women Were Birds*, 51, 168.

mother's blank pages left for her. In the three sentences, she redefines herself in matrilineal time, and complicates what it means to be a mother. She defines herself both with her matrilineal family and antithetically against them. The words repeat but the meaning changes each time. The repetition of the lines and the circularity and generational shift in every line emphasize the connection that matrilineal family carries into spirals of life. Temporally, the generations are named sequentially backwards so that as the reader encounters each line, they move forward in time as the generations move backward; with this, Williams is challenging the linearity of time.

From the inter-species dance of words and bodies, there emerges a rewriting of creation: a protest against linearity. Williams ends her meditations on voice in the 54th chapter, LIV(E), at the Spiral Jetty, an earthworks sculpture constructed in 1970 on the Great Salt Lake by artist Robert Smithson. The Spiral Jetty prompts a rumination on time. Williams writes:

The world is already split open, and it is in our destiny to heal it, each in our own way, each in our own time, with the gifts that are ours. We stand in the center of the spiral and turn in the vast quiet that presses in on us. It is disorienting. The men leave. The women stay, and together we lie down in the salt desert, facing each other, our ears on the Earth listening. I hear my mother's voice.¹¹⁴

On the Spiral Jetty, Williams lies on the salty basalt rocks, ear to the earth and hears the complex call of her mother's voice in the "vast quiet." Williams knows the urgency of a world "split open," its categories blurred. Her world is one where nuclear fallout changes human DNA, where women once were birds, and where journals are full of blank pages, and mothers are never what they are expected to be. Finding healing for a changed world is also a task of healing oneself and finding a way not necessarily forward, but rather in

¹¹⁴ Williams, *When Women Were Birds*, 228.

the spiral of the moment from the realization that the world is fundamentally changed. In this realization, Williams celebrates her unconventional voice, her unconventional motherhood. Grieving is a process in time but it is certainly not a linear process.

Feminine time is cyclical but it is never the same: cycles of menstruation, gestation, birth and death, generations of women. The temporal flow of our bodies is punctuated in cycles but these cycles are different each time. Time is paradoxically both repeating and changing. If we listen, we can hear our mother's voice in the silence; it was never silent to begin with.¹¹⁵ And from those moments, we feel our bodies, feel our desires, and our anger at the injustice, and we write them in birdsong, in joy.



Figures 1-3: Aerial view of Spiral Jetty¹¹⁶

From basalt boulders and soils from the lake's shore, Robert Smithson and his team built into the lake, asking the salts and the algae to complete the project in the forms of crystals and colors. The jetty then, is not only a human creation, but also a collaboration, a becoming with between human actors and living things in the water (algae and bacteria) as well as the nonliving salts of the Great Salt Lake. Salt, Smithson knew, would form its crystals into a salty crust around the basalt structure. He knew too that the high salinity of

¹¹⁵ Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 885.

¹¹⁶ Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, 1970. © Holt-Smithson Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York. © Aero-graphics, Salt Lake City. Photos via <https://www.diaart.org/collection/spiraljettyaerials>.

this particular part of the lake made way for life: brine shrimp, algae, and microorganisms like Halophiles, which are responsible for the intermittently pale red coloring around the Jetty.¹¹⁷ Smithson's Jetty is a playful cooperation between human and non-human.

For Spiral Jetty, time is located at the edge of a body of water: at the liminal space where it is and is not Great Salt Lake and is and is not shore as the water rises and falls with the ever shifting cycles of rain and drought. The sculpture has been completely submerged for decades at a time and then reemerges, born anew when the water level drops. This structure is inherently temporal because it is an earthworks construction and it is subject to changes in its environment. It changes over time, decays, and becomes anew in a way that fine art cannot. Time for earthworks is a cyclical state of flux. It is ever repeating and ever changing, chasing itself but never ending up where it was before. Time must be a significant part of the response to a confused world but it cannot be the linear time of the phallogocentric hierarchy. Time cannot be linear and rational in a motherly understanding of the world, it must be cyclical and ever changing: a spiral. Depending on where you begin, Spiral Jetty spirals out of the blankness of the Great Salt Lake, or it begins at the shore as a line that falls into the spiral, moving in toward the infinite point of the saline lake. When one walks along the jetty, toward the center, they move counter clockwise, subverting the expectation that time moves in one direction. Going forward is going backward in time as the spiral is twisting counter clockwise. Going back toward the land is going forward in time, unwinding clockwise. Walking the jetty is a bodily act of stealing time.

¹¹⁷ "Spiral Jetty, Geoaesthetics, and Art: Writing the Anthropocene - Susan Ballard, Liz Linden, 2019."

Why the spiral? The spiral starts from a point but in Smithson's jetty, the spiral starts in the perceived emptiness of the desert. It says *I AM NOT EMPTY!* It writes out of emptiness. Spiral time is constant creation.

As Williams comes to terms with her life as a downwinder, she has grieved her losses and must make sense of the world and bodies that have already been fundamentally changed. We can lie on the ground and weep. We can recognize that the salt water leaving our bodies echoes the salt water of the lake below.

This is becoming in spiral time, just as the Medusa's hair is snakes, slithering into spirals, just as the spiral jetty snakes across the liminal space between the Great Salt Lake and the desert. Donna Haraway ends her "Cyborg Manifesto" with the declaration "Though both are bound in the spiral dance, I'd rather be a cyborg than a goddess."¹¹⁸ The Medusa is closely related to the cyborg; she moves beyond goddess and pushes boundaries. She confuses the categories of natural and unnatural. She subverts the male gaze and takes control of her strange and beautiful body where she encounters other species. We are strange creatures who become entangled with other species, other things around us. We must make room for the non-human in our ontologies if we are to write out of empty pages.

There is something lost as the various systems that form a climate on this planet act back upon human actions. We can feel it in our bodies. In our time, we are made of plastic and carbon and our DNA is rewritten by the radioactive atoms and the blank pages of the women before us. We are created in our interactions with other beings. We are a multiplicity of all of these things we are made of, but we have also lost something.

¹¹⁸ Haraway, *Manifestly Haraway*, 68.

Within this loss is a great sadness. Williams reminds us to grieve this sadness but also to be joyful. This is what Cixous is talking about when she says that Medusa is laughing, how she uses *voler* as a *double entendre*. It is what Haraway means by “play of companion species.”¹¹⁹ Williams answers Cixous’ call for women to write their bodies. Williams is undoubtedly writing in the tradition of *L’écriture féminine*; she even refers to Cixous as her “mentor in words,” and Cixous is referenced in the acknowledgements for “Language.”¹²⁰ To Cixous’ call for bodily writing, Williams answers with voice, a collaboration between language and body. If this writing is in white ink and blood then feminine writing is stealing and reading is reading what is not there.¹²¹ We can make peace with the blank pages of the women who came before us through writing out of the blankness. Through writing, we can reclaim our bodies. We can write from our own bodies but we can also enter into the realm of otherworlding to write from the bodies of the non-human. Williams acknowledges the vitality of a material body through writing. Out of the white pages spring the bodies of women and birds in a dance of interconnectedness.

¹¹⁹ Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 19.

¹²⁰ Williams, *When Women Were Birds*, 166.

¹²¹ Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 881.

Conclusion: Constant Creation in the Anthropocene

Beneath the shade of a pear tree grafted with an apple branch, I found myself reimagining and blaspheming the relationships between women and serpents and fruit trees. This project began with an origin story. It will conclude in the spiraling infinities of this moment. To topple hierarchy, we can rethink our origins, but we can also think of every moment as an origin, a possibility for birth of voice, language, and bodies. We are constantly creating each other and ourselves through our interactions and the words we write. The form of the spiral presented in *When Women Were Birds* is a mode of constant becoming; it suggests the shaping of an ontological movement that is more flexible. It is constant creation that incites the velocity of spiral time. We give birth to words and ideas. They come from our bodies and these ideas and bodies touch the worlds of our fellow beings and help us to imagine other worlds, and less hierarchical ways of being. Women, Cixous recognizes, “will go right up to what is impossible;” they push the boundaries of what is accepted.¹²² The three texts in this project push past what is accepted by the narrative of man’s dominion over nature. We have looked at women who have sexual experiences with bears, a pregnant teenager who watches dog fights and calls a natural disaster mother; we have dared to imagine a time when women were birds, and we have written out of the blank pages of the legacy of women’s voices under dominion. These

¹²² Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 885.

ideas are subversive; they are unruly and unexpected. From these confounding relationships that Haraway refers to as making a “mess out of categories in the making of kin and kind,” we will come to an end in this uncertain and tumultuous time that is now known as the Anthropocene.^{123,124}

In May of 2020, a group from the International Commission on Stratigraphy agreed that the current geologic epoch we live in can be deemed the Anthropocene.¹²⁵ “Anthro-” because geologists now believe that the disperse effects of human presence will define this period’s fossil record, measured by the parts per million of carbon in the atmosphere, the fallout of nuclear bombs, and the overabundance of microscopic pieces of plastic in everything from rivers and oceans, to our bodies and the bodies of our fellow species. Climate change, the nuclear age, plastics, and mass extinction: these are the strange times in which we live.

Humans are beginning to see that we are not in charge; there are systems and agents that we cannot fully control or predict. Climate change challenges hierarchical ontologies because it suggests changes to the non-human world that we are not prepared for: rising ocean levels, increased storms, flooding and fire events, and so on. The world is acting back on us; we cannot think in terms of dominion because it has become abundantly clear that man is not in charge. In the Anthropocene, what becomes evident is that the categories we once used to define the world in binaries are no longer so black and white. We are all interspecies beings, Medusas, and mutants. Our edges are a complex web. Our time is one of a multiplicity of beings and becomings. The Anthropocene is a

¹²³ Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 19.

¹²⁴ Subramanian, “Anthropocene Now.”

¹²⁵ As I write this year, I am reminded that the Gregorian calendar counts forward from the year of the Christ’s birth. Christianity is everywhere; do you see it now?

time of strange interspecies ties. If we create the environment in the Anthropocene, then the environment also creates us because there can be no firm symbolic or material line drawn between nature and culture. In language and bodies, the Anthropocene is a time of blurred binaries.

Like Medea and Katrina in *Salvage the Bones*, the Anthropocene is brutal and violent in its dance of categories. Kathryn Yusoff explains that she “write(s) not toward White Geology but toward the “non-event” of a billion black Anthropocenes.”¹²⁶ If we began with origins, we must understand that the origin is not a single event but a continual violence on bodies and in particular the bodies of people of color, women, animals, and other groups who do not sit at the top of the hierarchy. The time we live in cannot be marked in its inception by just one golden spike. Instead, we must think of becoming in the Anthropocene as a time marked by billions of violent, embodied beginnings.

In the multiplicity of origins, we begin to see that our history has not been linear. There was not Genesis as the introduction of dominion but rather the words of the stories like Genesis, Medea, and Medusa have swirled for thousands of years creating a profusion of dominion narratives. There are a billion beginnings, a billion endings, all extending, curling in and out forever in a spiral. We revise the single spike to see the spirals of becoming. Robert Smithson knowingly constructed the Spiral Jetty in a remote location with the nearest landmark being The Golden Spike National Historical Site, the place where east met west on the Transcontinental Railroad. By reason of their shared isolation and proximity, the sites have become linked. The Spiral Jetty’s

¹²⁶ Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, 22.

counterclockwise subversive spiral is foiled in form by the railroad that the golden spike ceremonially completed, a straight line across the land that, in the collective American imagination, represented the progress achieved in closing the frontier of the American West. Progress manifested in the material of a golden railroad spike. The phallic symbolism of the golden spike is challenged by the yonic spiral. Golden spikes represent the changes in geologic epochs, and Kathryn Yussof argues that because of its violent origins, a billion golden spikes must be used to mark the Anthropocene. Perhaps the Golden Spike that marked the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad and the violence of the American frontier can be considered one of these violent origins. The Spiral Jetty, then, can be a response to this golden spike, revising the transcontinental railroad's demand for progress. This drive to constantly move forward in a linear fashion is precisely the dominion thinking that landed us in this predicament, exemplified by the damage that this attitude has brought about in our complex and fundamentally changed world. Spiral time acknowledges the cyclical pattern that is constantly changing – not repeating – with each cycle. Thinking in cycles challenges the logic of linear progress, suggesting another way of becoming. There is a desire to create in this strange time where boundaries become confused and nothing is as it seems.

The Spiral Jetty is a manifestation of this desire to create in the confusion of the Anthropocene. Art critics Susan Ballard and Liz Linden posit, “If *Spiral Jetty* is a suitable marker of the Anthropocene, it is a marker formed through organic relationships of sedimentation and disruption, no longer just an artwork, but an entropic ecosystem.”¹²⁷ An ecosystem that human creation is a part of, rising and falling water levels, an ever

¹²⁷ “Spiral Jetty, Geoaesthetics, and Art: Writing the Anthropocene - Susan Ballard, Liz Linden, 2019,” 9, 2020.

changing present, and uncertain futures are all specific to Spiral Jetty but also to this time, this Anthropocene. If the Spiral Jetty, a material-semiotic interspecies voice on the landscape, is a creation of the Anthropocene, then the three literary texts are likewise creating out of the trauma of the changed world.

In *Salvage the Bones*, Esch picks through the sludge and refuse left after the storm. From it, she finds objects that are not obviously useful or even particularly beautiful. She finds broken glass and stones, and out of the violence of the storm, she has the desire to create a mobile for her unborn child. It is in the wreckage after the storm that Esch identifies herself as a mother: a creator. In *Memoirs of a Polar Bear*, polar bears and humans together create out of lives estranged from their nature. Out of strange lives of mistreatment in circuses, writing, zoos, and strained relationships with mothers, the grandmother polar bear writes an autobiography, Tosca and Barbara create a beautiful and intimate circus through a shared interspecies language, and Knut becomes and performs climate activism through his polar bear identity. Each bear has the desire to create and perform. In *When Women Were Birds*, Terry Tempest Williams writes in a fundamentally changed world. Out of the loss of her mother and so many of the women in her family to what she understands to be the effects of living downwind of nuclear testing, and from the confusing message her mother passes to her in her blank journals, Terry Tempest Williams wrote a book about voice and the joy of living in a strange and unexpected world. Creation out of trauma subverts the linearity of progress.

In this time that has come to be known as the Anthropocene, this type of writing is becoming necessary more than ever as a way of creating in a fundamentally changed and actively changing world. Creating in the wreckage of a damaged world challenges

the very binaries and narratives that led to this destruction in the first place because climate change and ecological damage are tied to environmental injustices through racism and sexism.

This project has laid out one way that the Anthropocene can be addressed and rethought through the feminist project of writing the body. This is certainly not the only way to go about rethinking this hierarchical system introduced by the narrative of dominion. We are pregnant with possibility and so is the vibrant world around us. Let us raise these words and worlds from our bodies and with our laughter. Feminine writing is a practice of constant creation. We can create with other species, claim our bodies, and create understandings of other species through this exercise. Motherhood is not pure and always good; it can be violent but through this violence comes creation, constant and ever-evolving creation. Out of the violence of our time, and in claiming our own violence, we can find the drive and the capacity to create something beautiful.

We can imagine and write our way out of blankness and into our bodies and reciprocally and cyclically out of our bodies and into blankness in order to reclaim them. We can imagine into the worlds we share with others to increase our own ability to give without expecting anything in return—that is, to give the way a mother gives. There is beauty to be made from the bones of the Anthropocene. Terry Tempest Williams writes:

Once upon a time, when women were birds, there was the simple understanding that to sing at dawn and to sing at dusk was to heal the world through joy. The birds still remember what we have forgotten, that the world is meant to be celebrated.¹²⁸

¹²⁸ Williams, *When Women Were Birds*, 225.

Our kinship with birds reminds us that in finding one's voice, there is a certain creative force that provides the possibility of creating beauty in a damaged world. They can sing; we can write from our bodies.

We must learn how to recognize the species we are becoming with because the Anthropocene is a time of mass extinction. We must learn to see where our companions interact with and create us. This sort of knowledge not only gives us greater insight into how interconnected we are with the non-human world but also trains us not to think so hierarchically and to in turn, begin acting accordingly. There are a multitude of possibilities for how we can rethink our world. Once we decide to topple the ladder and think history anew, we can create any number of interpretations. There are so many ways to understand the present.

Creation was in each moment, we came to understand. I had come from my mother and when she still held my mother within her body, I was also there. A woman's eggs form when still in the womb of her mother. In this case, I existed within my grandmother.¹²⁹ And in turn, she exists within me: mitochondrial DNA is passed down through matrilineal bloodlines for most animals: humans and snakes alike. My mitochondrial DNA is my mother's and her mother's and her mother's and so on. Unlike most DNA, itochondrial DNA is not a double helix but a circle, an ouroboro: that snake which swallows its own tail in an infinite circle. We are constantly in cycle but we are not the same as what was before us. Genes are semiotics made material. Through writing, I create and I am created in every moment.

¹²⁹ Not all human women necessarily carry eggs in their bodies.

My grandmother taught me to spring from the neck of the decapitated snake. She taught me that creation was not a single event from which everything occurred in linear succession. She taught me that creation is constant. In reading Cixous next to Haraway, I realize this bodily writing must come with the understanding that your body is one that you share with billions of other species. I think of the bright red stripes of a kingsnake, coiled in a box beneath a mutant fruit tree. I think of the spiral curls springing from my head. Writing, I have learned, is an act of the body and the mind. I need to write my body. This is my power. With my power, I need not place myself above the other but rather, I need to crouch down next to it, greet it, and write from its body too. This is the undoing of dominion. This is creation in spiral time.

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