

Engaging with the World: An Interview with Terry Tempest Williams

Zheng Zhaomei & Terry Tempest Williams

Abstract: Terry Tempest Williams (1955-) is author of fifteen books including the environmental literature classic, *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*. Her work has been translated and anthologized around the world, and *Refuge* was translated into Chinese in 2010. Williams is a Rachel Carson Honor Roll inductee, winner of a Lannan Literary Fellowship, and winner of the Robert Marshall Award from the Wilderness Society. In addition to her work as a naturalist and writer, Williams has been active in the struggle to conserve public lands. In the interview, Williams upheld Albert Schweitzer's call for "a reverence for life", hoping to spark a higher consciousness of inclusion, parity and respect for all humanity and non-humanity, especially the marginalized and the silenced. Williams believes that in the face of the deteriorating environmental crisis, a writer's responsibility lies not only in the writing but also in action to save the earth.

Key words: Terry Tempest Williams; environmental literature; environmental activist; engagement

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标题：投身世界：特丽·坦皮斯特·威廉斯访谈录

内容摘要：特丽·坦皮斯特·威廉斯（1955-）是美国著名的自然文学作家，先后出版十五部著作，其中《心灵的慰藉：一部非同寻常的地域与家族史》被誉为美国自然文学经典之作，于2010年译入中文。威廉斯获得过诸多奖项和殊荣，如入选“蕾切尔·卡森荣誉榜”，荣获“兰南文学奖”¹，以及美国最具影响力的民间自然资源保护组织奖项：由美国荒野保护协会授予的罗伯特·马歇尔奖等等。本次访谈围绕威廉斯对身份认同、文学创作和中美文化交流等几个方面展开，有助于加深理解作家的创作理念。威廉斯在访谈中，重申阿尔贝特·施韦泽提出的“敬畏生命”的思想，呼吁将所有人类和非人类都纳入到同一个命运共同体中，以包容、开放和尊重的态度对待一切事物，尤其是被边缘化、被消声的事物。威廉斯强调在环境危机日益严重的今天，作家的责任不仅仅局限在书斋中的写作，同时应付诸行动，投身保护地球的实践中。

关键词：特丽·坦皮斯特·威廉斯；环境文学；环保人士；积极参与

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Zheng Zhaomei (hereafter Zheng): Ms. Williams, your *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* was translated into Chinese in 2010, and since then more and more Chinese readers and critics have become interested in your writings and yourself as well. We are curious that you are playing many roles at the same time: a writer, a feminist, a Mormon, a scientist, an environmentalist, an activist, an educator, a speaker... some of which are considered as conflicting by critics. Just as Katherine R. Chandler and Melissa Goldthwaite commented that “tensions and oppositions abound in her work . . . As critics, we have set our sights on ferreting out how those contradictions contribute to a coherent vision.” Do you think yourself as multifaceted? Which role(s) do you think are the most important and which most challenging?

1 “兰南文学奖”（the Lannan Literary Award）是兰南家族于1989年设立的，用于奖励以英语写作的优秀作家的文学奖，分为诗歌、小说和非小说三类，每类奖金为15万美金，是世界上奖金数额最高的文学奖之一。威廉斯荣获了1993年度“兰南文学奖”非小说类奖。

Terry Tempest Williams (hereafter Williams): When I was young, I often wondered am I an artist or an activist? Am I a Mormon or a feminist? Am I citizen of the American West or a global citizen? Now, I don't worry about that any more. I am a writer engaged with the world. I believe in engaging both the internal and external landscapes, simultaneously. Perhaps, this is what it means to be an integrated human being. There are times I teach, there are times I speak, there are times I write. And there are times, I am deeply quiet and contemplative in the desert. For me, it is always about being present. I see no contradictions. I am comfortable with paradoxes. I am a Mormon woman who is a radical soul in a conservative religion. Though I am not "active" in a religious sense, it is my culture and one of the communities I am committed to, even if I am an edgewalker. What is my coherent vision? I believe in a world that is interconnected and interrelated. I believe we have a responsibility to take care of the places we call home, both large and small on this beautiful planet we call Earth. I want to be present in this moment in time, and speak on behalf of Beauty and Justice; I want to speak as truthfully and passionately as I can in the name of community, both human and wild. And I want to contribute through my voice on the page and in the world to help illuminate what Albert Schweitzer calls "a reverence for life." I want to be strong enough to not avert my gaze to what is difficult and hard.

I want to hold opposing views at once and embrace a complexity that allows us to grieve and dance, at once. I want to embody a sacred rage and a calm heart. I want to love the Earth enough to change.

You ask what is the greatest challenge? To live with my hypocrisy as a human being, knowing my very presence on the planet is contributing to its destruction.

Zheng: You come from a Mormon family, and you often claim yourself as a Mormon woman and an heir to a rich spiritual tradition. But Mormon readers often express frustration with your unorthodoxy and criticisms of the faith's emphasis on conformity, authority, and patriarchy. Are you struggling with your religious culture?

Williams: Octavio Paz said, "If we are interested in a revolution of the Spirit, an evolution of the Spirit, it requires both love and criticism." I feel both for my Mormon Culture. Although I am no longer orthodox, by that I mean I no longer believe in much of the Mormon theology, I still believe in the power of community, the force of prayer, and living a wholesome life rooted in place, deep tenants in the faith that raised me. So much of who I am is rooted in my religious background.

But there is also much about Mormon culture that I find not only stifling,

but aligned with “toxic masculinity.” I have witnessed the effects of structural racism within Mormonism, the ways in which Native People are viewed as “Lamenites,” how African-Americans were not allowed to hold the priesthood through much of my youth, and how women are still not allowed to hold the priesthood in a world where men and women are increasingly sharing equal power in the world.

Harold Bloom calls Mormonism an “American Religion.” I think this is an astute analysis. America is in crisis. The old forms of governance are no longer working for us, nor are the old structures of power. We are in a process of reimagining everything. One of the great qualities of Mormonism is its capacity to adapt. It is one of the reasons the religion has been so successful. The Church will change as its members change. Whatever criticism I offer to my home religion is with the hope of developing an edge of awareness and attention to social issues that might spark a higher consciousness of inclusion and parity for women, indigenous people, people of color, gay people, and trans -- that power not just be concentrated in a hierarchy of aging white men, but a more generous sharing of power will be cultivated in diversity giving rise to a broader and deeper sense of humanity that naturally expands to a spiritual solidarity of care and consciousness that extends to how we treat the Earth.

You ask if I am struggling with my religious culture. I struggle with the Mormon Church’s Patriarchy and power that renders others’ voices mute. I also deplore the intermingling of Church and State in the Utah, done behind closed doors. This has been evident in the current issue of Bears Ears National Monument and Senator Orrin Hatch’s actions to undermine Native People’s sacred lands. On Monday, December 4, 2017, President Donald Trump gutted Bears Ears National Monument by 85%. He acknowledged Orrin Hatch and all the other politicians in the state from the Congressional delegation (all Mormon) to the governor’s support. It was a terrible act of disrespect to the sacred lands of the Hopi, Navajo, Ute, and Zuni Nations. This was backed by the quiet support of the Mormon Church and acted out on the land by largely rural Mormon communities in places such as Blanding, Utah.

It’s complicated. But by eliminating 2 million acres of protected land, that land is now open to fossil fuel development. The state of Utah will benefit from that business and conversely, so will the Mormon Church. This is a corporate religion supporting corporate takeover of America’s public lands. It begs the question, “What is truly sacred?”

Zheng: Richard Jefferies was a British novelist and essayist in 19th century who helped pioneer the field of modern nature writing. *The Story of My Heart* is an autobiographical description of his “soul life” in nature, which was first published in 1883, but not much read and known today. A new edition of the book was published in 2014, as rediscovered by you and your husband, Brooke Williams, which gives modern readers a chance to meet Richard Jefferies who now has been rescued from obscurity. Why do you think it is important to bring this book back into print so that another generation could encounter Jefferies’ ideas?

Williams: Brooke and I fell in love with Richard Jefferies book, *The Story of My Heart*. We felt it explored the beauty and magic of the world we live in, a world that honors the mysteries that surround us — a life beyond materialism and cynicism that is informed by a mystical engagement with the world. By paying acute attention to Nature, we enhance our “soul-life,” the understanding that we belong to something much greater than ourselves. Jefferies explores a form of Earth Justice based in carrying for a world, both human and wild. We are not the only species that lives and breathes and loves on this planet. Jefferies does not believe in an anthropocentric view of God — God exists in all things — We become conscious of the Great Mysteries and liberate ourselves from the oppression of small thinking and living.

Zheng: In essays alongside Jefferies’ original work, Brooke and you contemplate dilemmas of modernity, the intrinsic need for wildness, and what it means to be human in the 21st century. During the process of delving into the love letter to nature, your relationship with each other and with the natural world has also been strengthened and refreshed (Torrey House Press). Could you tell us how it is achieved?

Williams: If you are talking about how we have maintained and flourished in a marriage that has expanded over four decades... Well, I think it is different for everyone. For us, it has been a daily adventure. If Thoreau said, “In wildness is the preservation of the world,” we could say “In wildness is the preservation of our marriage.” Brooke and I have always known that our love for each other included our love for the natural world. Our commitment is rooted in our community, both human and wild. We have consciously created a marriage filled with open spaces and mystery like the open spaces we love. We have never had a plan, we just trusted the next step before us and discussed it fully. We are in constant communication and communion with each other and the day at hand. We have honored the landscape of the imagination and dared to break set with

convention. We both have a high tolerance for uncertainty and risk. It has not been easy at times, but we have always known that growth comes out of the vitality of the struggle. I not only love, Brooke, but I respect him and cherish his curious, wild mind and his joyous, kind spirit. We have been lucky and we have never taken each other for granted, nor do we take the privilege that is ours for granted. We have beautiful friends who challenge and inspire us and families that support us, though we may disagree on many things. We believe in serving something larger than ourselves and that has been trying to serve a consciousness found in wild nature. And it is this that has been our spiritual grounding where our love and intimacy resides.

Zheng: You have complained about the hustle and bustle of modern life in an interview given by Michael Toms in 2000. “More and more I find that is the issue: how to create time, how to create buffers around us so that we are doing nothing. I think that may be our biggest disease right now — the disease of busyness.” And in *The Story of My Heart*, Richard Jefferies points out the importance of idleness. Do you think he has given us a cure?

Williams: I do not believe anyone can give us “a cure” to anything, especially, when it comes to how we manage and respect time. It is a daily practice, a conscious decision to slow down, to choose a more contemplative life over a frantic one. I schedule open days with as much resolve as I schedule public commitments. If I cannot see days free ahead of me, I cannot breathe. This is how essential my days of dreaming and writing and walking and being are to my creative existence. It also allows me to appreciate my days of engagement whether it is teaching a class or giving a talk or traveling to a far off place. There is a strange kind of balance in structuring a life that is both intensely public and deeply private.

Zheng: All your works are characteristic with a strong sense of place. You have employed three overlapping concepts to define your approach to place: poetics of place, politics of place and erotics of place. How are they related to one another?

Williams: Hmmm... what a great question. I have to think about that. Again, I think they are seamless — it’s how an ecosystem functions, all parts are integrated into the whole. Poetry, politics, place — all explored through love — yes, that is it — that is the landscape where I dwell daily. (I just have to say that it is snowing outside here in Cambridge and I am in heaven being in conversation with you, Emma, sipping cups of tea, a candle lit). Recently, I read these three lines from a poem written by W.S. Merwin:

Your absence has gone through me
 Like thread through a needle.
 Everything I do is stitched with its color.

The title of the poem is “Separation.” Perhaps, this is our daily practice to not be separated from the place where we dwell: the land, its people, its politics, and love ourselves enough to be present and engaged with one another, even in conflict, especially in conflict, with a full and brave heart. To truly listen to one another is the beginning of prayer. To create together is the beginning of ceremony. More and more, I feel we just have to empty ourselves to one another — give each other all we have in an honest and truthful way, understanding our weaknesses and limitations and face each other as imperfect human beings. It is in this space of humility, beauty reveals itself. In this tenderness, love creates a path we could not have seen without the gift of vulnerability and desire. This is how I understand an erotics of place — daring to love and engage with what scares us, what could literally kill us, emotionally and physically, but through our commitment to one another, we are brought into our highest and deepest selves and something real is brought forward.

Zheng: In your short essay “Why I write,” you compared writing as “the dance with paradox” and described your paradoxical attitudes toward writing as “I write to discover and I write to uncover……I write because I believe in words; I write because I do not believe in words…… I write because I trust nothing…… Words are always a gamble……” Are you always writing in a state of paradox?

Williams: Isn’t being alive as a human being a paradox, as each day we inch closer toward death?

Zheng: A further question of paradox. The similar conflicts reappeared when you talked about the use of “I” in your writing in two of your earlier interviews. One is given by Ona Siporin in 1996, in which you said, “… I would love to write fiction. It would be such a relief because I’m so tired of having to expose myself. I look at the first-person pronoun “I” and I just get sick to my stomach. [In fiction] I would not have to be a slave to facts.” And the other is given by Jocelyn Bartkevicius and Mary Hussmann in 1997, in which you said, “Often times we think when we use first person narrative, it closes the text, but I think once we have the courage to put “I” on the page we are free to work with the language and

the ideas.” Are you consciously revealing or concealing yourself from the readers while you are writing?

Williams: I am not consciously revealing or concealing myself to the reader, I am writing to tell the truth of my experience within the circle of ideas I am exploring. The interviews you are referencing are from the past, decades ago. I don’t bother myself with those concerns now. I was younger then. The world was very different. Climate change were two words that had barely entered the public vocabulary. For so many years, talking about the weather was talking about nothing. Now it really is our survival. Climate change is upon us. The world is on fire. The world is flooding. Science is under siege. The rule of law in America is at risk. As writers, we have an obligation to expose the hard stories and bear witness to what we see. We must find the courage and the love to not look aw. Whether it is the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico or emaciated polar bears wandering through the village of Kaktovik, Alaska on the edge of the Beaufort Sea or the cruelty of eviscerating Bears Ears National Monument, sacred home ground to the Hopi, Navajo, Ute and Zuni Nations, these are the stories that are commanding my attention. This is not the time to be thinking of what “I” means to a narrative structure in creative nonfiction. It is a time of focusing on what we can do together through daring acts of the imagination, using the gifts that are ours — each in our own way — each in our own time — in the places we call home. The question that is burning bright in me is how do we continue to keep “the open space of democracy” open?

Zheng: As an activist, you have been passionately active in social and environmental issues for decades. Here is a piece of news on the internet: in February 2016, you and your husband, Brooke Williams, protested climate change by bidding on Bureau of Land Management oil and gas leases at a Salt Lake City auction. Your winning bids on 1,120 acres of north of Arches National Park prompted you to incorporate your own energy company, Tempest Explorations LLC. In October, the Interior Department refunded your money and withheld the leases. Could you tell us what is going on with that?

Williams: We purchased these two oil and gas leases on February 16, 2017. Two weeks later, I was informed by my employer at the University of Utah, that due to changes in policies and procedures, it may be difficult to go forward with my job as an endowed professor at the Environmental Humanities Graduate Program that I founded in 2003. Six weeks later after painful negotiations, I resigned. The University said I was a danger to the students and university by taking field trips. This was a ploy t, they wanted me gone. The fossil fuel industry is a large

benefactor to the University of Utah. We now know the University had received pressure to get rid of me from the Utah State Legislature. Our oil and gas leases were revoked in October, 2016, by the United States Bureau of Land Management on the grounds that we had no intention of developing fossil fuels. We had said openly, that we would develop the fossil fuels only after science could show us that they were worth more above ground than below given the costs to climate change and a livable future. We are now appealing this decision with the U.S. government. Our legal case awaits its appearance before the Land Board of Appeals within the Department of Interior.

I am now Writer-in-Residence at the Harvard Divinity School.

Zheng: After the September 11 attacks in 2001, you said you have to come to believe that “there are many forms of terrorism and environmental degradation is one of them.” You have reiterated the point on several occasions since then. Do you still think it is the case today?

Williams: Never has it been more clear that the current war on America’s public lands under the administration of Donald J. Trump is an act of domestic terrorism. On Monday, December 4, 2017, he radically reduced Bears Ears National Monument and Grand Staircase-National Monument by 2 million acres, opening these now unprotected lands, sacred ancestral grounds of the Hopi, Navajo, Ute and Zuni Nations to oil and gas and coal development. In a word, this action is criminal. Lawsuits have been filed, but it is fair to ask after the lawsuits have been fought (and I feel certain we will win on the grounds of what Trump did are illegal), what lands will remain to protect.

The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is also under threat with republicans tacking on an obscure rider on the Tax Reduction Bill that seismic studies can begin on the Coastal Plain of the Refuge to begin drilling for oil. The 50-year conservation battle to keep the Arctic Refuge wild and free from fossil fuel development is a hair from being lost.

Zheng: In your latest book, *The Hour of Land: A Personal Topography of America’s National Parks*, you said, “I no longer see America’s National parks as ‘our best idea’, but our evolving idea” (35), why ?

Williams: In 2012, President Barack Obama, a former community organizer chose to honor another community organizer and established the Cesar E. Chavez National Monument to honor the work of the United Farm Workers in Keene, California. The community of La Paz exemplifies the power of an evolving ethos

that cannot separate the land from the people who inhabited that land. We see that the national parks are not just one story that has been largely white and privileged, but multi-stories rooted in multiple identities that are all part of “the vitality of the struggle.” Stonewall National Monument that celebrates the LGBTQ community in their fight for equality; Harriet Tubman National Monument that honors the work of the Underground Railroad; and of course, Bears Ears National Monument that is handshake across history between Native Peoples and the United States government. We are evolving as a people in the United States of America and as a result, our view of our national parks and monuments are evolving, as well. We are coming to understand our darkest histories of privilege, racism, and the abuse of power that extends to the land — and as a result, the degree of our awareness is the degree of our consciousness and that is the bedrock of human consciousness.

Zheng: Both Hélène Cixous and Emily Dickinson, your favorite women writers have described the power of language. Hélène Cixous says, “The only book worth writing is the book that threatens to kill us.” Emily Dickinson says, “If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know it is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that it is poetry.” And you also say, “I write knowing I can be killed by my own words, stabbed by my syntax, crucified by both understanding and misunderstanding at once.” In what way are you influenced by them? Do you believe and hope your writings are as powerful as theirs?

Williams: I cannot hope my words are as powerful as another. I can only try to make my words as powerful as the emotions I feel, that is my task and challenge. Helene Cixous instructed and inspired me to write out of the body, to follow my own instincts laid bare by blood, bones, and the tissues of truth, not the structures laid down by the patriarchy. Cixous asks us to speak the language women speak when there is no one there to correct us. Call it a liberation theology of language. She asks us to write not out societal oughts and shoulds, but out of our dreams and desires and what ifs and why nots — to locate through the language of our bodies our own pleasures the creative tensions between transgression and transmission. It is this heat born out of earthly revelation that frees us and reimagines our world, both personally and politically.

Emily Dickson’s poetry reads like Buddhist koans. She shows us why the precision of language matters. I read her seemingly simple poems with a dictionary as though it is a hand lens looking at the veins and serrated edges of leaves as one proceeds to identify and key out a new plant never seen before. I admire Emily

because she did not care about the outside world of opinion, only the internal compass of her own soul born out of deep reflection and the integrity of solitude. Her love of the nature, birdsong, and the living world was not just to serve as symbol and metaphor but her love affair with all things alive and trustworthy.

Zheng: You said it is writing about the questions that keep you up at night. In *Pieces of White Shell*, the question is “What stories do we tell that evoke a sense of place?” With *Refuge*, it is “How do we find refuge in change?” With *Leap*, it is “How do we breathe life into the orthodoxies that we are a part of?” It’s the questions that propel you. What is the question on your mind now?

Williams: Is Earth not enough?

Zheng: You have had a dialogue with a famous Chinese naturalist writer, A Lai in June 2017, at Shanghai Normal University. You said at the end of the dialogue you had learned that besides a love for home and wild nature, you and A Lai also shared a grief. In many ways both of your hearts were broken with the deteriorating environmental crisis. As one of your books entitled *Finding Beauty in a Broken World*, can we assume that you are still hopeful to restore the relationship between nature and humanity? If yes, how can we find hope in the midst of grief and despair?

Williams: If we can stand in the center of grief and truly be present with all we are losing and stand to lose on this beautiful, broken planet we call home, then I believe we can walk through the darkness into joy. I am not so interested in hope as I am in cultivating faith and conscious actions in the name of community.

Zheng: You have been appointed writer-in-residence at the Harvard Divinity School 2017-2018 academic year. What is your plan for teaching and writing during your stay in Harvard?

Williams: I am learning, reading, thinking, contemplating — feeling the closeness and distance of being away from home and consequently, writing with a new sense of clarity. The Harvard Divinity School is liberating me in ways I cannot yet discern, I can only feel it — being in a place where I don’t have to check my words or fight for an idea — the ideas are already being discussed, implemented, deepened.

And yet, I see a place for me here which is an embodied poetics of place. What I know is not an abstraction but an intelligence akin to the stratigraphy of stone walls in the Grand Canyon. Exposure. Erosion. Experimentation. Elemental love.

I think it begins here. Every day is a revelation. And when I returned home to the desert, every day is a revelation there, too. One of the mind; one of the body; How to bring these two places of knowing together in prayer?

I am offering a Salon, an open space for students to talk about the truth of their lives in relationship to this moment in time. And next semester, I am co-teaching a class called “Apocalyptic Grief, Radical Joy.”

Who knows where we will travel? I am so excited to explore these ideas with the students here at the Divinity School. What a gift it is to be here. I trust the process of life. Had I not resigned from the University of Utah, heartbroken and stunned by being exiled — I would never have had the opportunity to be here. I am so grateful for the processes that shape us.

We can never know what is dreaming us into being. We can only be present in the moment before us and respond with the fullness of an open and courageous heart.

And dear dear Emma, we have said nothing about the transformative time in China!

Love to you, Terry.

Zheng: Yes, exactly. During your stay in China last June, you’ ve been to bustling metropolitan cities such as Beijing and Shanghai as well as smaller cities or little towns such as Dali and Wuzhen and have noticed their differences. But even the latter places where a more traditional and tranquil lifestyle is preserved are also endangered in the process of modernization. The transformative time in China is a worthwhile topic. Thank you very much for your concern about it.

Williams: You are welcome. Maybe we can go on this topic when I come back to China next time. I’ ll see and find more about how China is being transformed.

Zheng: That’ s a good idea. Thank you very much for accepting my invitation for this interview. I’ m looking forward to meeting you again in China!

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