

## **Hop, Skip or Leap? Issues of Accessibility in the Literature of Rachel Carson, Janisse Ray, and Terry Tempest Williams**

*Helen Bralesford*

---

The last half of the twentieth century was a period when American women finally became able to use their voice to instigate political change. In the field of environmentalism there are notable examples of women successfully doing just that. From Rachel Carson whose seminal text *Silent Spring* (1962) warned a generation of the wider implications of indiscriminate pesticide use, to contemporary regional writers like Southern activist Janisse Ray and Utahan Terry Tempest Williams, the strategies that they have employed in their writing in order to instigate political change are often risky, bold, and innovative. But they are also democratic, seeking always to move the broader public to activism on behalf of the environment.

---

**T**his essay explores the strategies of these three writers concentrating on close reading of the fables each employed in different political environments in order to inform or change public opinion and so assert political pressure. From Rachel Carson's use of "A Fable for Tomorrow" which led to criticism of her work as non-scientific, but helped make accessible to the lay public the complex issues surrounding the ecological destruction caused by the misuse of pesticides, to Terry Tempest Williams' rewriting of Greek legend orated to a public hearing in Utah and Janisse Ray's entreaty to a Southern population to respect its environment as it respects other Southern traditions, these little narratives have sought to create a big impact.

Despite utilising a familiar and ancient literary form, each of these writers experiments artistically with the fable, tailoring it to the issues they seek to address and the audience they need to reach. This paper scrutinises

their techniques, questioning the efficacy of them as a strategy for instigating political change and questioning what they really achieved on behalf of the environment during the second half of the twentieth century.

The last half of the twentieth century was a period when American women finally became able to use their voice to instigate political change. In the field of environmentalism there are notable examples of women successfully doing just that. From Carson whose seminal 1962 text *Silent Spring* warned a generation of the wider implications of indiscriminate pesticide use, to contemporary regional writers like Southern activist Ray and Utahan Williams, the strategies that they have employed in their writing in order to instigate political change are often risky, bold and innovative. But they are also democratic, seeking always to move the broader public to activism on behalf of the environment.

This essay explores the strategies of these three writers concentrating on close reading of the fables each employed in different political environments in order to inform or change public opinion and so assert political pressure. From Carson's use of "A Fable for Tomorrow" which led to criticism of her work as non-scientific, but helped make accessible to the lay public the complex issues surrounding the ecological destruction caused by pesticide misuse, to Williams' rewriting of Greek legend orated before a public hearing in Utah and Ray's entreaty to a Southern population to respect its environment as it respects other Southern traditions, these little narratives have sought to create a big impact.

Although this essay discusses ecofeminism in relation particularly to Williams' work, it does not set out to argue that use of the "little story" or fable is an environmental strategy employed exclusively by female authors. While I am aware that, as Lawrence Buell observes in *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), "American men have historically written somewhat differently about nature than have American women" (16), it would be too simplistic to assert that the employment of the short story as environmental strategy in the twentieth century is a gendered device. Moreover, although Williams' "Bloodlines" could be read as an example of *écriture féminine*<sup>1</sup> it would be more difficult to argue that either Carson or Ray write in a style that could be defined as such.<sup>2</sup> The relationship between female authors and

---

1. Terry Tempest Williams is clearly influenced by a number of French feminist ideas listing in the bibliography of *Leap* (2000), for example, work by Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Claudine Herrmann.

2. Rachel Carson, criticised frequently as she was for her gender, denied being a

these little narratives can, however, more convincingly be attributed to a combination of pragmatism and literary/environmental influences. There is certainly sufficient evidence to argue that both Ray and Williams' writing has been influenced by Carson's perceived success with *Silent Spring* and I would not hesitate to assert that both Carson's success and her gender were equally influential here.<sup>3</sup> They are pragmatic because, I argue, they were carefully chosen as strategies in particular political situations. Despite utilising a familiar and ancient literary form, each writer experiments artistically with the fable, tailoring it to the issues they seek to address and the audience they need to reach. The purpose of this paper is to scrutinise their techniques, questioning the efficacy of them as strategies for instigating political change and asking what they really achieved on behalf of the environment during the second half of the twentieth century.

These stories utilise a distinctly North American cultural and environmental heritage. Both Carson and Ray, despite employing a European narrative form, accentuate elements of American settlement mythology in their tales: Carson through her evocation of the bucolic,<sup>4</sup> and Ray through her employment of a natural colonisation as the basis for an allegory of how humans might live by adapting to new environments without demanding that their environment be adapted to them. Only Williams chooses overtly to incorporate Native American narrative techniques within her story employing Zuni fetishes and insisting—in common with many Native American stories—that her protagonist must join with the land in order to be healed. Ray's anthropomorphism of the long-leaf pine and lightning might, however, also be considered to fit into the Native American tradition of representing the inanimate as spiritual beings directly related to and inseparable from the human.

---

feminist. In *The Gentle Subversive* (2007), Mark Hamilton Lytle cites Carson as saying that: "She was interested not in 'things done by women or men, but in things done by people'" (177-78).

3. Both Janisse Ray and Williams have been compared with Carson and both have written about Carson's legacy. See for example, Matthiessen, ed.; Sideris and Moore, eds.
4. I would argue too that Carson's employment of the bucolic in "A Fable for Tomorrow" was a strategy calculated to tap into what Lawrence Buell identifies as a distinctly American, environmental imagination. In *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) Buell observes that "American literature to this day continues to be more rustically oriented than the living habits of most Americans, scarcely 3 percent of whom live on farms anymore" (14). Carson's target readership consisted of these urban and suburban dwellers. Hence her town in "A Fable for Tomorrow," is located within a rustic setting.

Carson wrote *Silent Spring* with a lay audience in mind, whilst always recognising that criticism would emanate from the commercial and scientific communities. *Silent Spring* therefore walks a tightrope between literary accessibility and scientific integrity. However, from the opening pages it is clear which audience Carson privileged. The first chapter, entitled “A Fable for Tomorrow” begins in the classic fairy-tale manner—“There was once a town in the heart of America ...”—a strategy designed to resonate with every reader who ever heard a bedtime story. Not only is the structure of this narrative a familiar one, but the language employed centres and humanises the issues it introduces. By locating the narrative in the “heart” of America, Carson ensures that pesticide abuse is represented as a national issue, central and important to the corpus of the nation but also intrinsically bound to the personal.<sup>5</sup>

The eponymous title of Carson’s first chapter does exactly what would be expected of a fable which is defined as: “A short narrative in prose or verse which points a moral. Non-human creatures or inanimate things are normally the characters.”<sup>6</sup> It is a short piece of prose—taking up three pages in the first edition—and it is the inanimate “town” that features, its character being that of a bucolic middle America that returns the reader in imagination to settlement days he/she will only have read about.<sup>7</sup> Continuing in the fairy-tale tradition, Carson’s fable includes such quintessential ingredients as “magic, charms, disguise and spells” (Cuddon 300) terminating with the moral: “No witchcraft, no enemy action had silenced the rebirth of new life in this stricken world. The people had done it themselves” (Carson 3). In a coda Carson drops the pretence of story-telling: “This town does not actually exist ...” which the reader immersed in convention well understands, “but it might easily have a thousand

---

5. Christine Oravec’s examination of “A Fable for Tomorrow” shows that Carson originally gave the town a name—Green Meadows—but that this was changed in subsequent drafts generalizing the place into “a town in the heart of America” and thereby mythologizing it. Oravec asserts that this was a deliberate strategy of Carson’s observing that in *The New Yorker* version of the fable which was published prior to the book, the name Green Meadows was used (“An Inventional Archaeology Of ‘A Fable for Tomorrow’” 42-59).

6. For a fuller definition and etymology of the term fable see Cuddon, 300-1.

7. Jimmie M. Killingsworth and Jacqueline S. Palmer argue that this bucolic or pastoral element in “A Fable for Tomorrow” was one of the reasons *Silent Spring* (1962) could so easily be attacked by those who failed or refused to read the whole book. They assert that Carson’s embrace of ecology is not sentimental, romantic or nostalgic, but that the fable permitted parodists and critics to dismiss her as such (174-204).

counterparts in America or elsewhere in the world” (3). Carson then sets out with clarity the purpose of *Silent Spring* which she calls “an attempt to explain” (1-3). In essence, Carson’s fable is a hook, designed to draw the reader gently into a text that might otherwise prove inaccessible or alarmingly technical.

Employing this literary strategy to open the book was a calculated risk. On the basis of these three opening pages alone, *Silent Spring* was attacked as unscientific and alarmist, an argument that privileged science over art in an era of the Cold War when, as Linda Lear observes, “[s]cience and technology and those who worked in those fields were revered as the saviours of the free world and the trustees of prosperity” (259). Christine Oravec claims that the fable is the most memorable part of the book, calling it “a rhetorical bombshell that landed in just the right place at just the right time” (43). However, she disputes through her examination of Carson’s drafts and papers—she calls the process “inventional archaeology”—that Carson constructed her first chapter from a fabula template, suggesting instead that it became a “composite” grounded in fact and made accessible through fable (46). Whatever Carson’s authorial processes, the risk she took proved worthwhile; she felt she had no choice but to write for a broad audience, believing that only the general public maintained the integrity and had the political clout to expedite change.<sup>8</sup>

Recent literary theory has often stressed that meanings are made at the point of reception, that is, that the reader creates and recreates meanings from the literary text dependent on his/her individual subjectivity and the discourse within which they are immersed. Much as Carson attempted to write for her target readership, the critical response to some extent bears out this theory. Many readings were wilfully selective, concentrating their criticism upon and parodying the narrative strategy of Carson’s fable without recourse to the scientific and legal evidence that underpinned the story. However, there was a schism in Cold War rhetoric that Carson was

---

8. Carson was aware of concerns amongst scientists about the effects of DDT on fish and mammals that had been raised as early as 1944. In her work for the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) she was asked to edit reports from her former supervisor, Elmer Higgins, and wildlife biologist, Clarence Cottam, on the detrimental effects of the widespread use of DDT. These reports were, however, unlikely to influence the U.S. government (the predator and pest control scientists at the FWS itself were amongst the indiscriminate users of chemical pesticides) or a post-war chemical industry eager to capitalise on the stockpiles of DDT remaining after the war (Lear 118-19 & 312-21).

able to use to her advantage to undermine the dominance of scientific discourse, one that gave credence to her employment of fable to promulgate her cause. In some areas the public was beginning to lose faith in science and government to provide solutions to all society's problems. This growing mistrust was largely linked to concerns about the effects of nuclear fallout. In her biography of Carson, Linda Lear cites evidence that a "full-blown fallout scare gripped the nation" by the end of 1959 (374). Coupled with the thalidomide tragedy that became headline news in the U.S. in 1962 (it is perhaps anachronistic to argue that this affected Carson's writing as *Silent Spring* was published in 1962, but it can be argued that it affected the book's reception) these issues made the public aware of the fallibility of scientists thus making Carson's decision to employ narrative rather than scientific rhetoric both wise and fortuitous.<sup>9</sup>

However, it was not only that Carson risked employing fable as a narrative form that led towards *Silent Spring's* eventual recognition as a seminal environmental text. Some credit must also go to how she constructed the fable. Carole B. Gartner identifies the use of alliteration and the interplay of phrases or paragraphs as two distinctly literary devices that Carson employed, but her narrative strategies are equally significant (Waddell, ed. 118). For example, Oravec unearths a change between drafts from the use of a first-person narrator to the heterodiegetic narrator that "tells" the fable in the version that was finally published. Only during the last paragraph does the first person—recognisable as Carson herself—reassert herself to interpret the moral of the fable and to explain its purpose. This Oravec identifies as one strand of the evolution of fact into fable that created a "contemporary myth" (50-51).

It can be argued that Carson's success with "A Fable for Tomorrow" helped to create a practice of employing fable for succeeding generations of female environmentalists. However, they did not always employ similar literary techniques and their intended readership was often quite different from the one for whom Carson wrote. Southern author and activist Ray, who has been directly compared with Carson, has also clearly been influenced by her work. Yet, despite the laudatory comparison, Ray's personal, biographical style could not be more dissimilar from the intensely

---

9. Linda Lear also argues that the thalidomide tragedy combined with the publication of Murray Bookchin's *Our Synthetic Environment* (1962)—both of which hit the headlines in July 1962—were fortuitous for Carson's cause. The first instalment of *Silent Spring* was published in *The New Yorker* of 16 June 1962 (Lear 409-12).

private Carson's.<sup>10</sup> However, she does employ fable as a method to give nature a voice.<sup>11</sup>

“Built by Fire” comprises the fifth chapter of Ray’s first book *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* published in 1999. It explores the natural history of the Georgian longleaf pine that Ray is intent on preserving, but it is sandwiched between chapters that narrate the human stories of Georgia—stories of settlement, family history, religion and class. Like her predecessor, Carson, Ray has a specific problem to overcome. Whereas Carson needed to politicise a Cold War public relatively unused to questioning scientific and governmental authority, Ray’s difficulty lies in achieving empathy for an environment which is already degraded and linked with defeat. Her mission is to save the remaining acreage of Georgian long-leaf pine by drawing attention to it as a unique eco-system that cannot be replaced by commercial pine plantations. However, in *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*, Ray’s own description of her homeland elucidates the problem:

My homeland is about as ugly as a place gets. There’s nothing in south Georgia, people will tell you, except straight, lonely roads, one-horse towns, sprawling farms, and tracts of planted pines. It’s flat, monotonous, used-up, hotter than hell in summer and cold enough in winter that orange trees won’t grow. No mountains, no canyons, no rocky streams, no waterfalls. The coastal plain lacks the stark grace of the desert or the umber panache of the pampas. Unless you look close, there’s little majesty. (13)

But, Ray continues: “It wasn’t always this way” (13). Her fable “Built by Fire” is one of the strategies she employs to elicit a positive response to this unpromising landscape.

Like Carson’s fable, Ray’s “Built by Fire” is brief—just over three pages. In common with the fabula form, the protagonists are non-human: the longleaf pine and lightning. Elements of fairy-tale in the narrative include the adventures of the pine, the supernatural (both the pine and lightning are endowed with subjectivity and the ability to speak) and a happily-ever-after ending. There is also a moral, although less overtly stated than Carson’s.

---

10. *The New York Times* review of Ray’s *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* (1999) cited on the book’s front cover, heralds her with the epithet: “The forests of the Southeast find their Rachel Carson” (Ray n.p.).

11. Ray does not dispute my definition of the chapter “Built by Fire” as a fable, but says that she “never thought of it as such. I always thought of it as a creation story” (Ray, “Re: From Janisse Ray”).

Ray's fable narrates how a pine seed "grew covetous" of land reigned over by lightning, settled there and began to grow, but had to battle constantly with lightning, who resented its intrusion, to survive until it adapted to cope with the inevitable fires that resulted from lightning strikes and even began to use them to its own reproductive advantage. Eventually a mutual ecology evolves between the two antagonists, one from which other forms of life also benefit (35-38). Ray's fable can be read as an entreaty to humans to recognise their inter-dependence on nature, their place in ecology and their dependence upon natural resources around them for survival and reproduction. The moral points the values of tolerance for, and willingness to share the land. In this chapter, Ray suggests tentatively that the relationship between the longleaf pine and lightning, which began in hostility, can be emulated by the environment's human inhabitants who should also learn how to "expect fire and to adapt" to their natural surroundings rather than acting as lightning does initially by being "possessive" and waging war on the pine (38).

Ray's use of fable humanises the landscape, anthropomorphising the longleaf pine by endowing it with a noble subjectivity. It is represented as adaptable, determined, courageous and persistent, a pioneer, like Ray's own "cracker" forebears.<sup>12</sup> However, it also shares some of their less enviable traits, being covetous, imperious, argumentative and mortal. Ray calls this a book written for Southerners: "The audience I was hoping to reach is what I continue to call 'my people.' I meant Southerners, the majority of whom loved the land (had a 'sense of place' even if they had never heard the term) but didn't have an environmental ethic to match that love" ("Re: From Janisse Ray"). The anthropomorphism of the long leaf pine operates to make both the positive and the negative character traits recognisable to Ray's target audience, without overtly criticising its members. In this respect, Ray's fable operates just as Bruno Bettelheim suggests that fairytale should by helping to "develop the desire for a higher consciousness through what is implied in the story" (34).

In a later chapter Ray calls the ecology that evolved from the marriage of the longleaf pine and lightning "a clan of animals ... bound to the

---

12. "Cracker" is derived from the old English "Crake" to boast. According to Jim Goad it is synonymous with bomb or firecracker, descriptive of a person with explosive anger or who made a lot of noise (15). Marjory Stoneman Douglas also employs the term "cracker" in reference to the nineteenth-century Floridian cowboys who "spoke the slurring early English of the Old South" (273). This suggests another explanation for the origins of the term as someone who cracks a whip as a cowboy might.

community of longleaf pine” (141). The term clan is also used by Ray to describe her forebears, Scottish immigrants of “the Clan McRae” and she evokes a sense of community amongst them from the start: “I was born from people who were born from people who were born from people who were born here” (4). Yet, Ray’s positioning of “Built by Fire,” the formal structure of the whole book, and its paratextual apparatus, undermine her attempts to use anthropomorphism to create an ecology wherein people and environment form a holistic community.

*Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* contains thirty short chapters which alternate between the human stories and the ecological. Whilst the two intertwine in ways that demonstrate how each affects the other, the themes are formally differentiated throughout the book by this literary structure and by the addition of its paratextual apparatus. Each eco-chapter is headed with an illustration of a pine cone, which operates as a logo. Furthermore, the contents page also flags up the divided structure by italicising eco-chapters such as “Built by Fire,” whilst leaving the biographical stories in plain text. At best this structure can suggest only contiguity between the human and the natural even where each is perceived of as a clan: they touch but remain separate.

Just as Carson took risks through the adoption of a literary form to popularise science, Ray takes chances through the formal strategies adopted in *Ecology*. The links between chapters are evident only with close reading. Through these formal divisions Ray invites a section of her readership to ignore the environmental issues altogether by offering a choice between the two thematic strands of the book.<sup>13</sup> This, arguably, encourages an element of Ray’s readership to skip the issues that Carson took such trouble to make accessible using a familiar literary hop—the fable. In defence of her strategy Ray argues: “I guess my mission was the same as Carson’s—to make the necessary information more real, more digestible,” and whilst the fable taken in isolation might be deemed a modest success, the structure that surrounds it undermines its achievements (“Re: From Janisse Ray”). Where Carson combined the science we now call ecology with the literary, Ray in her own words makes memoir “parallel” with ecology (“Re: From Janisse Ray”). These literary strategies expose both writers to the substantial risk that the readership they seek on behalf of their espoused cause may take the opportunity to skip the very reason for writing.

---

13. This supposition was borne out experientially. When Ray’s book was set as a text for a Master’s degree course on Southern literature, only one of the students in the group bothered to read all the environmental chapters.

Carson chose the general public as her target readership because she knew that scientists and politicians could not be trusted with self-regulation; thus, she adjusted her literary technique to her audience. More recently, Ray wrote for an audience that she determined needed to hear her environmental message. But what if the audience is of a specific, powerful and very impatient sort? How, for example, might a woman writer employ literature to speak to traditionally male politicians and legislators on behalf of the environment effectively enough to stop a potentially damaging bill passing through Congress? Williams also took a chance on narrative.

Williams' short story "Bloodlines" is reproduced in *Red: Passion and Patience in the Desert* (2001), but it was written for inclusion in a chapbook that was placed on the desk of every representative and senator in Congress in an attempt to change, in favour of greater wilderness designation, the proposals of the "Utah Public Lands Management Act" which went before Congress during the summer of 1995. The chapbook was later published, with some added material, as *Testimony: Writers of the West Speak on Behalf of Utah Wilderness* (1996). Williams also presented her short story as a verbal statement on behalf of the environment during a public hearing in Southern Utah to Congressman Jim Hansen. Like Carson's "Fable for Tomorrow" and Ray's "Built by Fire," "Bloodlines" is brief—less than two and a half small pages, but there, similarities between Williams' narrative and the other two writers' fables appear to end.

"Bloodlines" is a narrative in the third person that tells of a woman tailor who is raped and violated whilst hiking in the San Rafael Swell. The violation leaves her without a voice. To heal herself she must stitch herself back into the landscape she loves and reconnect with it by creating "bloodlines" back to the land. Using red thread and scissors, she recalls Zuni fetishes she has held and creates her own: the mountain lion to provide her with power, the raven for healing, the black bear for strength, healing and courage, and frogs for fertility.<sup>14</sup> In *Testimony* there is a coda to the story that is absent from the version in *Red*. This could be read as the moral.

Whereas Ray's fable echoes Promethean mythology, Williams' story is essentially a retelling of Ovid's "Tereus." In Ovid's tale, Tereus, King of Thrace, is inauspiciously married to Procne. Entrusted with the care of Procne's beautiful sister, Philomela, Tereus breaks his oath to "protect her like a father" (233) and instead rapes her. When Philomela threatens to

---

14. For more information on Zuni fetishes which are hand-carved animal figures made from stone, bone, shell or antler, see Whittle, *Native American Fetishes*.

expose him, he cuts out her tongue and imprisons her to ensure her silence. Even after she is mutilated, Tereus cannot control his lust for Philomela and repeatedly rapes her. Philomela eventually discovers a way to communicate her plight to Procne, weaving “scarlet symbols” that tell her story into a white fabric which is sent to her sister. Procne joins forces with Philomela to take terrible revenge on Tereus. Together they kill his son, Itys, serving his cooked body to the unwitting king. After he has eaten his fill, the sisters reveal to Tereus what he has eaten. In the metamorphosis that follows, Philomela’s voice is returned as a scream before she is turned into a nightingale. In Williams’ retelling, the narrative becomes an ecofeminist diatribe directed at a male-dominated Congress that she perceives as having betrayed the trust of their predecessors, the founding fathers of environmentalism who created the Wilderness Act 1964.<sup>15</sup>

Elements of fairytale and fable remain in Williams’ story. Although it could be argued that it owes as much to North American narrative strategy as to the European model, the inclusion of the supernatural (Zuni fetishes), the tailor’s misfortune, the loss of her voice and its return—which suggests a return of good fortune and health—combine with Williams’ coda—the moral—to present a narrative form with many similarities to both Carson’s and Ray’s fables. However, as the first two paragraphs of the story reproduced below exemplify, the tone is very different and Williams refuses to make the moral explicit:

There is a woman who is a tailor. She lives in Green River, Utah, and makes her livelihood performing alterations, taking a few stitches here, letting out a few inches there, basting in hems and finishing them with a feather stitch.

While hiking in the San Rafael Swell, this woman was raped, thrown face first on the sand. She never saw the face of her assailant. What she knew was this, that in that act of violence she lost her voice. She was unable to cry for help. He left her violated and raw. (50-52)

Whilst fairytale and fable share their roots in an accessible oral tradition, making it understandable that Williams might choose to employ

---

15. In the editors’ introduction to *Testimony* (1996), Williams and Trimble explain their objection to the 1995 Utah Public Lands Management Act. They argue that it “undermined the integrity of the 1964 Wilderness Act” (3). As such, to pass the 1995 act would have been a betrayal of environmental principles commensurate with Tereus’ betrayal of his oath to Philomela’s father. See Trimble and Williams, *Testimony: Writers of the West Speak on Behalf of Utah Wilderness*.

strategies that are intrinsic to this form when called upon to give a verbal testimony, it is less understandable why Williams chose a story that is so difficult to interpret. Congressman Jim Hansen was forced to admit that he did not understand it with what became a legendary response: “I’m sorry Ms. Williams, there’s something about your voice I cannot hear” (Slovic, “There’s Something.”)

Hansen’s inability to comprehend the point that Williams makes through narrative is hardly unexpected. Carson’s “A Fable for Tomorrow” had met with similar resistance from the elements of her readership unused to being approached with a literary rather than a literal appeal.<sup>16</sup> Roland C. Clement of the National Audubon Society said of Carson’s fable: “It just ‘turned off’ many scientists. The chapter is an allegory. But an allegory is not a prediction, which is what the literal-minded readers, with no background in literature, confused it with” (Lear 34).

One of Carson’s critics, Frederick J. Stare, Ph.D and M.D., is cited as stating that *Silent Spring* “unfortunately only widens the gap between science and the public” (Lear 433). Whilst Carson undoubtedly expected such criticism, hence her meticulous research and the inclusion of notes on source materials, she had clearly chosen to privilege the general public’s reading over that of the many scientists whose vested interests she could not hope to overcome.<sup>17</sup> Carson also had the benefit of an established readership that she knew well, but why did Williams, in a forum where rationality is privileged and with full awareness that her audience of politicians was more receptive to rhetoric than eco-feminism,<sup>18</sup> choose to employ such an inaccessible narrative when so much depended upon being understood?

In an interview with Scott Slovic, Williams explains what she perceives as the power of narrative:

- 
16. For example, Lear recounts that Carson’s fable “was almost uniformly derided by reviewers unable to understand its basis in allegory and used it to further demean her credibility as a scientist” (430).
  17. Frank Graham Jr. states that *Silent Spring* contained fifty-five pages of notes on Carson’s source materials. The Penguin edition I cite here has one-hundred and forty-two (34).
  18. Karen J. Warren gives a succinct definition of ecofeminism, or ecological feminism, which she states is “the position that there are important connections between how one treats women, people of color, and the underclass on the one hand and how one treats the nonhuman natural environment on the other” (xi). This is a simplified definition for a problematic term.

Stories arise out of the moment and that's where the power lies. You can't know what story is appropriate for any given moment. I mean the stories are born out of an organic necessity, out of the heat, and that is the source of their potency. ("There's Something About Your Voice I Cannot Hear: Environmental Literature, Public Policy and Ecocriticism")

Slovic posits Williams' belief that "formal ideologies and mindless, inherited language start to break down when narrative language is introduced into policy discussions" noting that "laypeople, artists, and government officials, when asked what's really important to them, often turn to tales of experience and hope" ("There's Something About Your Voice I Cannot Hear: Environmental Literature, Public Policy and Ecocriticism"). Alison Lurie concurs on the power of narrative: "we need to have the truth exaggerated and made more dramatic, even fantastic in order to comprehend it," she argues (125). If Williams' tailor is read as an ecofeminist trope for the land and her rape as the abuse it has suffered at the hands of hu(man)kind, the idea that a tailor—someone used to making only minor repairs of "a few inches"—has to stitch herself back into the landscape "her red thread trailing behind her for miles," may be an exaggeration in comparison to the threat to wilderness posed by the proposed Act, but it makes the scale of damage comprehensible (Carson, "Bloodlines" 50-52). "Bloodlines," as testimony, is an attempt to unravel rhetoric through raising the consciousness of the politicians to whom it is directed without ever challenging them directly; like fairytale, it assumes that although each listener might take a different message from the story, the "exaggerated truth" it contains will be comprehended and acted upon.<sup>19</sup>

In *Retelling/Rereading: The Fate of Storytelling in Modern Times* (1992), Karl Kroeber also asserts the efficacy of stories which, he says, "move readily but unobtrusively over surprising obstacles, including vast spans of time and space, quietly adapting to foreign environments, and then changing those environments" (3). Kroeber argues that story is a paradox in that it is also indisputably one of the primary means through which a society defines itself. Williams' hope is that her story will make that leap over the obstacles of deafness and misunderstanding, but she can only trust that it will indeed operate as she hopes. Kroeber valorises narrative as "inherently antiauthoritarian" (4), a quality that Williams seeks to exploit without any guarantee that she can control its reception.

Carson's critics exemplified the problem of wilful misinterpretation

---

19. See also Bettelheim 34.

when they parodied her fable. “The Desolate Year” was published and distributed by the Monsanto Chemical Company in October 1962, in direct response to the publication of *Silent Spring*.<sup>20</sup> It hones in upon “A Fable for Tomorrow” as its only point of attack, ignoring the rest of Carson’s book in which she “explains” the factual basis on which the fable is founded. Monsanto’s fable is an imitative, exaggerated horror story, focussing upon the most pestilential forms of insect life: “A cattleman in the Southwest rubbed the back of a big red steer, and his hand found two large lumps under the hide ... gritting his teeth, he placed his thumbs at the sides of one of the lumps and pressed. The hair parted, a small hole opened and stretched. A fat, brown inch-long maggot slowly eased through the hole ...” (Carson, “The Desolate Year” 6). As if the implied horror of a steer being eaten from within was insufficient to persuade the public of the error of Carson’s ways, the parodist climaxes on the effect of a world without Monsanto products, employing not only Carson’s tone, but also her language. Where Carson uses the term “sickened and died” for cattle and sheep, the parodist extends the threat to humans: “Man, too, sickened, and he died.”<sup>21</sup>

As an engaged environmentalist, if not as an inductee into the Rachel Carson Honor Roll, Williams must have been aware of the historical pitfalls surrounding the use of fable in environmental campaigning; its openness to parody and criticism in an environment where logic and rhetoric are privileged.<sup>22</sup> And Williams was neither a stranger to the traditional language of testimony, nor to giving testimony before congressional subcommittees. In her 1994 work, *An Unspoken Hunger: Stories from the Field*, the testimony she made before the subcommittee on fisheries and wildlife conservation and the environment concerning the Pacific Yew Act of 1991, is reproduced. This can be scrutinised alongside her “statement before the Senate Subcommittee on Forest & Public Lands Management Regarding the

---

20. See Murphy 95-100.

21. Monsanto’s parody also wilfully misread Carson’s text. As early as page twelve of *Silent Spring* Carson took the trouble to state with absolute clarity her position regarding pesticides: “It is not my contention that chemical insecticides must never be used. I do contend that we have put poisonous and biologically potent chemicals indiscriminately into the hands of persons largely or wholly ignorant of their potentials for harm” (12), she wrote.

22. However, as an accomplished writer, she must surely also have been aware of the American tradition of re-writing the fairytale so that, unlike its European predecessor, it criticises a fixed social system instead of lauding those who succeed within it. This point is made concisely by Alison Lurie in *Boys and Girls Forever: Children’s Classics from Cinderella to Harry Potter* (2003).

Utah Public Lands Management Act of 1995, Washington, D.C., 13th July 1995” (63) in Terre Satterfield and Scott Slovic’s *What’s Nature Worth? Narrative Expressions of Environmental Values* (2004). This last example which shows Williams’ ability to employ traditional testimony, formed part of the same campaign for which “Bloodlines” was written and it was presented only two or three months before copies of the chapbook in which it appeared were distributed to members of Congress. A comparison between “Bloodlines” and Williams’ more traditional forms of testimony is enlightening.

For her statement on The Pacific Yew Act, Williams intertwines personal family history—“I am thirty-six years old. I am the matriarch of my family. Nine women in my family have had mastectomies. Seven are dead”—with the factual—“*Taxus brevifolia*, Pacific Yew. Fossil records of this evergreen tree have been found and placed within the Jurassic era. 140 billion years ago”—and the authoritative—citing the National Cancer Institute, the Psalms, professional woodsmen (126-28). Although this testimony makes concessions to the political audience, she does not exclude a narrative, retelling her grandmother’s received knowledge whereby yew trees “... were planted on the graves of our English ancestors. Their roots would wind their ways into the mouths of the dead and give them eternal voice” (Williams, *An Unspoken Hunger* 125-31).

Even so, Williams’ Pacific Yew Act statement is nowhere near as oblique or cryptic as “Bloodlines”; it could be argued to appeal to sentiment, (particularly Mormon sentiment through its references to ancestors), but it is grounded on logic. The connection between *Taxus brevifolia* and Williams’ family is made direct and pertinent because the Pacific Yew is the source of the cancer-fighting drug taxol. Wanton destruction of the yew in Bureau of Land Management (BLM) clearly diminishes Williams’ own treatment options for “when,” as her oncologist warns her, she develops cancer.

In her statement of 13 July 1995, Williams makes direct political references when she presents letters for entry into the Congressional Record: “These letters represent men and women, Republicans and Democrats alike, registered voters and voices too young to vote, but not too young to register their opinions” (Satterfield, ed. 77). She also employs a form of rhetoric that could be traced back to the Greek root of the word where a rhetor is the “speaker in the assembly”:<sup>23</sup>

---

23. J. A. Cuddon defines rhetoric as “the art of using language for persuasion, in speaking or writing; especially in oratory” (747).

It is not a wilderness bill that the majority of Utahns recognize, want, or desire.

It is not a wilderness bill that honors or respects our history as a people.

It is not a wilderness bill that honors or respects the natural laws required for a healthy environment.

And it is not a wilderness bill that takes an empathetic stance toward our future. (Satterfield, ed. 77)

The repetition of key phrases “it is not” and “honors or respects” is a rhetorical device to drive home the weaknesses that Williams finds inherent in the Utah Public Lands Management Act of 1995. The tone is one with which politicians are familiar and, presumably because they use it themselves, find persuasive. As in her testimony on behalf of the Pacific yew, Williams also invokes the authority of male leaders from Brigham Young, who led the Mormon saints to Utah, to Pulitzer Prize winner and scientist Edward O. Wilson from whose work she quotes.

The ecofeminist fable “Bloodlines” comes in contrast to the masculine language borrowed from Aristotelian politics.<sup>24</sup> Produced by Williams at a point in the campaign to stop the Utah Public Lands Management Act 1995 when she clearly feared all was lost, it demonstrates a distinct change of strategy.<sup>25</sup> Ecofeminism is problematic to define. Envisioned as a movement in opposition to “the capitalist patriarchal world system” which “is built upon and maintains itself through the colonization of women, of ‘foreign’ peoples and their lands; and of nature,” it directly challenges patriarchal language in relationship to the land (Mies and Shiva 2). Williams’ story is a clear example of ecofeminist rhetoric in practice.

---

24. Aristotle’s argument that “One quality or action is nobler than another if it is that of a naturally finer being: thus a man’s will be nobler than a woman’s” is clearly disproved by Williams’ practice of the art. But then, as Lisa Ede, Cheryl Glenn, and Andrea Lunsford set out to prove in “Border Crossings: Intersections of Rhetoric and Feminism” the assumption implicit in Aristotelian thought that a rhetor can only be male, is outmoded; rhetoric can be an invaluable feminist tool. See Ede, Glenn, and Lunsford 401-41.

25. In *Testimony* Williams and Trimble tell eloquently how close to failure they believed they were using conventional political forms of lobbying over the Bill. They write “After a round of public hearings that made clear the Utah delegation was beyond reason, we imagined another approach, some path behind the normal barriers that, together, as writers we might travel” (4). This may explain Williams’ rejection of political rhetoric in “Bloodlines,” her contribution to testimony, despite co-editor Trimble’s concerns about it. For Trimble’s comments see Satterfield, ed. 74-75.

Situating the land as female, embodying it so that it can be “raped,” denying it a voice, then imagining how it can be re-inscribed with life, stitched back together again, reborn and healed are undoubtedly ecofeminist tropes. But a subtly different reading offered by Slovic attempts to distance the story from the problematics of ecofeminism. Slovic emphasises attachment to the land and down-plays gender: “This story has no simple, explicit message about environmental policy or wilderness preservation, but in its richly emotive and imaginative language it suggests that *human* life is deeply associated with specific places on the planet” (“There’s Something About Yoar Voice I Cannot Hear,” emphasis added). Slovic’s reading is interesting because it attempts to rescue “Bloodlines” from the controversies surrounding ecofeminism by aligning it instead with radical ecology. Radical ecology argues that all are connected to the land and that no one group, dominant gender, race or class has the right to dislocate another from its connection to the land especially through exploitation of that land. However, the gendering of Williams’ story with its female protagonist and her male attacker undermines Slovic’s reading.<sup>26</sup> When read as an example of Williams’ refusal to continue to employ the type of masculine political language that had so far failed in the campaign, the gendering of “Bloodlines” must also be read as an indictment of the masculine political system itself. It suggests, therefore, that dominant masculine systems, not men themselves, are guilty of environmental “rape.” This use of gender is a risky strategy in a predominantly male environment, where it might alienate Williams’ audience by means of being read as assigning the blame for ecological destruction—“rape”—purely on the grounds of gender. Williams’ change from the acceptable political lobbying approach that privileges rationality, scientific logic, economic argument and masculine political rhetoric to the symbolic, trope-laden ecofeminist narrative language that constitutes “Bloodlines” at such a late stage of lobbying over the Utah Public Lands Management Act, emphasises that this was a strategy, calculated and considered even if it did arise from desperation.

Williams defends her decision to employ a story that became central to *Testimony* thus:<sup>27</sup>

- 
26. Although Williams refuses the rapist an identity, “she never saw the face of her assailant,” she does assign him a gender: “*He* left her violated and raw” (50, emphasis added).
27. “Bloodlines” runs from pages 50-52 in a book of 112 pages total. It is as difficult to ignore this as a formal statement of its centrality to the campaign against the Utah Public Lands Management Act 1995 as it is to ignore the argument in Williams’ statement quoted above that “Bloodlines” was at the *heart* of what she felt.

But I didn't say to myself: "What's the most perplexing story I can give them?" I wanted just to tell a story that would be at the heart of what I felt. The story "Bloodlines" was the only way I felt I could take on the emotional landscape I felt was at risk, that I could convey the abuse, the rape of the land, I saw as a resident there. I had a dream about that red thread, and I really pay attention to that. It's really a trust. I trust that that story, on some level, is understood, unconsciously. I truly believe that Jim Hansen would read that story and say, "What would you expect from her?" But on some level there may be a residual image that affects him ... Images are what the imagination plays with. And these are what prey on the rational mind. (Satterfield, ed. 74-75)

Williams' writing is characterised by a refusal of division. Like Carson who combined the literary with the scientific, Williams' writing pulls "the scientific mind and the literary minds together"; as is revealed in "A Conversation with Terry Tempest Williams," she is equally uncomfortable with divisions of genre within literature which she argues "narrow our scope, confine our imagination" (11). Slovic's reading of "Bloodlines" emphasises this aspect of her narrative. It refutes the supposition that to be ecofeminist in intent is to divide the genders by assigning them the essentialist roles of victim to the female and aggressor to the male.<sup>28</sup> Instead, it centres the relationship of humans of either gender to place. However, Slovic seems too eager through this reading to avoid the divisive issues that dog ecofeminism by aligning Williams' story with radical ecology, when "Bloodlines" is clearly an (eco)feminist text. A text that I would argue was born directly from frustrations with a masculine political system and the inadequacies of appeals through masculine political rhetoric that failed. The risk that readers would interpret Williams' story differently was always inherent; that the story is clearly open to the criticisms of essentialism levelled at ecofeminism since its inception was also innate. However, it seems obvious that by this late stage in negotiations over the 1995 Act Williams considered such risks acceptable, even necessary.<sup>29</sup>

\*\*\*

---

28. This is close to Ariel Salleh's anti-essentialist ecofeminist argument which asserts the "positivist formula Man/Woman=Nature" over the "Eurocentric convention that positions Man over and above Woman and Nature" (ix).

29. Noël Sturgeon gives a good explanation of the inherent conflict between what she identifies as five distinct ecofeminist positions caused by ideas of essentialism.

Carson set out carefully to interpret scientific data, to mediate the chasm between science and literature to a short accessible hop. Those who opposed her view were able wilfully to skip through sections of *Silent Spring* attempting to turn Carson's strategy against her. Ray paralleled memoir and ecology, binding chapters with invisible mycelium threads that draw human and natural narratives together. But the form of her narrative also permitted readers to skip important issues. Tempest Williams insisted upon a leap in understanding—one that Congressman Jim Hansen and many others in positions of power are not always prepared to make, given their entrenchment in political rhetoric.

The political success of each woman writer's strategy is not easy to determine. Paul Brooks, Carson's editor, says that "*Silent Spring* may have changed the course of history" (xi). Frank Graham Jr. writing in *Since Silent Spring* devotes two pages to the tangible achievements of Carson's book, but devotes almost as much space to the issues that Carson raised that remain unresolved (256-8). There are those who still dispute the harmfulness of DDT and question whether Carson's identifying it as a hazard lost humanity the opportunity to eradicate malaria.<sup>30</sup> Asked about the success of *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*, Ray said "[i]t encapsulated what a lot of people were feeling. People are watching the places they love, places to which they are attached, be destroyed ... It spoke for them" ("Re: From Janisse Ray"). She did not, however, point to a tangible change in environmental policy that resulted from its writing.

On 18th September, 1996, President Bill Clinton held up his copy of *Testimony* saying: "This made a difference" (Satterfield, ed. 62). His

---

Whereas some see women as "biologically close to nature in that their reproductive characteristics (menstrual cycles, lactation, birth) keep them in touch with natural rhythms," others argue that "[p]atriarchy equates women and nature, so that a feminist analysis is required to understand fully the genesis of environmental problems" (28-29). This causes problems because feminists have long had to argue against a culturally created essentialism which tied women to a "naturally" subordinate social position.

30. This has been exemplified in the centennial year of Carson's birth by press articles such as the one in which David A. Farenthold reports that a resolution intended to honour Carson was blocked by a Senator Tom Coburn on the grounds that *Silent Spring* "was the catalyst in the deadly worldwide stigmatization against insecticides, especially DDT" ("Bill to Honor Rachel Carson on Hold"). Coburn's outburst reflects his position as a doctor who claims that between 1 and 2 million people die each year of malaria and other insect-borne disease. Lear, called to defend Carson, points out that "Carson was never against DDT. She was against the misuse of DDT" ("Bill to Honor Rachel Carson on Hold").

remark, if we choose to be cynical, could be dismissed as a mere political sound-bite. But he was speaking at a ceremony dedicating the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, a newly created national park that covers 1.7 million acres of southern Utah and the first to be administered by the Bureau of Land Management rather than the National Park Service.

Environmentalism, it seems, is all about how to move presidents to mountains.

University of Nottingham  
United Kingdom

### Works Cited

- Bartkevicius, Jocelyn, and Mary Hussman. "A Conversation with Terry Tempest Williams." *The Iowa Review* 27.1 (1997): 1-23.
- Bettelheim, Bruno. *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1976. London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1991.
- "Bill to Honor Rachel Carson on Hold." 22 May 2007. 20 June 2007 (<http://www.Washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2007/05/22/AR20070522015>).
- Bookchin, Murray. *Our Synthetic Environment*. New York: Knopf, 1962.
- Brooks, Paul. *The House of Life: Rachel Carson at Work*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1972.
- Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995.
- Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring*. 1st ed. Cambridge, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1962.
- . *Silent Spring*. 1962. London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2000.
- Cuddon, J.A. *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. 1976. 4th ed. London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1998.
- "The Desolate Year." *Monsanto Magazine* (October 1962): 4-7.
- Ede, Lisa, Cheryl Glenn, and Andrea Lunsford. "Border Crossings: Intersections of Rhetoric and Feminism." *Rhetorica* XIII.4 (1995): 401-41.
- Fahrenthold, David A. "Bill to Honor Rachel Carson on Hold." *Washington Post* Wednesday 23 May 2007, sec. B01.
- Gartner, Carol B. "When Science Writing Becomes Literary Art: The Success of *Silent Spring*." *And No Birds Sing: Rhetorical Analyses of Rachel Carson's Silent Spring*. Ed. Craig Waddell. Carbondale: Edwardsville Southern Illinois University Press, 2000. 103-23.
- Goad, Jim. *The Redneck Manifesto: How Hillbillies, Hicks and White Trash Became America's Scapegoats*. New York: Touchstone, 1997.
- Graham Jr., Frank. *Since Silent Spring*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1970.
- Killingsworth, Jimmie M., and Jaqueline S. Palmer. "*Silent Spring* and Science Fiction: An Essay in the History and Rhetoric of Narrative." *And No Birds Sing: Rhetorical Analyses of Rachel Carson's Silent Spring*. Ed. Craig Waddell. Carbondale: Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000. 174-204.

- Kroeber, Karl. *Retelling/Rereading: The Fate of Storytelling in Modern Times*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992.
- Lear, Linda. *Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature*. London, New York: Penguin Books Ltd., 1997.
- Lurie, Alison. *Boys and Girls Forever: Children's Classics from Cinderella to Harry Potter*. London: Chatto & Windus, 2003.
- Lytle, Mark Hamilton. *The Gentle Subversive: Rachel Carson, Silent Spring, and the Rise of the Environmental Movement. New Narratives in American History*. Eds. James West Davidson and Michael B. Stoff. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Matthiessen, Peter, ed. *Courage for the Earth: Writers, Scientists, and Activists Celebrate the Life and Writing of Rachel Carson*. Boston: New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007.
- Mies, Maria, and Vandana Shiva. *Ecofeminism*. Halifax, Nova Scotia: London Fernwood Publications, 1993.
- Murphy, Priscilla Coit. *What a Book Can Do: The Publication and Reception of Silent Spring*. Amherst: Boston University of Massachusetts Press, 2005.
- Oravec, Christine. "An Inventional Archaeology of 'A Fable for Tomorrow.'" *And No Birds Sing: Rhetorical Analyses of Rachel Carson's Silent Spring*. Ed. Craig Waddell. Carbondale: Edwardsville Southern Illinois University Press, 2000. 42-59.
- Ovid. "Tereus." *Tales from Ovid: Twenty-Four Passages from the Metamorphoses*. Trans. Ted Hughes. London: Faber and Faber, 1997. 229-45.
- Ray, Janisse. *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*. Minneapolis: Milkweed, 1999.
- . "Re: From Janisse Ray." E-mail to author. 19 February 2007.
- Salleh, Ariel. *Ecofeminism as Politics: Nature, Marx and the Postmodern*. London: Zed Books, 1997.
- Satterfield, Terre, and Scott Slovic, eds. *What's Nature Worth? Narrative Expressions of Environmental Values*. Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2004.
- Sideris, Lisa H., and Kathleen Dean Moore, eds. *Rachel Carson: Legacy and Challenge*. Albany: State University of New York, 2008.
- Slovic, Scott. "There's Something About Your Voice I Cannot Hear: Environmental Literature, Public Policy and Ecocriticism." 24 Oct. 2006 (<http://www.highbeam.com/DocPrint.aspx?DocId=1G1:131903070>).
- Stoneman Douglas, Marjory. *The Everglades: River of Grass*. 50th Anniversary 1997 ed. Sarasota: Pineapple Press Inc, 1947.
- Sturgeon, Noël. *Ecofeminist Natures: Race, Gender, Feminist Theory and Political Action*. New York: London: Routledge, 1997.
- Trimble, Stephen, and Terry Tempest Williams. *Testimony: Writers of the West Speak on Behalf of Utah Wilderness*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 1996.
- Warren, Karen J., ed. *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*. Bloomington: Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997.
- Whittle, Kay. *Native American Fetishes*. Atglen: Schiffer Publishing Ltd., 1998.
- Williams, Terry Tempest. "Bloodlines." *Testimony: Writers of the West Speak on Behalf of Utah Wilderness*. Eds. Stephen and Terry Tempest Williams Trimble. Minneapolis: Milkweed, 1996. 50-52.
- . *Leap*. New York: Vintage Books, 2000.
- . *Red: Passion and Patience in the Desert*. 2001. New York: Vintage Books, 2002.
- . *An Unspoken Hunger: Stories from the Field*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1994.