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# Terry Tempest Williams on Education, Nature, and Democracy

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by

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**Abstract:** Terry Tempest Williams, American writer and activist, has dedicated her entire life to the protection of the wilderness, and continues to commit herself to defending wildlands from exploitation for fossil fuels extraction. Among Williams' writings, the most well-known, pillars of American environmental literature, are *Refuge*, *Unspoken Hunger*, *Finding of Beauty in a Broken World*, *The Hour of the Land*, and the recent collection of essays *Erosion*, published in 2019. As I will argue in this paper, Terry Tempest Williams' main political commitment is to include the protection of nature in the concept of democracy, and her early experience as a writer and educator could be used as an insightful example of what Khan defines as "critical ecopedagogy". In the first section, I will focus on Williams tracing her intellectual genealogy, connecting it to Carson's work. *Silent Spring* and *The Sense of Wonder* provided Williams with the main practical tools for her pedagogical approach. In the second part of this paper, I will then outline Williams' "critical ecopedagogy". Considering Kahn's interpretation of Herbert Marcuse's "ecopedagogical" critical thought, I will demonstrate how also Williams' philosophy of education aims at the revolutionary political act of rewriting a more inclusive and ecological concept of democracy, extended to all living beings.

## Introduction

Richard Khan coined the term "critical ecopedagogy" to refer to a new philosophy of education which blends ecology issues with pedagogical but also political aims. Using Herbert Marcuse's writings on ecology and education, Khan shows how a critical ecopedagogy may acquire a particular meaning in the present age of climate change and environmental crisis, and illustrates how such a philosophy of education is deeply intertwined with democracy<sup>1</sup>.

As I will argue in this paper, Terry Tempest Williams's main political commitment is to include the protection of nature in the concept of democracy, and her early experience as a writer and educator could be used as an insightful example of what Khan defines as "critical ecopedagogy". Since Williams is a politically involved artist, and not a systematic theorist, I would like to suggest this by this reading through the analysis of her personal experience with nature since

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Khan, *Critical Pedagogy, Ecopedagogy, and Planetary Crisis. The Ecopedagogy Movement*, Peter Lang Publishing Inc., New York, 2010. See also R. Kahn (ed.) *The Journal of Ecopedagogy*, "Green Theory and Praxis" 5, 1, 2009, and Kahn, *For a Marcusean Ecopedagogy* in Douglas Kellner - Tyson Lewis - Clayton Pierce - Daniel Cho (ed.) *Marcuse's challenge to education*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, Md., 2009, pp. 79-102.

childhood, and her writings for children. I will highlight how Williams traces her intellectual genealogy back to Rachel Carson's ideas about educating young minds towards environmental awareness through the exercise of the "sense of wonder"<sup>2</sup>. Ethical and aesthetic education both go together in Carson's and Williams's thoughts. As I will show at the end of my paper, this ethical-aesthetic education is linked to the political commitment of re-writing democracy with the acknowledgment of the agency of nature.

For this purpose, I will first present relevant passages about Williams's life. In the first section, I will focus on some of Williams's childhood episodes that she purposely recalls in her books, in order to establish a link with Rachel Carson's work and to trace a line of continuity. Subsequently, Williams's references to Carson's *The Sense of Wonder* will be analysed, as her main source of inspiration. Then, I will pass through the period of her training at the Teton Science School (Wyoming), which provided her with the main practical tools for her pedagogical approach.

In the second part of this paper, I will then outline Williams's "critical ecopedagogy", considering Khan's interpretation of Herbert Marcuse's "ecopedagogical" critical thought. I will demonstrate how also Williams's philosophy of education aims at the revolutionary political act of rewriting a more inclusive and ecological concept of democracy, extended to all living beings.

### Childhood, Nature, and Wonder

Terry Tempest Williams was born in 1955 in Corona, California. Both her mother, Diane Dixon, and her father, John Henry Tempest, are descendants of Mormon families who settled in Salt Lake Valley, Utah, in the mid-1800s.

Right from childhood, Williams became familiar with the natural world thanks to her paternal grandmother, Kathryn Blakett Tempest, who read her Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, and whom she kept up this passion for by observing the migratory birds of the Bear River near the Great Salt Lake in Utah<sup>3</sup>.

Williams wants to highlight the inspiration she gets from Carson's works, and this can be inferred from the repeated references to the author of *Silent Spring*. For example, Williams writes that at the age of eight, she first heard the name of Rachel Carson from her grandmother: "'Imagine a world without birds,' my grandmother said as she scattered seed and filled the feeders. 'Imagine waking up to no birdsong'. I couldn't. 'Rachel Carson', I remember her saying"<sup>4</sup>, and, in an interview, Williams recalls that her grandmother read her *Silent Spring* when she was a child, although she did not understand the meaning which was then too difficult for her at the time. In 2002, on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of

<sup>2</sup> See Rachel Carson, *The Sense of Wonder. A Celebration of Nature for Parents and Children* (1956), HarperCollins Publishers, New York, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> See Williams, *Refuge. An Unnatural History of Family and Place*, Vintage Books, New York 1991.

<sup>4</sup> Williams, *The Moral Courage of Rachel Carson*, in Peter Matthiessen (ed.), *Courage for the Earth. Writers, Scientists, and Activists Celebrate the Life and Writing of Rachel Carson*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston and New York 2007, p. 130.

*Silent Spring*, Williams published the essay *The Moral Courage of Rachel Carson*, in which she claims that Carson was not only a hero, but an “extended member of her family”<sup>5</sup>. Even if she does not refer to Carson explicitly, Williams describes her childhood experience of the Ocean mirroring Carson’s description of her grandson Roger’s wonder in front of the powerful waves. In fact, in Rachel Carson’s *The Sense of Wonder*, we read:

[...] Big waves were thundering in, dimly seen white shapes that bloomed and shouted and threw great handfuls of froth at us. Together we laughed for pure joy – he a baby meeting for the first time the wild tumult of Oceans, I with the salt of half a lifetime of sea love in me. But I think we felt the same spine-tingling response to the vast, roaring ocean and the wild night around us<sup>6</sup>,

while Williams writes:

I was born on the edge of the Pacific. California was paradise. My mother took me to the beach daily near Capistrano, home to the returning swallows. [...] It is there I must have imprinted on the rhythmic sound of waves, the cry of gulls, the calm of my own mother’s heart. It is here, on this edge of sand and surf, where I must have developed my need to see the horizon, to look outward as far and wide as possible. My hunger for vistas has never left me. And it is here I must have fallen in love with water, recognizing its power and sublimity, where I learned to trust that what I love can kill me, knock me down, and threaten to drown me with an unexpected wave<sup>7</sup>.

When Williams was ten years old, her grandmother Mimi enrolled her in the Audubon Society, an organisation that still promotes bird protection. Williams’s recollection of her first experience at the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge is imbued with lyricism combined with a continuous research for evocating, through words, the images and sounds she had perceived then. For example, she writes:

The days I loved most were the days at Bear River. The Bird Refuge was a sanctuary for my grandmother and me. I call her “Mimi”. We could walk along the road with binoculars around our necks and simply watch birds. Hundreds of birds. Birds so exotic to a desert child it forced the imagination to be still. The imagined was real at Bear River. I recall one bird in particular. It wore a feathered robe of cinnamon, white and black. Its body rested on long, thin legs. Blue legs. On the edge of the marsh, it gracefully lowered its head and began sweeping the water side to side with its delicate, upturned bill. ‘Plee-ek! Plee-ek! Plee-ek!’ [...] My grandmother placed her hand gently on my shoulder and whispered ‘avocets’. I was nine years old<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Ead., *The Moral Courage of Rachel Carson*, op. cit., p. 130. See also David Kupfer, *An Interview with Terry Tempest Williams* [2005], in Michael Austin (Eds.), *A Voice in the Wilderness*, op.cit., p. 172.

<sup>6</sup> Rachel Carson, *The Sense of Wonder. A Celebration of Nature for Parents and Children*, Harper Collins, New York 1998, p. 15.

<sup>7</sup> Terry Tempest Williams, *When Women Were Birds. Fifty-Four Variations on Voice*, Picador, New York 2012, p. 19.

<sup>8</sup> Ead., *Refuge. An Unnatural History of Family and Place*, Vintage Books, New York 1991, p. 15. Rachel Carson also went to the Bear River Migratory Refuge in 1950 and published a booklet in which she describes the ecological heritage of the marshes, and the efforts to protect the countless species of birds that annually come from the two oceans to the Bear River refuge to nest. See Rachel Carson-Vanez T. Wilson, *Bear River. A National Wildlife Refuge, Fish and Wildlife Service*, United States Department of Interior, Washington 1950.

Something that takes on an important meaning is the collection of shells gathered with her grandmother when Williams was eight years old:

My grandmother's hobby was spending time at the ocean, walking along the beach, picking up shells. For a desert child, there was nothing more beautiful than shells. I loved their shapes, their colors. I cherished the way they felt in the palm of my hand – and they held the voice of the sea, a primal sound imprinted on me as a baby [...] Thirty years later, these shells [...] remind me of my natural history, that I was tutored by a woman who courted solitude and made pilgrimages to the edges of our continent in the name of her own pleasure, that beauty, awe, and curiosity were values illuminated in our own home. My grandmother's contemplation of shells has become my own. Each shell is a world of creative expression, an architecture of a soul. I can hold *Melongena corona* to my ear to hear not only the ocean's voice, but the whisperings of my beloved teacher<sup>9</sup>.

According to Williams, the “miracle of nature” served as an imprinting for her young mind. In fact, thanks to her grandmother, Williams connects her “meeting with the birds”<sup>10</sup> to her reverence for nature. It is difficult not to recognize that all these are multiple references to Carson's holistic vision and writing style which combines love for nature with scientific features in a lyrical and evocative prose – which Williams knows very well<sup>11</sup>. Moreover, Williams explicitly mentions *The Sense of Wonder* as her pedagogical reference in a passage of her book, *When Women Were Birds*:

Teaching helped me find my voice through the creativity of translations. The challenge was to impart large ecological concepts to young, burgeoning minds in a language that wasn't polemical, but woven into a compelling story. My task as a teacher was to honor the integrity of fact while at the same time igniting the students' imagination. To create an atmosphere where each child felt free to explore their own questions without fear of being reprimanded was my greatest pleasure. Rachel Carson wrote ‘If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder, he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement, and mystery of the world we live in. What [...] I came to learn, was that a shared love of nature was the most political act of all. Finding one's voice is a process of finding one's passion. I found my voice in teaching<sup>12</sup>.

According to Carson, the wonder experienced in childhood intuitively reveals to young minds the sense of belonging to the natural world, a feeling that generally tends to disappear in adulthood. Carson stated that the cult of nature must be infused into children right from their first months of life, so that a conservationist sensibility will pave their way during their adult life<sup>13</sup>. According to Carson, the exercise of wonder with the intercession of an adult, with whom the child can share the experience of nature, is fundamental<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> Ead., *An Unspoken Hunger. Stories From the Field*, Vintage Books, New York 1996, p. 15.

<sup>10</sup> Williams, *When Women Were Birds*, op. cit., p. 19. Mickey Pearlman, *Terry Tempest Williams, in Listen to their Voices: Twenty Interviews with Women Who Write*, Norton, New York, 1993, pp. 128-129.

<sup>11</sup> Ead., *An Unspoken Hunger*, op. cit., p. 108.

<sup>12</sup> Williams, *When Women Where Birds*, op. cit., p. 85.

<sup>13</sup> See Robert C. Fuller, *A Life Shaped by Wonder: Rachel Carson, in Wonder. From Emotion to Spirituality*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill 2006, pp. 101-109.

<sup>14</sup> See Williams, *Refuge*, op.cit, and Ead., *When Women Were Birds*, op.cit. See also Carson, *The Sense of Wonder*, op.cit.

Williams's sense of sacredness derives also from her family's particular interpretation of Mormonism. She recalls how her family often experienced religious inspiration while spending time outdoors. She, for example, remembers:

I was raised to believe in a spirit world, that life exists before the earth and will continue to exist afterward, that each human being, bird, and bulrush, along with all other life forms had a spirit life before it came to dwell physically on the earth. Each occupied an assigned sphere of influence, each has a place and a purpose. [...] We learned at an early age that God can be found wherever you are, especially outside. Family worship was not just relegated to Sunday in a chapel<sup>15</sup>.

Williams's grandmother, for instance, told her that *taxus baccata* trees had mythical origins. When they were planted on the ancestors' tombs, their roots would wrap around their mouths, thus giving them voice: "Their roots would [...] give them eternal voice. And on long summer nights we imagined hearing the voices of our dead singing across the continents, whispering through the hedges of yew, coming back to us. As a Mormon girl in Utah, I believed this"<sup>16</sup>.

Navajo's mythology is another source of inspiration for Williams. She acknowledges the sacredness of life also looking at the Navajo people's reverence for nature. As she writes, "Awareness is our prayer. Beauty will prevail. Nature people are showing us the way"<sup>17</sup>. In *Pieces of White Shell*, for example, she describes coyotes as totemic animals<sup>18</sup>. But when she then sees a coyote's skin hanging outside a farm, after the farmer has killed it, she refers to the dead animal as "Jesus Coyote" hanging on the cross<sup>19</sup>. Williams, thus, creates her own mythology, blending that of the Natives and her Mormon creed.

In an interview, Williams highlighted how childhood could be gifted with a second sight, recalling that Joseph Smith Jr, founder of Mormonism was an adolescent when he had experienced sacred visions. As she writes:

I believe the [Mormon culture] is in many ways a magical religion. I'm sure the Hierarchy would disagree with me on this, but our Church was founded by Joseph Smith, a 14-years-old who had a vision. We were taught as children that we could have visions too. Add to this notion my family's love affair with the land where most of our time together was spent outside, and I became a prolific daydreamer. To imagine over a landscape came quite naturally. The natural world was the spiritual world. [...] And so it was a spiritual experience being in nature, it was a safe experience because we were largely with family, it was an intellectual experience because we were learning the names of things, were learning what was related to what, and what we might see, and it was fun. It never stopped being fun for me, so it's a simple response. And it was most always in a context of love and respect for the land and for each other<sup>20</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> Williams, *Refuge*, op. cit., pp. 14-15.

<sup>16</sup> Ead., *An Unspoken Hunger*, op. cit., p. 127.

<sup>17</sup> Ead., *Boom! Erosion of Belief*, in *Erosion. Essays of Undoing*, Crichton Books, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, Kindle edition, location 3117.

<sup>18</sup> Ead., *Pieces of White Shell. A Journey to Navajoland*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York 1983.

<sup>19</sup> Ead., *An Unspoken Hunger*, op. cit., p. 144.

<sup>20</sup> Jocalyn Bartkevicious and Mary Hussmann, *A Conversation with Terry Tempest Williams*, in Austin (ed.) *A Voice in the Wilderness*, op. cit., p. 78.

Thus, Williams's narrations about her astonished gaze when she was a child, the first amazement she felt towards nature, the magical sense of the sacred that is hidden behind the multifaceted beauty of the natural world are also evidence of Williams's deep knowledge of Carson's *Sense of Wonder*. Furthermore, these are all fundamental aspects in order to understand Terry Tempest Williams's environmental philosophy and ecopedagogical insight.

### Story-Telling and Role-Play

On February 16, 1987, Williams's mother, years earlier affected by breast cancer, died of ovarian cancer. She was followed by Williams's grandmother, her brother and other family members. Between 1952 and 1962, the atomic tests at the Nevada Test Site exposed the Tempest family, as well as other Utah residents, to radioactive fallout. According to Williams, this explained the high rate of tumours in "downwind" communities<sup>21</sup>. Hence Williams draws the strength from all this to launch a campaign against nuclear tests, and write her most known work: *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*, published in 1991.

In *Refuge*, Williams builds a complex narrative that intersects the death of her mother and the flooding of the Great Salt Lake which destroys the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge.

Williams's autobiographical prose is committed to describing Utah's arid nature and landscape with lyrical and passionate tones. It is from the history of cancer in her family that Williams draws the strength for her political commitment; for this reason, her writing becomes a form of protest. One of the important themes of her thought is that "testimony" could become a powerful and subversive tool for addressing the environmental anti-nuclear issues, and women's health concerns<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> The term 'downwinders' was used to refer to the population affected by debris and nuclear ash, because they resided in the area affected by air currents that carried the nuclear debris and spread it over their houses and gardens. In the Commission documents for Atomic Energy, they were defined 'a low-use segment of the population'. See Carole Gallagher, *American Ground Zero. The Secret Nuclear War*, The MIT Press 1993, p. xiii. See also Philip L. Fradkin, *Fallout: An American Nuclear Tragedy*, Johnson Books, Boulder, Colorado 2004. John Fuller, *The Day We Bombed Utah. America's Most Lethal Secret*, Signet Books 1984; Paul S. Boyer, *Fallout: a historian reflects on America's half-century encounter with nuclear weapons*, Ohio State University Press, Columbus, Ohio 1998; A. Costandina Titus, *Bombs in the Backyard: Atomic Testing and American Politics*, University of Nevada Press, Reno, Nevada 2006; Howard Ball, *Justice Downwind. America's Atomic Testing Program in the 1950s*, Oxford University Press, New York 1986.

<sup>22</sup> Rachel Carson supported anti-nuclear campaigns during the Cold War, and felt concern for the Berlin crisis of 1961 and the Cuban crisis of the following year. She has committed herself to banning nuclear tests in the atmosphere from 1954. Carson was aware of the consequences of nuclear tests in the Pacific Ocean. After the success of *The Sea around Us*, in 1952, Roger Revelle invited Carson on a four-month expedition called Operation Capricorn, in the South Pacific, to make an inspection of the Marshall Islands. Although Carson was unable to participate, she read Revelle's reports on the state of the islands after the use of the atomic bombs; the inhabitants and all the other living beings that populated the Marshall Islands were subjected to very high levels of nuclear fallout. Carson was concerned not only about the nuclear fallout, but also about the radioactive waste. In the new edition of *The Sea around Us*, the author outlines the "precautionary" principle of the potential dangers of nuclear waste in the sea, which although encapsulated in hermetic sarcophagi, is not safe in the seabed, because the latter is not inert, but alive and changeable. Therefore, the accumulation of toxic

Even though *Refuge* was William's first literary success, it is important to remember here that the book with which Williams made her literary debut was designed for a younger public. In 1984, Williams wrote *The Secret Language of Snow* together with her mentor, Ted Major. The book describes the different names the Inuit use to refer to snow. Connecting native culture to scientific features, *The Secret Language of Snow* uses lyricism and images to convey knowledge, but also to transmit a sense of respect and reverence for natural phenomena, animal life, and different cultures. The authors invite the young readers to carry out some simple scientific experiments, but also to freely enjoy snow in a particular experience. For example, we read:

Have you ever tilted your head way back and watched snowflakes drift to earth? If so, you may have felt the soft flakes tickling your face, or piling up on your eyelashes. Have you ever tried to catch snowflakes with your tongue as they fall? Or to keep one snowflake by itself in your hand? Falling snow, when seen through Kobuk Eskimo eyes, is called *annui*. Where does it come from? How is it made?<sup>23</sup>

To better understand how Williams's philosophy as a writer and educator took shape, we should recall the Author's 1974 field experience in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. While she was a student, Williams obtained a fellowship to spend an entire summer at the Teton Science School, in the Grand Teton National Park. Here, the educators Ted Major and his wife Joan trained entire generations of researchers, naturalists, and teachers, with a special focus on environmental issues. The training was mainly in the field, and included long excursions in the Grand Teton, led by Major. Williams recalls how this experience opened her mind, enhanced her engagement with the natural world, and connected the passion for nature to politics. She writes:

Ted Major was the first Democrat I had ever met, an old-fashioned progressive who echoed César Chávez: 'In a damaged human habitat, all problems merge'. When we talked about natural history, we talked about politics. 'We need education and laws to protect what is wild,' he would say. Law, history, religion, racism, speciesism, health were all under the rubric of responsible citizenry. Ted was a true patriot. His love of country included wilderness. It was also the first time I had been introduced to the word ecology. I was eighteen years old"<sup>24</sup>.

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and radioactive materials in the oceans would have serious consequences. In a speech entitled *The Pollution of Our Environment* presented at the San Francisco Annual Report of the Kaiser Foundation Hospitals and Permanent Medical Group in October 1963, Carson criticized nuclear tests, warned of the consequences of fallout and the radioactive waste and brought to light studies on Arctic lichens and Utah milk, where the presence of radioactive isotopes enters the food chain and affects human health. See Rachel Carson, *The Pollution of Our Environment*, in *Silent Spring and Other Writings on the Environment*, The Library of America, New York 2018. Ead., *The Sea Around Us*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1951. See also Robert K. Musil, *Rachel Carson, Terry Tempest Williams, and Ecological Empathy*, in Id., *Rachel Carson and Her Sisters: Extraordinary Women Who Have Shaped America's Environment*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick 2014, and Bruna Bianchi, *Rachel Carson e l'etica della venerazione della vita*, in *DEP. Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista telematica sulla memoria femminile*, 35, 2017, pp. 42-77.

<sup>23</sup> Williams and Ted Major, *The Secret Language of Snow*, Sierra Club/Pantheon Books, San Francisco and New York 1984.

<sup>24</sup> Ead., *When Women Where Birds*, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

At the Teton Science School, naturalistic features were imparted through story-telling, as Williams describes: “It was a baptism through stories [...] We gathered in the library with a fire roaring and listened to other storytellers talk about culture and landscape [...]. We were able to engage in conversation, ask them questions and listen. In the process, our ideas were forming”<sup>25</sup>.

Williams became the first intern at the Teton Science School. She organised and led naturalistic walks, as a bird-watching guide. Two days after getting married, Williams and her husband started working at the Teton Science School as instructors. The community, which has existed since 1966, adopts a special educational method that blends culture and nature together, and story-telling is used as a means to put across scientific features. In this community, Williams recalls she encountered Buckminster Fuller, Peter Matthiessen, Gary Snyder, Wallace Stegner, Barr Lopez and Simon Ortiz. The practices of listening to, and interacting with experts and narrators were the very moments when the young minds attending these particular lectures learnt most. After this experience, Williams used story-telling as a means of transmitting her passion for nature, and educating readers about her extended notion of democracy.

After *The Secret Language of Snow*, Williams published *Between Cattails*, another book for children that celebrates Williams’s passion for the Bear River Migratory Birds’ Refuge. Destined for a younger public, *Between Cattails* is a poem that plays with sounds and images in the description of the life in the marsh. Scientific features are conveyed through simple and masterfully selected words, blended with lyric imagery. The engagement with the protection of this fragile ecosystem emerges when Williams reminds young readers that “To save these stories / we must treat the marsh / tenderly”<sup>26</sup>.

What these two books for children have in common is the precise knowledge of the natural phenomena and ecosystems described, and the aesthetic perception of nature. Williams blends together the scientific and the lyric voices with a painstaking selection of words to describe the natural world in order to inspire readers with the experience of the beauty of nature.

In *Pieces of White Shell*, Williams highlights the importance of story-telling, with special reference to Navajo stories. As Williams writes:

Storytelling is the oldest form of education. Is the power of image making. Among Native Americans the oral tradition of a tribe is its most important vehicle for teaching and passing on sacred knowledge and practices of the people [...]. I am not suggesting we emulate Native Peoples [...]. We must create and find our own stories, our own myths, with symbols that will bind us to the world we see today. In so doing, we will better know how to live our lives in the midst of change”<sup>27</sup>.

Williams’s subsequent teaching experience involved her for five years at Carden School, Salt Lake City, Utah, where she was taken on to teach Science. She

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<sup>25</sup> Williams, *Hearing Stories, Finding Family, Returning Home*, “High Country News”, June 10, 1996.

<sup>26</sup> Ead., *Between Cattails*, Charles Scribner’s Sons, New York, 1985.

<sup>27</sup> Ead., *Pieces of White Shell. A Journey to Navajoland*, Charles Scribner’s Sons, New York 1984, 4-5.

recalls this period of life using ambivalent tones: on the one hand she was positively involved in inspiring young minds, and in transmitting her passion for the natural world to them. On the other hand, she had to face a conservative director, who did not appreciate William's unorthodox ways of teaching.

In fact, Williams elicited the children's sense of wonder towards the natural world through story-telling and role-play. For example, Williams encouraged her young students to mimic whales in search of their fellows. Children rolled and imitated the whales' sounds and body-movements in the room, while listening to the whales' songs<sup>28</sup>. This "performative" practice displeased Williams's conservative head-teacher, and she was subsequently dismissed. However, behind the playful way of conveying a scientific notion (i.e. the whales' behaviour), through this peculiar role-play, Williams was also opening the children's minds, and was helping them to conceive whales as individuals with a specific agency. In other words, Williams trained the children's empathy towards the natural world. This carried a specific political meaning, since Williams stated: "I came to learn, was that a shared love of nature was the most political act of all. Finding one's voice is a process of finding one's passion. I found my voice in teaching"<sup>29</sup>.

### The Ability to Listen

Williams remembers that her grandmother exercised her auditory sense when listening to the birds singing. Birdsong is the most recurrent sound in Williams's writings<sup>30</sup>. The importance of listening to a voice/voices emerges again when she recalls her childhood's afternoons spent enjoying Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*. It was then, she states, that she "received [her] first tutorial on voice", but also "an early lesson on how the balance of nature could be articulated through story"<sup>31</sup>. Hence, we should draw on Williams's thought to understand the importance of the act of listening. In fact, she proposes the use of sound to recreate the interactions between living beings. In her writings, she evokes not only images, but she also reproduces "soundscapes", which correspond to a visual, auditory, and emotional sensitivity towards the natural world. As Masami Razer Yuki shows, the lack of listening reinforces the language of domination<sup>32</sup>. Listening ability is an attitude of acceptance and recognition of the other, which implies a horizontal relationship, contrary to the control attitude typical of a system of domination - a relationship that instead develops vertically. According to Williams, the inability to listen corresponds to the inability of human beings to develop conservationist attitudes that respect other living beings. In her thought, "Echo System" is a "situated"

<sup>28</sup> Ead., *When Women Were Birds*, op. cit., p. 85.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>30</sup> See Masami Razer Yuki, *Sound Ground to Stand On: Soundscapes in Williams's Work*, in Katherine R. Chandler and Malissa G. Goldthwaite (ed.) *Surveying Literary Landscapes of Terry Tempest Williams. New Critical Essays*, The University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City 2003, pp. 81-94.

<sup>31</sup> Williams, *When Women Where Birds*, op. cit., p. 27.

<sup>32</sup> Masami Razer Yuki, *Sound Ground to Stand On*, op. cit., pp. 81-94.

concept which does not only incorporate the meaning of *oikos*, home, the prefix from which terms such as “ecosystem”, or “ecology” derive; but it also embodies the meaning of “echo”, the acoustic effect due to which, a sound, reflecting against an obstacle, is heard again. But “echo” means also “resonance” and “response”. Williams writes: “echoes are real – not imaginary. We call – and the earth calls us back. It is our interaction with the ecosystem. The Eco System”<sup>33</sup>. In the author’s thought, the inability to listen to nature is the same as the inability to listen to human beings and, in particular, those who are the most vulnerable.

This specific idea allows her to extend the very notion of “ecosystem” because it does not imply them natural and anthropic dynamics but also family and affective dynamics. The scientific notion is expanded, and, by osmosis, includes not only the material life of people, but also the “spiritual” and the “emotional”. As Williams writes:

I believe [in a] politics rooted in empathy in which we extend our notion of community, as Aldo Leopold has urged, to include all life forms – plants, animals, rivers, and soils. The enterprise of conservation is a revolution, an evolution of the spirit. We call to the land – and the land calls us back. Eco System<sup>34</sup>.

Her particular concept of “empathetic” politics bases its meaning on connection, and on relationship<sup>35</sup>. It implies also a sympathetic understanding, a cognitive approach that goes through the use of the senses, a dialogue with another one, that passes through recognition and respect<sup>36</sup>.

I would like to suggest reading Williams’s writings in the light of Richard Khan’s ecopedagogical interpretation inferred from various essays of Marcuse’s<sup>37</sup>.

As Charles Reitz highlighted, Marcuse suggested the “inner connection between [...] beauty, truth, art, and freedom”, and asserted that the notion of aesthetics as something ineffective and unrealistic was the result of a “cultural repression”<sup>38</sup>. According to Reitz, in Marcuse’s reasoning, the repressive civilization tends to

<sup>33</sup> Williams, *An Unspoken Hunger*, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

<sup>34</sup> *Ivi*, p. 87.

<sup>35</sup> See Chandler and Goldthwaite (ed.) *Surveying Literary Landscapes*, *op. cit.*, pp. 47-58, and 59-80.

<sup>36</sup> See Williams, *Red, Passion and Patience in the Desert*, *op. cit.*

<sup>37</sup> Khan, *Critical Pedagogy*, *op. cit.* See also Kahn, *For a Marcusian Ecopedagogy in Marcuse’s challenge to education*, *op. cit.*, pp. 79-102. Samuel Day Fassbinder, *Greening the Academy: Ecopedagogy Through the Liberal Arts*, SensePublishers, Rotterdam 2012. See Herbert Marcuse, *Lecture on Education, Brooklyn College (1968)* in *Marcuse’s challenge to education*, *op. cit.*, pp. 33-39, and Marcuse, *Lecture on Higher Education and Politics*, Berkeley (1975), in *Marcuse’s challenge to education*, *op. cit.*, p. 40-44. Marcuse, *Ecology and Revolution (1974)* in Kellner (ed.) *The New Left and the 1960s*, Collected papers, vol. 6, Routledge, New York 2005, pp. 173-176, and Marcuse, *Ecology and the Critique of Modern Society*, “Capitalism, Nature, Socialism. A Journal of Socialist Ecology”, 3, No. 3 (1979), pp. 29-38. Andrew Feenberg – Joel Kovel – Douglas Kellner, *Commentaries on Marcuse on Ecology*, “Capitalism, Nature, Socialism. A Journal of Socialist Ecology”, 3, No. 3 (1979), pp. 38-48. See also, Reitz, *Ecology and Revolution: Herbert Marcuse and the Challenge of a New World System Today*, Routledge, New York 2019.

<sup>38</sup> Charles Reitz, *Art, Alienation, and Humanities. A Critical Engagement with Herbert Marcuse*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2000. Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, Beacon Press, Boston, Mass. 1978, p. 173. See also Khan, *Critical Ecopedagogy*, *op. cit.* See also Kahn, *For a Marcusian Ecopedagogy in Marcuse’s challenge to education*, *op. cit.*

propose archetypes that reproduce dichotomies, failing to grasp the “creative receptivity”<sup>39</sup>. As Marcuse stated:

The foundation of Aesthetics as an independent discipline counteracts the repressive rule of reason. The efforts to demonstrate the central position of the aesthetic function and to establish it as an existential category invoke the inherent truth values of the senses against their deprivation under the reality principle. The discipline of aesthetics [...] aims at a liberation of the senses which, far from destroying civilization, would give it a firmer basis and would greatly enhance its potentialities<sup>40</sup>.

Thus, Marcuse suggested liberating man from “inhuman existential condition” through the play, which would enable humans to manifest existence without fear or anxiety. Moreover, as Marcuse specifies, in order to achieve human liberation, a reconciliation with nature is necessary<sup>41</sup>.

We can find a playful cognitive approach in Williams’s books for children, when, for instance, she invites her young readers to take care, respect, and “treat [...] tenderly”<sup>42</sup> the natural world that surrounds them. Moreover, she invites her children to take part in the natural world, in a sort of spontaneous and playful act: for example, when she invites children to perceive the falling snow on their tongues, or to imitate whales swimming. This is a training them to go beyond the artificial boundary between nature and culture, and to recover a new relationship with the natural world, which will then result in a political act. In fact, subsequent to the empathic recognition of non-human life’s agency, the result will be the act of “taking a stand” for its protection<sup>43</sup>.

### Education, Nature and Democracy

When Williams attended university, she was in search of a major in “Environmental English”. In an interview she recalls that:

I was torn because there wasn’t enough time to take all the literary requirements and all the biological requirements, so I asked my advisor if I could major in “environmental English” [...] “Absolutely not!” he said. So I went over the biology department and asked them if I could major in “literary biology”, and they looked at me and said “You are completely mad” [...] So I wound up with a straight English major and biology as a minor. Finally, in graduate school, I was able to integrate my passion for the two through story. By exploring narrative, within the Navajo culture, I saw a correspondence between language and landscape<sup>44</sup>.

<sup>39</sup> Reitz, *Art, Alienation, and Humanities*, *op. cit.*, Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

<sup>40</sup> Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, *op. cit.*, p. 181. See also Reitz, *Art, Alienation, and Humanities*, *op. cit.*

<sup>41</sup> Marcuse, *Ecology and Revolution*, *op. cit.* See also Kahn, *For a Marcusean Ecopedagogy in Marcuse’s challenge to education*, *op. cit.*, Charles Reitz, *Art, Alienation, and Humanities*, *op. cit.*

<sup>42</sup> Williams, *Between Cattails*, *op. cit.*

<sup>43</sup> See Khan, *Critical Ecopedagogy*, *op. cit.*

<sup>44</sup> David Petersen, *Memory is the Only Way Home. A Conversational Interview with Terry Tempest Williams*, “The Bloomsbury Review” (1991) in Michael Austin (ed.), *A Voice in the Wilderness. Conversations with Terry Tempest Williams*, Utah State University Press, Logan, Utah 2006, pp. 15-16.

In 2003, Terry Tempest Williams founded the Environmental Humanities Graduate Program at the University of Utah, where she taught “Art, Advocacy, and Landscape”. Until 2016, she conducted field research with students, analysing communities dependent on the fossil fuel development in Utah, and the consequences of fracking on the environment and people’s health. In the end, she felt forced to resign because she could not bear the University limitations ultimately required of her, nor “an institution that privileges compliance over creativity”<sup>45</sup>, as she replied to the University of Utah’s decision for her early retirement, which she connects to her latest political action against the Bureau of Land Management<sup>46</sup>.

In 2017, Williams joined the Harvard Divinity School as “writer-in-residence”, where she led the seminar “Apocalyptic Grief, Radical Joy”, on the sense of loss and hope in a climate crisis era<sup>47</sup>. Even if she now teaches young adults, Williams’s philosophy of education still aims at transmitting conservationist behaviour through the exercise of “wonder”.

Williams’s ecopedagogy does not follow a theoretical pattern, but it is the result of her personal experience, blended with Rachel Carson’s thought. Through the story-telling, role-playing, the exercise of listening and the aesthetic experience of wonder, Williams conveys respect for the natural world. In the following argumentation, I will show how Williams’s ecopedagogy may be aimed at rewriting the concept of democracy.

For this purpose, I would like to mention a passage from *All That Is Hidden*. In this chapter, Williams describes her walks in the Cabeza Prieta Wildlife Refuge in Arizona, while military training was taking place. Through her words, the entire wildlife expresses its vulnerability in the face of the blindness and deafness of those involved in the military training, and all the politics that lies behind it. She writes: “I am reduced to an animal vulnerability. They can do with me what they wish: one bullet, I am dead. I am a random target with the cholla, ocotillo, lizards, and ants. In the company of orange-and-black-beaded gila monsters<sup>48</sup>, I am expendable. No, it’s worse than that – we do not exist”<sup>49</sup>.

We may consider Williams’s writings a counterbalance to the exclusion from politics and the dominant story of those who are apparently “voiceless”<sup>50</sup>. Here again Williams is in line with the same commitment Rachel Carson showed in *Silent Spring*: giving voice to those who are not able to speak for themselves. In fact, Carson wrote: “This sudden silencing of the song of birds, this obliteration of the color and beauty and interest they lend to our world have come about swiftly,

<sup>45</sup> Williams, *My Beautiful Undoing: Erosion of Self*, in Ead., *Erosion. Essays of Undoing*, Sarah Crichton Books, New York, (ebook), location 2148.

<sup>46</sup> *Ivi*, location 2007 – 2228.

<sup>47</sup> See New HDS Course Addresses Grief, Joy, and the “Brokenness of the World”, in <https://hds.harvard.edu/news/2018/04/26/new-hds-course-addresses-grief-joy-and-climate-change> (20/06/2020)

<sup>48</sup> *Heloderma Suspectum*, a particular species of desert lizard.

<sup>49</sup> Williams, *All That Is Hidden*, in *An Unspoken Hunger*, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

<sup>50</sup> In Williams’s narrative, the unwritten story of those who have no voice is emblematically represented by her mother’s diaries, which she has inherited.

insidiously, and unnoticed [...]. It is hard to explain to the children that the birds have been killed off [...] ‘Will they ever come back?’ they ask [...] *Is anything being done? Can anything be done? Can I do anything?’*<sup>51</sup>.

The act of “silencing” is described by Carson as the result of a moment of “inattention”, for example, when she writes:

Who has decided – who has the right to decide – for the countless legions of people who were not consulted that the supreme value is a world without insects, even though it be also a sterile world ungraced by the curving wing of a bird in flight? The decision is that of the authoritarian temporarily entrusted with power; he has made it during a moment of inattention by millions to whom beauty and the ordered world of nature still have a meaning that is deep and imperative<sup>52</sup>.

As Terence Ball shows, there is not a logical and immediate connection between democracy and environmentalism, since democratic majorities may decide to implement policies that destroy the environment. In the concept of democracy as ordinarily known, not only do we not include members of our “biotic community” – to use a term of Aldo Leopold’s – such as non-human animals, landscape, ecosystems, habitats, etc., but we also exclude children, and the future generations. Thus, Ball suggests that rewriting a more inclusive democracy should also consider constituencies that have no voice, because of physical limits (i.e. children, non-human animals, and also landscapes), or because they will be part of, even though they are not yet, the community of living beings (i.e. future generations). For this reason, it is necessary for representatives to use their voice to stand up for voiceless individuals (humans and non-human, in a very extended sense). As Ball highlights, this task requires a special ability to listen to/ listen for, in other words, the ability to apply sympathetic listening, and a special attentiveness to others’ agencies<sup>53</sup>.

Thus, the importance of Richard Khan’s “critical ecopedagogy” will be clear. According to Khan, an ecological critique shows an anti-imperialist, anti-racist and pro-democracy attitude. Contrary to the institutionalization of environmental studies as hard science, Kahn adopts the Marcusean concept of “Humanitas” to overcome the dichotomy between nature and culture, human and nonhuman, postulating Marcuse’s “revolutionary eco-pedagogy”. Marcuse’s educational theory, which was first outlined by Charles Reitz, in *Art, Alienation, and the Humanities* (2000)<sup>54</sup>, suggested that schools and educational programs should foster critical, multidimensional rather than one-dimensional thinking. The over-specialization and segmentation of disciplines turns into the one-dimensional standardization which is the result of a repressing civilization. As a solution, aesthetic education may provide the radical and revolutionary function of

<sup>51</sup> Carson, *Silent Spring*, *op. cit.*, pp.142-143.

<sup>52</sup> *Ivi*, p. 176.

<sup>53</sup> Ball, *Democracy*, in Andrew Dobson and Robyn Eckersley (ed.) *Political Theory and Ecological Challenge*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2006, pp. 133-147.

<sup>54</sup> See Charles Reitz, *Art, Alienation, and Humanities. A Critical Engagement with Herbert Marcuse*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2000; See also Douglas Kellner – Tyson Lewis – Clayton Pierce – Daniel Cho, Introduction to *Marcuse’s challenge to education*, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-33.

liberation<sup>55</sup>. In Marcuse's words, "this kind of education may well reduce the protective barriers which separate the classroom from the reality outside. It may promote civil disobedience"<sup>56</sup>.

As Khan and Reitz demonstrated, Marcuse highlighted the crucial role of aesthetic education in freeing man from the established one-dimensional reality. According to Marcuse, destructiveness as the main feature of the capitalistic/consumeristic society<sup>57</sup>. When referring to the war-machine destructiveness, Marcuse thinks about Auschwitz (i.e. genocide), and the Vietnam War (i.e. ecocide). He ultimately referred to as ecocide that which affects "those who aren't even born yet by burning and poisoning the Earth, defoliating the forests, blowing up the dikes"<sup>58</sup>.

In Marcuse's words, "the goal of radical change today is the emergence of human beings who are physically and mentally incapable of inventing another Auschwitz"<sup>59</sup>. Marcuse outlined the destructiveness of a capitalistic logic. For instance, he wrote:

Monopoly capitalism is waging a war against nature – human nature as well as external nature. For the demands on ever more intense exploitation came into conflict with nature itself, since nature is the source and locus of the life instincts which struggle against the instincts of aggression and destruction. And the demands of exploitation progressively reduce and exhaust resources: the more capitalist productivity increases, the more destructive it becomes. This is one of the internal contradictions of capitalism<sup>60</sup>.

As he asserted at a conference on Ecology and Revolution held in Paris in 1972, "the violation of the earth is a vital aspect of the counterrevolution"<sup>61</sup>, and he connected this "bloody insanity" to "the cruel waste of destructive forces and consumption of commodities of death manufactured by the war industry"<sup>62</sup>. Thus he welcomed

the revolt of youth (students, workers, women) undertaken in the name of the values of freedom and happiness [as] an attack on all the values which govern the capitalist system [and] oriented toward the pursuit of a radically different natural and technical environment

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<sup>55</sup> See Charles Reitz, *Art, Alienation, and the Humanities*, 2000; Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*; Id., *The One-Dimensional Man* 1964; Id., *The Aesthetic Dimension*, 1978.

<sup>56</sup> Marcuse, *Lecture on Education, Brooklyn College* (1968) in *Marcuse's challenge to education*, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

<sup>57</sup> See Marcuse, *Ecology and Revolution* (1974) in Kellner (ed.) *The New Left and the 1960s*, *op. cit.*, pp. 173-176. See also Malcom Miles, *Eco-aesthetic dimensions: Herbert Marcuse, Ecology and Art*, "Cogent Arts & Humanities", 3, No. 1, 2016, pp. 1-17. See also Charles Reitz, *Art, Alienation, and Humanities*, *op. cit.*; Khan, *Critical Ecopedagogy*, *op. cit.*; Id., *For a Marcusian Ecopedagogy* in *Marcuse's challenge to education*, *op. cit.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ivi*, p. 173. See also Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, *op. cit.*

<sup>59</sup> *Id.*, *Ecology and the Critique of Modern Society* (1979), Douglas Kellner and Clayton Pierce (ed.) *Philosophy, Psychoanalysis and Emancipation*. Collected Papers, Vol. 5, Routledge, New York 2011, p. 213.

<sup>60</sup> Marcuse, *Ecology and Revolution* *op. cit.*, p. 174.

<sup>61</sup> *Ivi*, p. 173.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibidem*.

[an attempt] to establish non-alienated relations between the sexes, between generations, between man and nature<sup>63</sup>.

Williams writes: “The extermination of a species and the extermination of a people are predicated on the same impulses: prejudice, cruelty, arrogance and ignorance. If we cannot begin to see the world whole in all its connectivity, honoring the sacred nature of life, then I fear we further fracture and fragment the integrity of our communities, as we continue to cultivate the seedbed of war”<sup>64</sup>.

Using Peter Matthiessen’s words, Williams declares the need of an “empathetic intelligence”<sup>65</sup>, in order to understand that the pollution of the environment, the threat to ecosystems, and ecocide are actions of (self)-destruction. Williams specifies that through the slow and relentless killing of nature, human beings would ultimately also kill themselves<sup>66</sup>.

As Richard Khan and Charles Reitz demonstrated, Marcuse considered the ecology movement as “a political movement and a psychological movement of liberation” because “the protection of life and the environment, will also pacify nature within men and women”<sup>67</sup>. Furthermore, he highlighted the role of art and beauty which “can contribute to changing the consciousness [...] of men and women who could change the world”<sup>68</sup>. For Williams, reverence for life is a creative act, a form of activism, a concrete policy. In her essay, *Paper, Rock, Scissors*, we read:

By honoring wilderness, we honor beauty. Beauty is not peripheral, but at the core of what sustains us. Awe and wonder ignite our imagination. We are inspired. We witness the magnificent and miraculous nature of creation. Wilderness becomes soul settling; a homecoming; a reminder of what we have forgotten – that where there is harmony there is wholeness. The world is interconnected and interrelated. Wild nature is not only to be protected, but celebrated<sup>69</sup>.

Analysing Marcuse’s work on education and ecology, Kahn highlights how ecopedagogy turns into political education<sup>70</sup>. Khan explains that “those seeking to take up ecopedagogy [...] must [...] integrate the ecological critique into the politics and culture of civic freedom and equality and so become sustainability radicals”<sup>71</sup>. A revised democracy, which would abandon its anthropocentric

<sup>63</sup> Ivi, p. 174. The connection between war and the poisoning of the environment was outlined by Rachel Carson who wrote how synthetic chemicals employed in agriculture against insects are “a child of the Second World War” and “chemical warfare”, see Carson, *Silent Spring* (1962), Houghton Mifflin Company, New York 1994, p. 16.

<sup>64</sup> Williams, *Finding Beauty in a Broken World*, Vintage Books, New York, 2009, p. 285.

<sup>65</sup> Ead., *An Unspoken Hunger*, op.cit., p. 108.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>67</sup> Marcuse, *Ecology and the Critique of Modern Society*, op. cit., p. 212. See also Charles Reitz, *Art, Alienation, and Humanities. A Critical Engagement with Herbert Marcuse*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2000.

<sup>68</sup> *Id.*, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, op. cit., p. 33.

<sup>69</sup> Williams, *Paper, Rock Scissors. The Wilderness Act*, in *Erosion*, op. cit., location 669.

<sup>70</sup> Khan, *Critical Pedagogy*, op. cit.

<sup>71</sup> Ivi, p. 136.

feature, needs a “civically – and environmentally – educated and engaged citizenry”<sup>72</sup>. According to Khan, it follows that, for the making of conservationist minds, there is a need of a new pedagogy which is no longer anthropocentric but “eco-centric”. This could be ultimately recognized as the same aim of Terry Tempest Williams’s work as an educator and a writer.

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<sup>72</sup> Ball, *Democracy*, in Andrew Dobson and Robyn Eckersley (ed.) *Political Theory and Ecological Challenge*, *op. cit.*, p. 140.