

Terry Tempest Williams's *Refuge*: Sentimentality and Separation

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FOR SEVERAL MONTHS I HAD BEEN HEARING about *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*, by Terry Tempest Williams (New York: Vintage, 1992). Colleagues had heard her speak at the Port Townsend Writer's Conference in Washington two summers ago where a mostly non-Mormon audience gave her a standing ovation. After listening to her relate several unconventional religious practices, my LDS friends offered more cautious praise but were now interested in reading the book. I bought it myself during a Christmas shopping spree, delighted at the smooth-covered paperback's burnished appearance, resolving to savor it over vacation. Soon after this purchase my January 1993 issue of *Outside* magazine arrived containing an extensive article on *Refuge* and cancer by David Quammen, a journalist I have come to respect for his ability to write about science with humor and lucidity.¹ Now I *knew* I would like the book. But Neal Kramer, a friend aware of my own father's recent and unexpected death, cautioned me that *Refuge* might be painful reading. Still, by now there was no going back; I had to be "in the Mormon know."

Unfortunately, Williams's book disappointed me. Perhaps my expectations had been too high. Perhaps—I feared—I was not sophisticated enough, nor environmentally concerned enough, to appreciate all the rising and falling of the Great Salt Lake with its accompanying destruction. Yet even though Williams's and her mother's relationship proved worthwhile reading—and rather than recall fresh memories of my father's passing, it taught me compassion toward my own mother's struggle watching *her* mother's slow death in a nursing home—I also have to be honest and admit that the story did not keep me reading all night as it ap-

1. David Quammen, "Palpating the Tumor: Cancer and Family, in Utah and Beyond," *Outside*, Jan. 1993, 29-33.

parently had others such as my bird-watching colleague Don Hunter.² Unlike him, I could easily put the book down, especially when Williams shifts from family saga to environmental didactics,³ which, added to Williams's periodically sentimental relationship with nature, detracts from the story's effectiveness for me. In addition, her occasional but pointed jabs at Mormonism strain the carefully spun web of family and community ties that, as a feminist, Williams explicitly values and records. This strain results from what I believe is Williams's attempt both to promote and violate affiliations.

These negative reactions to Williams's text have made me feel guilty. How could I not entirely like a book about which such a large audience raved? After all, I too feel indignant at nuclear testing and the U.S. government victimizing individual American families for the state's good.⁴ In addition, having grown up a native of Jackson Hole, Wyoming, at the foot of the Grand Teton mountains (which Williams herself visits in the book), I cherish the outdoors and share Williams's keen interest in preserving "refuges." However, I also admit that my father was a redneck, anti-environmentalist fisherman, who taught me sympathies for interacting with the land in ways different from Williams and other "à la naturels," as my mother warmly refers to them. Besides these environmental kinships, I relate to Williams as a Mormon feminist, who like her often feels disgruntled by *implicit* messages about women's subordinate position in the church and the general membership's limited opportunities to question its patriarchy—a tertiary, although obvious agenda in Williams's text about which few reviewers fail to mention.⁵ Thus, my dissatisfaction with *Refuge* results not so much from her desire to respect and protect vital ecosystems, to critique Mormonism, or even to celebrate women's relationships and their natural affinity for Mother Earth. Rather,

2. From Helen Cannon's review for *Dialogue*, she says her friends "swear it's an 'all nighter,' impossible to leave" (172). See Helen B. Cannon, "Unnatural History," a review of *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*, by Terry Tempest Williams, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 25 (Summer 1992): 171-75.

3. See where Williams, through a Kenyan woman's dialogue, reiterates the cliché that "we have forgotten our kinship with the land" (137), or even more overtly when she decries the destruction of wetlands: "Conservation laws are only as strong as the people who support them. We look away and they are in danger of being overturned, compromised, and weakened" (265).

4. Williams's story reminds me of Yoshiko Uchida's 1982 autobiography, *Desert Exile: The Uprooting of a Japanese-American Family* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), which describes the U.S. government's unwarranted internment of Japanese Americans during World War II in ten different sites like the Sevier Desert camp—euphemistically known then as the Central Utah Relocation Center—located near Delta, Utah, where Uchida and her family spent time.

5. Six of the nine reviews I read noted Williams's religious defiance in one form or another.

my dissatisfaction results partly from Williams's occasional sentimentality and largely from her portrayal of Mormons, especially Mormon women, who generally come off as passive, frequently mindless victims who fulfill the public's stereotyped notions about them and contrasts markedly from the often feisty, energetic women I find in my ward.

Before I argue these exceptions to *Refuge's* success, however, I would like briefly to summarize several early book reviews, since my original hesitations about whole-hearted praise lead me to read what other critics thought. Of the nine reviews I found, only one reviewer ventured to criticize Williams's book in any forceful way. Margaret B. Guthrie of *The New York Times* felt that Williams "deserves the highest marks for her description of her mother's death." However, said Guthrie, "Her questioning of her Mormon faith is not smoothly interwoven with the other two themes of *Refuge*, and interrupts the narrative flow. Most disruptive of all," continues Guthrie, "is the discussion of the atmospheric nuclear weapons testing in Nevada" which "Come[s] without any foreshadowing . . . mak[ing] for a contrived ending."⁶ Another criticism, in *The Women's Review of Books*, addressed Williams's "bimodal narrative" that, according to Marilyn R. Chandler, "sometimes seems forced and interruptive." However, Chandler pulls back from complete censure by asserting that "the points of contact between the two chronicles of loss reflect something essential about Williams's own habits of mind."⁷ Similarly, Charles E. Little's review in *Wilderness* contended that "Because of its numerous topics and themes" a typical editor at a New York publishing house might say that this book lacks focus—or at least that it essays too much. And that would be true. But the editor for this book was not so typical, wrote Little, since this editor "find[s] . . . something deeper that could make the literary flaws of this very human, very moving volume seem almost trivial."⁸

After reading these nine early reviews, I sensed a reluctance on anyone's part to take issue with much more than the fragmented scope of Williams's book. As my friend Karin Anderson England has observed, maybe we *all* feel guilty for criticizing experiences portrayed so personally that negative scrutiny might appear an attack on Williams herself. The one final guarded criticism I uncovered from Helen B. Cannon's review in *Dialogue* added that "Only a few things mar the book's near perfection, and," says Cannon—notice this guilt—"I feel crotchety and schoolmarmish and out of linguistic fashion to mention them." But she

6. Margaret B. Guthrie, "In Short," a review of *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*, by Terry Tempest Williams, *New York Times*, 19 Jan. 1992, 18.

7. Marilyn R. Chandler, "Unnatural Disasters," a review of *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*, by Terry Tempest Williams, *The Women's Review of Books* 9 (1992): 10.

8. Charles E. Little, "Books for the Wilderness," a review of *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*, by Terry Tempest Williams, *Wilderness* 55 (1991): 34.

kindly assured us, "I do so because I think Williams deserves more careful editing." Cannon then details significant misspellings and other grammatical errors published in the final text, claiming that such "Little things do matter," because for this reviewer they are "like pimples on a beautiful face."⁹

A few cautious evaluations like these comforted me, but most reviewers raved: from the *Washington Post*, "a heroic book"¹⁰; from *Publishers Weekly*, "a moving account of personal loss and renewal"¹¹; from *Kirkus Reviews*, "Williams's evocations of the austere beauty of the Utah desert, the Great Salt Lake, and their wildlife . . . offer great rewards"¹²; and finally from the *Association for Mormon Letters's* own *Newsletter*, "Terry Tempest Williams knocked me down."¹³ Obviously such widespread attention and praise attests to the book's merit, which I grant. Nevertheless, I still disagree with reviewers like Helen Cannon who asserts that *Refuge* displays, "No tricks. No sentimentalizing. No histrionics,"¹⁴ or Charles E. Little who claims the book exhibits "impressive honesty, an absence of the pretense one often finds in 'nature' writing."¹⁵ Too many affected passages prove otherwise.

In autobiography sentimentality may result when a writer indulges in excesses of emotion or appears pretentious. A rhetorical strategy writers employ for avoiding such affectation is merely to present life, allowing readers to draw conclusions free from effusive, abstract narrative commentary. Show more, tell less, even in extended personal essays like *Refuge*. As an autobiographer, Williams successfully avoids sentimentalizing her experiences surrounding the Great Salt Lake when she maintains objectivity *without* compromising her emotional connection to nature earned through long, thoughtful hours of observation on the bird refuge. For instance, when Williams ritually washes the dead swan and then later prepares her own mother's lifeless body for burial, readers are moved. The two portrayals communicate profound sincerity. Williams describes "smoothing feathers," "lift[ing] both wings," "untangling the long neck," and "wash[ing] the swan's black bill and feet until they shone like patent leather" (121). Similarly, when Williams artfully teaches us about nature in passages such as the first, describing the Great Salt

9. Cannon, 175.

10. Grace Lichtenstein, "Consolations of Nature," *Washington Post*, 21 Sept. 1991, 6.

11. Review of *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*, by Terry Tempest Williams, *Publishers Weekly* 238 (1991), 39:73.

12. Review of *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*, by Terry Tempest Williams, *Kirkus Reviews* 59 (1991), 16:1078.

13. Shauna Eddy, Review of *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*, by Terry Tempest Williams, *Association for Mormon Letters Newsletter* 16 (1992): 1-2.

14. Cannon, 171.

15. Little, 34.

Lake as like a dinner plate rather than a cup (6), or later in the book when she relates the fascinating story of hunter-gatherers' grasshopper cuisine at Lakeside Cave through her dialogue with archeologist David Madsen (181-83). In these cases our understanding and enjoyment of nature are deepened.

However, as soon as Williams adopts a "New Age" voice, she slips from sincerity to gushing theatrics that excessively romanticize her relationship to nature, endangering her of committing John Ruskin's "pathetic fallacy." According to Ruskin, writers commit this flaw when the "ordinary, proper, and true appearances of things"—especially "external things" in nature—are marred by "'extraordinary' or false appearances . . . under the influence of emotion, or contemplative fancy."¹⁶ An example of the pathetic fallacy from *Refuge* occurs when Williams declares, "All of life drums and beats, at once, sustaining a rhythm audible only to the spirit. I can drum my heartbeat back into the Earth, beating, hearts beating, my hands on the Earth—like a ruffled grouse on a log, beating, hearts beating—like a bittern in the marsh, beating, hearts beating. My hands on the Earth beating, hearts beating. I drum back my return" (85). For me, such purple patches conjure up images of hanging wooden beads and exotic tapered incense sold at environmentally-correct music stores by grey-bearded men. Williams's story most frequently threatens such pretense when she affects extraordinary affiliation with birds or other animals, and when she indulges in mere listing that feels forced or clichéd rather than meaningful presentation of her Utah experience. Consider Williams's description of the sand dunes: "they are female," she muses,

Sensuous curves—the small of a woman's back. Breasts. Buttocks. Hips and pelvis. They are the natural shapes of Earth. Let me lie naked and disappear. Crypsis.

The wind rolls over me. Particles of sand skitter across my skin, fill my ears and nose. I am aware only of breathing. The workings of my lungs are amplified. The wind picks up. I hold my breath. It massages me. A raven lands inches away. I exhale. The raven flies (109).

Some may view Williams's phrasing in this passage as poetic, but I am more inclined to view her erotic relationship with earth and wind—wanting to "lie naked and disappear," the wind "massaging" her inhaling and exhaling body—as self-indulgent. Such detracting passages only occur in *Refuge* when Williams stops educating and starts emoting. Another brief example: "I shall curl up in the grasses like a bedded animal and dream. Marsh music. Red-wing blackbirds. Yellow-headed blackbirds. Song

16. John D. Rosenberg, ed., *The Genius of John Ruskin: Selections from His Writings* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1963), 64.

sparrows. Barn swallows snapping mosquitoes on the wing. Herons traversing the sky" (150). Most outdoor enthusiasts could document their forays into the wilderness with this little style, but numerous other passages prove Williams is capable of better, and I for one am glad they exist.

My second criticism of the book is more important and probably more controversial. It is also where, as a Mormon feminist who wants badly to be fully supportive of Williams's feminist causes, I find myself conflicted.

Terry Tempest Williams's "unnatural history of family and place" is obviously a woman's text. In fact, *Refuge's* most appealing aspect is the pulse of its woman-centered heart. Williams repeatedly addresses feminist concerns for respecting Mother Earth; she emphasizes the collaborative efforts and bonds among family, friends, colleagues, and community to produce this story; and she apparently feels equally bonded to place—namely, the bird refuge and Utah, home of Mormonism. This connection to LDS people becomes problematic, however, because Williams's oversights and generalizations about her religious community, especially in regards to women, threaten to break the cords she so lovingly depicts. Several instances demonstrate that Williams values her affiliation with LDS women, but she also purposely ensures that readers know she is not very much like the majority of them. For instance, during her mother's illness the Tempest family benefits from Mormon women's domestic output: homemade custard from a neighbor and later dinner from the Relief Society (163). For this care Williams expresses gratitude, but she has also already mocked the 1960s Mormon women who produced glass grapes, "a symbol of craft adeptness," which, claims Williams, is "an important tenet of Mormonism" (48).

Although I do not want to appear humorless or self-satisfied since I too have indulged in humor at Mormon women's expense, I must point out that no matter how many Relief Society members actually enjoy making crafts few, if any, are shallow enough to view craft production as "important tenets" of their faith. Moreover, enough women have complained about such activities at homemaking meetings to alter the program so that rather than focus their energies on cranking out kitsch, Mormon women generally mean to come teach each other gospel doctrines, provide service for their wards and communities, and develop supportive friendships. Yet Williams conveniently leaves this information out, evidently preferring to generalize Relief Society members—at least in this instance—as superficial women with poor aesthetic taste. Although there may be some truth to Williams's characterization, it nevertheless slights the very women with whom Williams claims such close ties, presenting them in a narrow, pejorative profile. Thus, in this case and several others I will cite, rather than guide Mormon women to greater spirituality, Wil-

Williams alienates a significant portion of them. Ultimately, straining connections to her community and readership seems undesirable—not to mention alien to the feminist ideals Williams's text espouses, especially when set in the context of women's autobiographical tradition where exploration and celebration of affiliations usually reveal the female autobiographer's identity.

Mary G. Mason's essay "The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers" examines four prototypical female autobiographies—Dame Julian of Norwich's *Revelations or Showings*, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Margaret Cavendish's *True Relation*, and Anne Bradstreet's "To My Dear Children"—concluding that "the self discovery of female identity seems to acknowledge the real presence and recognition of another consciousness" and the disclosure of female self is linked to the identification of some "other."¹⁷ Obviously, Williams's main "other" is her dying mother, but she depicts relationships with "other" women too. Mason explains that women's "recognition of another consciousness . . . this grounding of identity through relation to the chosen other seems . . . to enable women to write openly about themselves."¹⁸ Certainly the conversations Williams recreates among her mother, her grandmother Mimi, and friends—even publishing letters between them as part of her text—demonstrates this phenomenon of revealing oneself through connections. And "because women tend 'toward involvement' with others 'as opposed to separation,'" says Ann Walters, "they are accordingly 'more likely to explore the self in relation to others' in their autobiographical acts."¹⁹ Finally, Carol Holly's discussion of "Nineteenth-Century Autobiographies of Affiliation" builds on Estelle Jelinek's work in *The Tradition of Women's Autobiography* by demonstrating that nineteenth-century female autobiographies like Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *Recollections* and Lucy Larcom's *A New England Girlhood* demonstrate how identity for these women was available through "affiliation" rather than "achievement."²⁰

Like other women autobiographers, Williams follows the female practice of revealing her own life in relation to family and community. In fact, Williams's celebration of relationships seems boundless. She hazards to include those sometimes sentimental but also endearing letters among women because, she says, when "Once opened, a connection is made. We are not alone in the world" (84); she thanks her extended family for their

17. In James Olney, ed., *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), 210.

18. *Ibid.*

19. In Paul John Eakin, ed., *American Autobiography: Retrospect and Prospect* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 226.

20. In *ibid.*, 219.

"web of concern" (292); she explains how her Mormon family, committed to genealogy, has "a sense of history. And our history is tied to the land" (14). Likewise, she describes how her friend John Lilly "suggests whales are a culture maintained by oral traditions. Stories. The experience of an individual whale is valuable to the survival of its community" (175). Toward her own story's end she notices the spiders' webs as they "re-inhabit" the resurrecting bird refuge, describing the spiders' "gossamer threads . . . binding it all together" (274). And with her mother's and grandmother's passings, Williams discovers that even though dead, "Mother and Mimi are present. The relationships continue—something I did not anticipate" (275). Finally, even though Williams questions her Mormon faith throughout the text, she learns through maturity that "Faith is the centerpiece of a connected life. It allows us to live by the grace of invisible strands" (198).

As a twentieth-century autobiographer, Williams has improved upon nineteenth-century accounts of women's lives by revealing her identity through relationships *and* achievement as a professional naturalist and author. However, all this effort to promote relationships seems diminished when Williams's "history" overlooks important aspects of Mormon women's experience or characterizes them in unattractive ways. This, in turn, threatens to generate rancor rather than love between Williams and Latter-day Saints so that *Refuge* ultimately becomes an autobiography more about separation than connection.

Besides ridiculing Mormon women's "craft adeptness," Williams re-creates her conversation with Mimi and Diane about Mormon women and authority. Although readers might respond to it as refreshingly honest, Mormon women may feel demeaned by Terry's slightly naughty retelling of the pedestal joke: "How does a man honor a woman? . . . He puts her on a pedestal and then asks her to get down on it" (117). Of course the joke is meant to make Mormons examine their unhealthy aggrandizement of women. But it also purposely assaults Christian sensibilities, and even though Terry would probably tell readers like me to "loosen up" as she did her mother, the lewd nature of the joke abuses Mormon women. Although she is freer to tell such jokes in truly private settings, for orchestrated public expression of intimate conversation like those in this book I believe Williams is capable of finding a better way to subvert Mormons' admittedly exasperating desire to keep women on pedestals. In addition, I would speculate that regardless of his motives a contemporary *male* autobiographer could not publicly recount such a joke with impunity. Therefore, a feminist like Williams, who should know better, ought not to escape censure either.

During the same three women's conversation Latter-day Saints are also stereotyped as complacent women with no mention of the significant

church leadership they render daily. Despite their lack of ordained power through priesthood authority—which can and has been used against them—Mormon women are not without influence. Still, Mimi asks, “Why is it . . . that we are so willing to give up our own authority?” The question is an important one for which Terry offers a pat answer: “It’s easier. . . . We don’t have to think. The responsibility belongs to someone else” (116-17). I agree, with equal dismay, that many Mormon women too readily proclaim relief at not being held accountable as priesthood holders. And for this complacency they deserve criticism. However, who can blame Latter-day Saint women for avoiding additional obligation in this church? The Relief Society members I know already accept tremendous responsibility for their ward’s success, and neither these efforts nor their thinking seems that “easy” to me. Thus, along with the warranted criticism presented in Diane’s, Mimi’s, and Terry’s conversation, Williams might at least have validated Mormon women’s leadership, too.

As their dialogue continues, Terry asks, “Why are we so afraid of being selfish? And why do we distract and excuse ourselves from our own creativity?” Diane says it is because “We haven’t figured out that time for ourselves is ultimately time for our families. You can’t be constantly giving without depleting the source. Somehow, somewhere, we must replenish ourselves” (117). This, of course, is current feminist philosophy with which I would not disagree. Yet I believe that when Mimi describes the ideas as “antithetical to the culture we belong to, where women are . . . taught to sacrifice, support, and endure,” she also ignores the changes occurring churchwide in support of women’s personal needs. Ignoring these changes discredits Mormon women’s present advances. After all, Mimi, Diane, and Terry have achieved a great deal as modern Latter-day Saints living in Utah, so that rather than portray themselves as victims they might take an offensive, rather than defensive approach to the problem, cataloguing and promoting the “other virtues” which strong Mormon women like themselves are “more interested in cultivating” (117). This does not mean I believe Mormon women have nothing to complain about or that they have achieved total equity in the church. They have not. And in *some* ways their history since the church’s beginnings has been a loss of power. But Williams again paints only half our Mormon picture, and the bad half at that. Although we still have a long way to go, I am convinced by my own experience as an educated LDS woman that I need more people like the Tempest Williams family to speak in *constructive* ways about the growth we have achieved or about the benefits gained when individual women care for themselves. If women like Diane, Mimi, and Terry *only* bemoan their lots, then their complaints mainly serve to break meaningful connections with their community, allowing Mormon women to dismiss the important lessons they have to teach as

mere feminist selfishness.

One other significant opportunity Williams misses for empowering Mormon women occurs in the ambiguous manner she describes blessing her mother. 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, Moroni 10:8-9, and Doctrine and Covenants 46:10-25 all teach Mormons—men *and* women—to seek spiritual gifts such as discerning spirits, speaking in tongues, and healing the sick.²¹ Though not everyone has been given all the gifts, this intimate moment between a mother and her daughter appears an opportunity for Terry to legitimately exercise faith in the gift of healing by blessing her mother just as early church women often did.²² Showing Mormon women the desirability of seeking such gifts might have invited them to follow her example. Instead, Williams prefaces the scene by mentioning that only Latter-day Saint males can hold the priesthood and give “formal blessings.” She then characterizes her female prayer in clandestine terms, implying the act is slightly sinful when it is not. “In Mormon religion,” Williams explains, “formal blessings of healing are given by men through the Priesthood of God. Women have no outward authority. But within the secrecy of sisterhood we have always bestowed benisons upon our families” (158). Such dubious-looking portrayals can only serve to continue Mormon women’s spiritual subjugation because orthodox members will read the passage as mere rebellion and dismiss Williams’s sincere, significant faith in seeking gifts of the spirit through appropriate means. Perhaps Williams herself does not recognize the power given by God and available through her faith since ironically, unlike an Eliza Snow or a Patty Sessions—early Victorian Saints—we “modern” Relief Society

21. During the dedication of the Nauvoo Monument to Women on 29 June 1978 Apostle Bruce R. McConkie remarked that “where spiritual things are concerned, as pertaining to all of the gifts of the Spirit, with reference to the receipt of revelation, the gaining of testimonies, and the seeing of visions, in all matters that pertain to godliness and holiness and which are brought to pass as a result of personal righteousness—in all these things men and women stand in a position of absolute equality before the Lord. He is no respecter of persons nor of sexes, and he blesses those men and those women who seek him and serve him and keep his commandments” (Bruce R. McConkie, “Speaking Today: Our Sisters from the Beginning,” *Ensign* 9 [Jan. 1979]: 61).

22. For example, from Eliza R. Snow’s pioneer diary: “I spoke to her br. H[unter] in the gift of tongues, sis. S[essions] interpreted, after which br. H[unter], sis. S[essions] & I laid hands on sis. H[unter]’s head and rebuk’d her illness & blessed her” (Eliza R. Snow, *Eliza R. Snow: An Immortal* [Salt Lake City: Nicholas G. Morgan, 1957], 325). Or from Patty Sessions: “Visited Sary Ann and sister Whitney. Sylvia had a chill at sister Buels as we visited her in the forenoon. We prayed and laid hands on her. She was better” (Kenneth Godfrey, Audrey M. Godfrey, and Jill Mulvay Derr, eds., *Women’s Voices: An Untold History of Latter-day Saints, 1830-1900* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1982], 193). And from Ruth May Fox’s diary: “Sister Sarah Phelps spoke in tounge[s] [tongues] with great power insomuch that the floor and the chairs and our limbs trembled. She blessed Sister Whitney who was an invalid for years. . . . The sisters laid hands on Sister W. and prayed for her speedy recovery Sister N[etie] C Taylor being mouth” (*ibid.*, 377).

members have few peers seeking for and sharing spiritual gifts. Describing their frequent experiences with healing the sick or speaking and interpreting tongues, Mormon historian Maureen Ursenbach Beecher writes that "The addition of the spiritual dimension [among early Latter-day Saint women] served but to strengthen the[ir] ties . . . and enhance their faith. Mormon women found spiritual expression which bonded them to each other, to their cause, and to their eternal Parents."²³

Besides missing an opportunity to lead modern Mormon women to renewed spiritual empowerment, Williams rejects the ultimate Mormon woman's experience: childbirth. To the majority of Mormon women, giving birth is supremely validating and a model for their own potential as infinitely creating goddesses. But Williams presently declines child-rearing. Early in the story her mother admits, "Having a child completed something for me. I can't explain it. It's something you feel as a woman connected to other women" (51). By consciously choosing not to have children, Williams again appears to refuse connection with Mormon women. She does not want to be them. Although Williams's mother tries to accept Terry's decision, she subsequently implies she would like grandchildren by Terry and Brooke, asking, "What would you tell your children of me?" (61) Then nearing her death, Diane reveals, "I would hate to see you miss out on the most beautiful experience life has to offer. What are you afraid of?" Williams claims she is afraid of "losing [her] solitude," insisting, "My ideas, Mother, are my children" (220-21). This may imply that Williams mistakenly believes a woman cannot have both ideas *and* children. Furthermore, she must be afraid of more—whether consciously or unconsciously—since she portrays her mother's growing tumor as being like a pregnancy, a problematic analogy at best. She describes the tumor as "foreign, something outside ourselves. It is, however, our own creation. The creation we fear" (44). And her earlier request to touch this creation calls up images of a child feeling for her brother or sister's kick inside a mother's womb: "After everyone left, I asked Mother if I could feel the tumor. She lay down on the carpet in the family room and placed my hand on her abdomen. With her help I found the strange rise on the left side and palpated my fingers around its perimeter" (35).

Besides these apparently unconscious anxieties about giving birth to a tumor like her mother's, Williams also fears breast cancer—another mutilation of women's life-giving powers. Given her family's unfortunate experience, Williams's fears are understandable. Furthermore, these personal concerns extend beyond human beings' afflictions to consider-

23. Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, *Eliza and Her Sisters* (Salt Lake City: Aspen Books, 1991), 97.

ation for Mother Earth. Williams describes the nuclear-bombed Utah ground developing "stretch marks" and giving birth to "stillborn" bombs (288). In order to deal with fears about the earth's scarred landscape and her own potentially diseased body, Williams simply refuses to give birth, choosing instead a "pen and a piece of paper" as "weapons" that she wields against the government and perhaps even unconsciously against Mormon women, who hazard to produce children in the face of life's grave dangers.

Williams's most explicit criticism of Mormonism comes toward the end: "For many years," she declares, "I have . . . listened, observed, and quietly formed my own opinions, in a culture that rarely asks questions because it has all the answers." Continuing on, her resentment builds, culminating in a firm indictment of both the government and Mormons for their blind obedience:

one by one, I have watched the women in my family die common, heroic deaths. We sat in waiting rooms hoping for good news, but always receiving the bad. I cared for them, bathed their scarred bodies, and kept their secrets. . . . In the end, I witnessed their last peaceful breaths, becoming a midwife to the rebirth of their souls.

The price of obedience has become too high.

The fear and inability to question authority that ultimately killed rural communities in Utah during atmospheric testing of atomic weapons is the same fear I saw in my mother's body. Sheep. Dead sheep. The evidence is buried (286).

Williams's curious choice to define herself as a midwife for dying women's souls could be viewed as self-aggrandizing, since she will not hazard giving birth herself, making the characterization suspicious to life-giving Mormon women. It could be painfully appropriate, however, since one who refuses to give life might be the best midwife to a dead flock.

While reading her book, Williams's audience is meant to understand that *Refuge* is an accurate and truthful history about her Utah experience. She meticulously records the Great Salt Lake's water level and important dates like births or deaths; she adopts a personable, poetic style when explaining environmental phenomenon, suggesting a desire to accurately educate a popular audience; and she provides an extensive acknowledgment section to conclude the book which credits numerous friends, family, and experts for their invaluable advice and information, helping her "tell the right story" (297). One reference to Leonard Arrington's work in Mormon history thanks him for instructing her "about my people" and adds that she is "grateful for his integrity in telling our history straight. He is trustworthy," asserts Williams (295). I believe we are meant to as-

sume Williams is trustworthy, too.

Issues of truth arise often in autobiographical studies. Describing "Modern American Autobiography," Albert E. Stone points out that "Autobiographies need and court readers, especially sympathetic ones who will generously confirm the identity of the self who writes and the self who lived." Stone goes on to explain, however, that "most autobiographers also expect skeptical readers. Indeed, their own historical consciousness activated by writing, and their propensity to confess as well as commit deceptions and errors, draw attention to the different kinds of truth aimed at and/or achieved." Williams's sometimes sympathetic but frequently critical depiction of Mormonism indicates she would acquire readers who relate to and/or resist her "unnatural history of family and place" as a Mormon in Utah. Stone cautions that "To read and exploit autobiographies as history, then, not only requires critical attention to the text, to what is said and not said, but involves going beyond the text in order to grasp a sometimes elusive set of aims and putatively 'truthful' assertions."²⁴ Stone also warns that one "perennial problem" critics face when interpreting autobiography "is the overdetermined nature of all assertions in autobiographical texts and the problem of the 'truth' value to others as compared to the author."²⁵ In other words, autobiographers' claims may inherently suffer from their too decided nature so that while these assertions seem true to the autobiographer herself, they may not necessarily be true—at least in the same way—to her readers. Williams's text certainly exhibits numerous "overdetermined" assertions that, from her tone, she adamantly believes are "true." But, according to Stone's observation about the interpretive problem in autobiography, what may be unquestionably true for Williams about Mormonism may be quietly questionable to her skeptical Mormon audience.

Like issues of truth in autobiographical studies, truth issues permeate Mormonism. An orthodox Mormon understands herself to be a member of the only "true" church and regularly rises in fast and testimony meeting to bear witness that Joseph Smith was a "true" prophet or that the present day leader is also a "true" prophet. Even though a non-Mormon reading public might not be aware of Mormons' preoccupation with truth, Williams herself certainly must. This means she had to expect, and even courts, resistance from some Latter-day Saint readers who would feel unsettled about the entire "truth" of Mormonism presented here. Furthermore, when Williams purposefully criticizes Mormons without also offering a fully drawn, more charitable portrait, and when she separates herself from Mormon women in particular, she betrays one of

24. In Eakin, 98.

25. *Ibid.*, 100.

her text's own major themes: the sacredness of a connected life. Ironically, no matter how much Williams may foster estrangement (an intriguing oxymoron), this Latter-day Saint will always be bound to her Utah culture. And I suspect that good Mormons, especially good Mormon women, will continue nurturing that bond.