TERRY TEMPEST WILLIAMS

Salt Lake City, Utah

An Interview by

Greg Smoak

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THIS IS AN INTERVIEW WITH TERRY TEMPEST WILLIAMS ON FEBRUARY 27, 2014. THE INTERVIEWER IS GREG SMOAK. THIS IS THE GREAT SALT LAKE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT, TAPE No. u-3249.

GS: Good afternoon. It is Thursday, February 27th, 2014. I'm Greg Smoak. We're at the offices of the American West Center, and it is my great pleasure to be here today with Terry Tempest Williams, author, activist, former Curator of Education and Naturalist in Residence at the Natural History Museum of Utah, although it wasn't that name at that time, and currently Annie Clark Tanner Fellow in Environmental Humanities at the University of Utah. And this is part of the Great Salt Lake Oral History Project. Thank you for being with us today.

TTW: Thank you, Greg. I'm thrilled to be here.

GS: As I was just talking with you a little bit ago, this has been a tough interview to prepare for in some ways because you are, I think, closely associated in many people's minds with Great Salt Lake because of your book *Refuge*, and the way in which you explored your family's history along with the Lake. And it's a classic book. It's certainly one that would be a part of the canon, I would say, on Great Salt Lake. I think when people think of books about the Lake that's one that we do get to. In the interview today I'd like to talk a little bit about the book and how it was written, but I also really want to move beyond it and discuss your lived experience, your personal engagement with Great Salt Lake as a place and how it has shaped your life and how you've remained in touch with the place itself. I'd like to start like we do with most oral histories with a little bit of a bio, if you could talk just a little bit about yourself, give us a background on your family, your education, how you came to your life's work. And then we'll get to the Lake in particular.

TTW: I view myself as a native Utahan, even though I was born in Corona, California. My parents were stationed in Riverside, California in the Air Force. The place where I was born is now a prison. But certainly my family, we are Utahans; we are from Utah; Mormon background. 1847, when Brigham Young said, "This is the place," our family members were right there with him saying, "It's our place too." The bones of my ancestors are buried here. So this is certainly the place where I call home.

GS: I just want to jump in, I don't want to interrupt you, but I interviewed, as I mentioned, Genevieve Atwood a couple weeks ago and she has a very similar story. She started out her interview the exact same way: "I was born in California, but I'm really *of* Utah. My parents were in the military." It's an interesting connection.

TTW: Yeah, I think it's probably a common story. I love Genevieve and feel a kinship with her, especially out at the Lake.

GS: Now, your family very much was an outdoor family. And it seems that you were a naturalist from an early age. Can you talk a little bit about the early exposure to nature and the natural Utah around you?

TTW: Great Salt Lake was always a part of our focal point, vantage point. I grew up on Commonwealth Avenue, 2856 Commonwealth Avenue on the East Bench, just below Pencil Point. And I can't think of a day in my life that I didn't look out over Great Salt Lake and watch the sunset. I remember the Oquirrh Mountains, the expanding excavation of Kennecott, and then that silver line of quicksilver of Great Salt Lake. When I close my eyes *that's* how I orient myself still. And that is the place of my imagination. It was important to my family because my family's background in business is the Tempest Company; they lay pipe: water, natural gas, sewage lines, optic fiber. And they would go

south to southern Utah; they would go north into Wyoming; they would go west to Nevada; and east to Vernal and elsewhere. Yet Great Salt Lake was always my horizon.

You asked about a naturalist at an early age, my family's also a family of great hunters. And they would come home with rafts of ducks, and my father would give me the ducks to pluck because he knew I'd love the feathers. So a lot of my memory is sitting on our lawn—coming up there's a very steep hill—I would sit on the lawn looking out over Great Salt Lake and plucking pintails, plucking redheads, canvasbacks, green-winged, blue-winged, cinnamon tail, mallards. And the deal was my mother, reluctantly, would cook the duck breasts, I would get the feathers, and I would also get the heads and feet. I can't tell you the times that I would put the head and feet in baskets in my room only to find out that it was a runway of many, many flies coming out of the maggots. And that didn't repel me either; I thought it was fascinating.

So, I could go on and on about Great Salt Lake. My grandmother—at a very early age I learned how to tell time out at Great Salt Lake, because we would be with Dr. Stanley Mulaik of the Utah Audubon chapter. We would be in a bus, straight ahead was twelve o'clock, to our right was three o'clock, six o'clock behind us, nine o'clock to the left. And you'd say, "Killdeer at two o'clock," you knew where your eyes were. Or he'd say, "White-faced ibis at eleven." And that's how I learned to tell time as a child through a timepiece of a bus orienting toward the birds.

And to me, it was heaven. It was the Serengeti of the American West. And when I say Serengeti that means something because my uncle, Richard Tempest, who was a former state senator, went on safari, and he would come home with Cape Buffalo, with

elephants, with leopard, lion. But none of those animals were as compelling to me as the long-legged birds, avocets and stilts.

GS: And early in the book *Refuge* you talk about family camping trips to the Stansburys, to the Deep Creeks, and to that larger Great Salt Lake desert ecosystem. Did your family ever spend time actually on the Lake or in the environs of the Lake on those kinds of camping trips?

TTW: Great Salt Lake was not a place you wanted to go. It smelled. You ran in once, you screamed, you ran out, and you returned home salted and pickled; and that was your experience, you know, with children, all the cuts on their legs. It stung. And my father in particular absolutely hated it because if you ever had to lay pipe out there it was just a complete swamp and cesspool. So he didn't have much use for it. But the West Desert was a different story, maybe because there were so many rabbits. That's where my family went rabbit hunting. They'd also go out to the dumps and shoot rats and coyotes and anything else that moved.

I went out with them once to hunt rabbits. We had an extended family of my uncle and my father and all of the children. I was the oldest. And there were two girls out of eleven grandchildren. There were a lot of sons. And may I just say for the record, I was a great shot. But when we went out I remember, past Stansbury, and everybody got out with their shotguns, and the first rabbit ran out and they shot it, and it was killed immediately. There I was on my knees thinking, *I don't want any part of this*. I saw what the power of the bullet could do. And that changed me. And while the men in my family were out hunting and the women in my family had stayed home, I turned my back on the

killing and watched birds and watched the rabbits that were hiding, jackrabbits, cottontails. So, yeah, there's a deep history out there and it's personal.

And also the history—I was very well aware of the military history out there, and what was hidden. And later I would discover the role that that played in my own family.

Tooele, we'd spend a lot of time out there because my family business, they were laying pipe there. So there was really no place in the state that wasn't familiar to us as a result of that, and for that matter, nowhere in the Intermountain West that we weren't familiar with as kids because we went on the road with the work.

GS: Now, you're known as a writer and a naturalist, so there's this combination of the humanities and science in pretty much everything you do. So could you talk a little bit about your education here at the University of Utah, and also your work with Ted Major up at the Teton Science Center, and how that influenced your development over the years, and how that might've impacted the way that you look at Great Salt Lake.

TTW: Again it goes back to the birds. My grandmother gave me Roger Tory Peterson's *Field Guide to Western Birds* when I was five. In a red pen she made three lines, which I always knew meant, "I love you." So those birds, that book, were deeply attached to my grandmother, who was my mentor, who was a great naturalist. And I would spend hours, Greg, pouring over those plates and memorizing stilts, avocets, great blue heron, snowy egret, all of the ducks, all of the sandpipers. So when I finally got to go out to Great Salt Lake I recognized them; they felt like relatives. It is my grounding. That was part of my education. I remember a fourth-grade teacher, Mrs. Wagner, who loved birds. Because of her I felt like I could finally come out with my secret, that I was a birdwatcher. I did not share this with my friends. That was part of my education. Our family would travel north

to Grand Teton National Park. We would get up before dawn to watch birds; that was part of my education. So it's hard for me to even separate the autumn without calling forth migrations of Ibis, Spiraling White Pelicans that looked like a DNA molecule. There was never a separation between my lived experience here in Salt Lake City with Great Salt Lake as my mirror, and what I was learning in biology, what I was learning in literature. *Walden*, I remember reading that in high school and it had a profound effect on me, so much so I read it with a green pen because I felt like that was the only appropriate thing to do. Reading Kafka in AP English with Dr. Sylvia Scanlon, I thought, *Oh, how wonderful, I can be a beetle too*. So there was always this deep affinity and affection for species other than my own.

GS: This is a kind of off the wall question, but you mentioned *Walden* so it made me think of it, are there books that you think are essential for understanding the Great Salt Lake? Are there things that you think everyone should read about the place? I've never asked anyone that question in this interview series.

TTW: Really good question. What comes to my mind is *Walden* and John Hersey's *Hiroshima*. I don't know why I say that, but just the whole military complex that are on the edges of Great Salt Lake and Tooele and the Dugway Proving Grounds, *that* shaped my perception, consciously or unconsciously, of what was happening out there. *Walden*, Great Salt Lake was my Walden Pond. I could go home to dinner with my mother and family, and yet that's really where my education was coming from. Alfred Lambourne was a beautiful writer on Great Salt Lake. A poet really in his descriptions. You asked about Ted Major, Ted Major is from Salt Lake City, and again, an enormous mentor for me. So when I met him for the first time at the Teton Science School I was a sophomore

at the University of Utah. I loved him because he always said, "I don't know, but I think we can find out." And coming out of the Mormon culture where we had all the answers, to meet a naturalist who said, "I don't know, but I think we can find out," that helped create allure for me. He was also the first Democrat I ever met. [GS laughs]

TTW: And that was a revelation to me. My family was very suspect. But again, coming out of a Mormon religion, I understood the principle, I think, of resurrection, but I understood it more fully when Ted Major talked about fire ecology and lodgepole pines and why fire mattered and what a serotonous cone meant. That to me made more sense than the resurrection that I had been schooled on. So that was another part of my education. I think of William Mulder in the English department, teaching American transcendentalism; that was a revelation to me. I'm not Mormon, I'm a transcendentalist, and therefore, Emerson, Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Emily Dickinson, Whitman, became my mentors. That period was so alive for me. And I became devoted to that time in history, and interested in the Civil War during that period of time and how that framed their thinking. And it wasn't lost on me that on some level we had a civil war going on in my own family, certainly in the American West in terms of use and misuse of public lands. And that's absolutely apparent out at Great Salt Lake: the Lake is divided in two. So that was instructive to me.

I remember Bob Finch coming to visit. He's a writer from Cape Cod. And he was part of Ed Leader's series on writing natural history that I helped organize when I was curator of education at the Museum of Natural History. And I remember Bob and I walking for hours on the edges of Great Salt Lake. He asked, "Who's the poet here?" I said, "What do you mean?" And he said, "A place is not a place until it has its poet." And

it made me think about, *Who has written about Great Salt Lake*? Certainly Fremont, Captain Stansbury, Jim Bridger, their journals, but it had never occurred to me that one could write about a place that one loves, and in that process discover more fully its inherent character. I could find a greater intimacy with the place that had so shaped me, not just visually, in terms of looking at the Lake every night and seeing the sunsets and what would happen in the reflection, but a body of water that had so fully shaped my psyche, a body of water in the desert that no one can drink. I also think that's where, as a writer and as a human being, I found my comfort with paradox.

GS: Maybe we can talk a little bit about your work—you're known as a writer but you were the curator of education and naturalist in residence of the Natural History Museum for quite a few years. Maybe tell us a little bit about how you used the Lake or incorporated the Lake into your teaching, or some of the programs that took place through the natural history museum, and what you wanted people to discover, what you wanted people to learn about the Lake and through the Lake.

TTW: I so loved my work there. It was fifteen years, maybe more, 1983 to 1996. And I was getting my Master's degree here at the University of Utah in Environmental Education, Cultural Foundations. Florence Krall was my mentor. I had been teaching five years at the Carden School, first grade through eighth. I couldn't call it "biology" because it denoted sexual reproduction, or so the headmaster thought. [GS laughs]

TTW: It was very conservative, it was tied to the John Birch Society. So that was my background, and prior to that the Teton Science School. So my whole life has been in love with nature. It's the only thing I cared about. And the only thing I could do really, that I wanted to do, was learn more about it. And I always had a dream of teaching. I also

had a love affair with words and writing. A lot of people have many talents and it's hard for them to choose what to do; I never had that problem. It was so clear to me the only thing I wanted to do was love the earth and express it through teaching or writing.

The museum came as an enormous surprise. I was about to graduate; my thesis had been rejected for being "too creative." I had written a thesis on Navajo storytelling. I was supposed to do a literature survey on Navajo oral tradition.

GS: And you had worked on the Navajo reservation for a number of years, right?

TTW: Exactly. And *I* couldn't finish reading my own thesis, it was so boring. And I just thought, *If I can't get through this, how can anyone?* And it just felt like a waste of time, anyone could do this, so I threw it away—and this does have a point, we'll come back to the point about the museum—but long story shorter, I called Brooke, said "I need three more weeks," I rewrote my entire thesis based on my lived experience on the res, which I organized through a pouch that I had carried, and really talked about oral histories and storytelling through that mechanism instead of a review of the literature. It was rejected. I thought, *What am I gonna do?* A few days later I got a call from a Fran Minton from the Museum of Natural History, and she said they had a position open for an assistant curator of education, would I be interested? I was so thrilled. It was a huge deal for me, a turning point.

Work, for women in my family, was not something one thought about. My grandmother, Lettie Romney Dixon, worked with Dr. Lees in the theater department here, and then later at the Division of Continuing Education. My aunt Norinne Tempest also worked here at the university as head of correspondence education. But even so, my own mother, my aunts, my other grandmother, they didn't work outside the home. So to make

a decision to take that position that in my mind was very lofty, was a huge turning point for me; to have my own office with my own view was a huge deal to me; to be able to create curriculum. I just couldn't think of anything so wonderful. So I just made a wish list, and invited my heroes and friends to the museum. We brought the musician Paul Winter, and he played in the gallery of dinosaurs and imagined what they might've sounded like. I remember hearing the resonance of his soprano saxophone just bellowing out through the halls. I remember Don Hague, the museum director, asking to see me immediately in his office. [GS laughs]

TTW: And he said, "Come in, sit down." And then he said, "Terry, do you smell marijuana?" [both laugh]

TTW: "I think it's just patchouli oil."

Paul Winter had a dream, to play with the Tabernacle Choir. Who knew that Jerry Ottley—the head of the Tabernacle Choir, was a closet Paul Winter fan? So Paul Winter dressed in a white shirt, brown pants with his knee high moccasins and played his soprano sax with the Tabernacle Choir and it ended in a hallelujah chorus. I thought I had died and gone to heaven.

I loved this filmmaker from Canada, Bill Mason. I had seen his work at the Teton Science School. He made a brilliant film on wolves. I wrote him a letter and asked if we could have a special film festival honoring his work. He was a big star at that time with the National Film Board of Canada, and surprisingly, he came. I was so out of it, Greg, that if you can imagine inviting an international filmmaker from the National Film Board of Canada to come to our Museum of Natural History for a three month film festival, and we showed his first film on a white sheet on the wall, thumbtacked. [GS laughs]

TTW: He was such a gentleman and gracious individual. After it was over he took me to the side and he said, "Terry, I have loved coming here. I've loved the audience, the enthusiasm. I'm so honored. This has never happened before in the United States. But should you do this again, you might want to have a film screen." That's how green we were.

Great Salt Lake. I felt like there was a great deal of prejudice going on in the community about Great Salt Lake. Here we have this magnificent form and nobody cared about it. And, like I said, people would visit the Lake once, scream, run back, take a shower, drive home. And I thought, *What if we really learned about Great Salt Lake?* I didn't know a lot about it myself. And so, our first lecture series was the Great Basin. And the first lecture was on Great Salt Lake. And we had Genevieve Atwood come talk about the geology. We had Don Paul talk about the birds. We had Peter Hovey talk about toads and frogs in the Great Basin. And I have to say it was Peter Hovey who came to me first and said, "Terry, what about a lecture series on the Great Basin?" And he educated me as a community member. And so together we devised what this might look like; who were the experts in our community; let's have it for three months; let's do it in the winter when people have time; let's do it on Monday nights because it's family home evening and no one really has family home evening, so it's basically a free night. And Don Hague was wonderful and said, "I'm game." We had hardly any budget. I was so nervous: would anyone come, would anyone care? We opened the doors and we didn't have enough seats for everyone. It was completely packed. The next week we had to move it to Kingsbury Hall. It got bigger and bigger. I feel like it was really an education for our community—it was certainly the beginning of my education of where I lived.

GS: What year was –?

TTW: That would've been in 1984. And so the first year we had the Great Basin lecture series featuring Great Salt Lake as the center point. The second year we focused on the Colorado Plateau. The third year we featured the Northern Rockies. The fifth year we had it on wilderness. We just kept expanding the series. But what we realized is we had developed an audience that was growing with us. And I think that it taught all of us about the importance of regions, about biogeography, about bioregionalism, and that natural history was an enormous part of that, as was the literature of place, as was the photography of place, as was music. And so I think that … I didn't set out to say how do we merge science with the humanities, I just was interested in seeing what might it mean to live in place? What might it mean to develop an ethic of place? And to see home whole? And so of course it would incorporate both the sciences and the humanities, and how to bring these two hands, these two modes of mind together in a prayer, because I think ultimately these lands are sacred lands, and that the crisis that we find ourselves in, not just in Utah, and in the interior West, but the American West and beyond; it's not just a crisis of politics but a spiritual crisis.

GS: Now when you were developing these programs did you explore the Lake more fully? Did you jump back in for a second time and not come back out screaming, or go to the west side of the Lake and explore places that you hadn't been before in your childhood?

TTW: During that time, it was 1983, 1984, Great Salt Lake was flooding, so it was hard to get around the Lake. My family was also in crisis: my mother was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. So again, it's hard for me to separate the two. I had my working life; I

had what was going on with my family; and then what was going on as a community. And in a strange sort of way it all circled around Great Salt Lake. That's where I went to retreat, I fled, when it got too intense with my mother's health. It was so devastating to me that she could be dying. I would go out to the Lake and I would watch birds. I would count how many times swallows were picking up mouthfuls of mud and creating a nest. I was noting where the birds were nesting, adapting to the rising water. If Bear River was flooding, then I went up into the higher uplands where I would find them. And I did go out to the west side often, because the water was spilling out there but there was still room to walk. And I ended up working with Don Paul and counting snowy plovers. I went out to Gunnison Island and helped him band pelicans. I was interested in the shrimpers. I was interested, interested in the prehistory surrounding the Lake. It was my refuge, literally, before I ever even thought of writing a book with the same title. I was interested in seeing Nancy Holt (who just passed away), her earth art; I went out to the Sun Tunnels with my grandmother. It was my sanctuary.

GS: Well maybe we should turn to the book just for a few minutes. I want to ask you about the origins of *Refuge*, before you actually conceived of writing the book. How did that take shape? When did you first start thinking about writing that book? I mean obviously you knew or felt the connections, like you said, between the community, your family, and the place. So how did that develop?

TTW: I thought that I was writing a novel called *The Bird Letters of Evelyn Bliss*. And it was about a young woman who was the secretary at the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge. And she was quite shy and an introvert, but she loved birds. And so she was living a fantasy life through the birds. I gave this story idea to my agent, Carl Brant—I

think I was twenty-six years old—and told him this is what I wanted to write. And he looked at me and he said, "Well that's subtle, Evelyn." [both laugh]

TTW: And he said, "No one wants to read something that thinly disguised. Tell me what you love about the Lake? Tell me what these birds look like?" And so at that point I started doing more research, more field trips—and I started thinking maybe I would write a natural history of Great Salt Lake. But it wasn't until my mother was dying, and we were sitting together, and I remember I was rubbing her back, and she said, "Tell me how you are?" And I said, "I'm just so frustrated because I'm trying to write this book on Great Salt Lake and I don't have any time because…" "Because I'm sick," she said. And I felt so horrible because, well, I forgot I was talking to my mother, she was a great listener. And I didn't say anything. I remember the tears just running down my cheeks. And she said, "You know Terry, maybe it's the same story." And so it was really my mother, I think, who was saying, "It's not you're doing this as a naturalist on this side and then you're doing this as a daughter on the other side of your life, maybe it's the same story. How do they relate to each other?" Well, it took me seven years to write *Refuge*, and it was a constant evolution of form and ideas and grief and love and confusion. After my mother had passed away, as had my grandmothers, I remember I dutifully went to a family reunion of the Romneys. And my aunt Bea, who was formidable—I think she was 6'4", maybe not, maybe she was only 5'11".

GS: But she *seemed* like she should be 6'4".

TTW: Yes, exactly. She's one of those women where you say, "I would walk across the plains with her," you know? She was mythic. Anyway, I knocked on the door, and she opened it, and she said, "Terry, how wonderful of you to come. Tell me what you're up

to." And I said, "Well, Aunt Bea, I'm writing a book." And she said, "Wonderful. What's the book about?" And I said, "It's about the rise of Great Salt Lake and the death of Mother." She looked at me, and then she walked away. And I thought, *Am I going mad? Is there no connection here?* And I went in and did what one does at a family reunion: drank bad punch and kind of cowered in the corner, where various relatives would ask, "Are you pregnant yet? What are you doing?" And how do you say, "I'm creating in a different way"?

GS: Was your Aunt Bea's reaction sort of the standard reaction of other family members when they first heard?

TTW: Well I think it was kind of, "Oh," and then they look at your stomach to see if you're pregnant. It's about procreation, not creating on the page. So I left really disturbed. And when I got home, Greg (Brooke was gone, down in southern Utah), I pulled out an old easel that I had and I took out two magic markers, and on one side I wrote "Great Salt Lake" and I circled it, and on the other side I put "family" and circled it. And then I wrote "Mother" beneath family. And then I wrote "Bear River Bird Refuge" beneath Great Salt Lake. And then I wrote "cancer." And then I wrote "lake flooding." And then I wrote "Mormon." And then I wrote "Division of Wildlife Resources." Just to see if it added up to anything. I realized there was nothing holding these two circles together. And I thought, *What will hold this story together?* And then I realized it was the narrator, it was me. I remember putting "TTW" and circling that and drawing two lines down. I stepped back and I realized what I had drawn was a map of the female reproductive system. And I thought, *I can do this*. The women in my family died of ovarian cancer, breast cancer, the female cancers. And I think it has everything to do

with creativity. I never wrote about that. But it was on that day that I realized I did have a story to tell, and they were interconnected and interrelated. And it gave me the courage to go forward.

GS: Now, in writing the book, you also continued more research on the Lake itself, on the science and ecosystem. How did you go about that? And what surprised you about the Lake? What did you learn about it that you hadn't known before?

TTW: The hydrology. I went mad with maps of hydrology and the statistics. If you had gone into my office at the Museum of Natural History, I had water-flow charts everywhere, I had all the lake levels charted on graphs; I just was immersed in the hydrology of Great Salt Lake. I absolutely loved learning about the brine shrimp. I loved learning about Lake Bonneville. I loved everything that Genevieve had to say. I worshipped Don Paul. Going out to Great Salt Lake, to the West Desert, to Hobbit Cave with David Madsen—who *is* seven feet tall—and Kevin Jones, and to really be with archaeologists and to be with them sifting through the sediments, and suddenly—of course I had birds on the mind—all of a sudden to see these bird feet emerge, to realize the patience of an archaeologist. I just wanted to pull the bird feet out to find out if it really was greater yellowlegs or whatever. But we had to follow the process of sifting the sands through a screen.

GS: Did that bring you back to your room as a child?

TTW: Exactly. Because I thought, *These are yellowlegs*. But no, we had to follow all the sediments down until the feet emerged. And then what we found was this glorious necklace, a Fremont necklace with bird feet dangling as an ornament—well, everyone wanted to try it on, and you cannot do that as an archaeologist. You do not. You are

scientists. But I knew that they wanted to, and I certainly wanted to, but we couldn't. So, this friend, Jimmy, he was the cook, we decided that we had enough dental floss and plastic forks to make bird foot necklaces for everyone, which we did, and built a big fire and danced around it.

So, there were those wonderful moments of learning about the Lake, living through the Lake, walking into the West Desert on the edge where it was flooding and finding these bizarre plywood tanks that were target practice for the military. And there were tons of munitions that hadn't been exploded. Again, the earth art from the phallic tree, Karl Momen's "Tree of Utah," to the beautiful Sun Tunnels. I never was able to see Smithson's Spiral Jetty because it was under water, but I was very aware that it was there.

GS: Have you ever made it up to the Jetty yet?

TTW: I have. And I reserved the right to see that at a time when I spiritually felt that I was worthy. And I was able to go there two years ago with Robert Newman and Vicky Newman, and our son from Rwanda, Louis Gakumba. I became a mother at fifty, and that was the ritual that tied me to my own mother at the Spiral Jetty. Being able to be there with Louis, and my dean, who expanded my notion of what education looks like, so much so that we created together the environmental humanities graduate program. So it's all this ongoing story with the Great Salt Lake as a centerpiece. Again, very personal, very transformative.

GS: I'm going to jump ahead a couple questions because you brought up that topic and it's one of the things that I did want to get at, is to have you talk a little bit about the origins of the environmental humanities program here, maybe veer off the Lake for just a

minute. But because it's what you do on campus now and is an innovative program, and one that I'm involved in as well, maybe we can record a little bit of that history.

TTW: I love Utah. I love the University of Utah. There's no place I would rather be. And to Dean Newman's credit, he's a visionary. And in 2003, I had been asked to give the commencement address at the University of Utah. And prior to that he had given me the opportunity to speak to the College of Humanities as an alum of the college. I spoke about what I couldn't find here. I spoke about how I was so deeply in love with both the sciences and the humanities and I wanted to integrate the two in my courses of study as an undergraduate but I couldn't. I remember I had all these hours in the English Department, as I told you, with Emerson, Thoreau, Emily Dickinson, everything that could be about natural history in English literature, American literature, I had absorbed completely. And I wanted to know if I could get a degree in Environmental English, and they laughed at me and just said, "Absolutely not." So I went over to the Biology Department, and I had just as many hours in ornithology, in advanced invertebrate biology, and all of the natural history classes, botany, call it an old-fashioned, homegrown education—John Wesley Powell would've approved. And I said, "Is there any way that I could get a degree in literary biology?" That was worse. And it was to the point where I didn't have enough hours to graduate in either because I had this split soul, intellectually, and split mind. So the consensus was, "We'll give you a BS in English, and you will never see the light of day in the academy." And then I left. I continued teaching school at Carden. But I really did love the academy. And I came back and got my Master's degree in Environmental Education. In time, it was interesting, my thesis was rejected, on the grounds that it did not fit any proper form, but Charles Scribner's and

Sons agreed to publish it as *Pieces of White Shell*. And to my committee's credit, they called and said, "We've reconsidered, and we'd like to give you your Master's degree, if that's all right with you." And I was thrilled. So if you go to the Marriott Library, on the Master's thesis shelves, you see all these perfect, red, what, 11 x 8 books, and then your eyes will drop down and you will see a little book. That would be mine! They basically just pulled off Scribner's cover and bound it in red.

Dean Newman—I challenged the college and said, "Wouldn't it be great if there was a degree where we could integrate the sciences with the humanities and see the world whole, integrated, interrelated?" He called me the next day and said, "You're on." And I said, "Excuse me?" And he said, "Let's do it. We can do this with a graduate program. Let's call it Environmental Humanities. Think about what that curriculum might look like. I will too. And let's talk." It was a dream. And then he found faculty and he found a budget. And you are now part of this, Greg, as am I. And, to me, it's one of the most exciting aspects of my life today.

GS: All right. Thanks. It was a little bit off track for this interview, but I did want to get that in there. And to return to the Lake, could you talk a little bit about, over the years, your involvement and advocacy for the Lake, with Friends of Great Salt Lake, with other organizations, or just individually what you've seen as critical issues and how you felt the need to take action?

TTW: I really have to say that people like Don Paul and Lynn de Freitas and the Friends of Great Salt Lake, Ella Sorenson, Wayne Martindale, there's just been so many great advocates of the Lake. And I don't see myself as one of them. My advocacy has been with my paper monkey-wrenching. Ed Abbey talked about his paper monkey-wrenching.

And I feel like whatever advocacy that I have been able to offer the Great Salt Lake has been with my pen. And I'm just so grateful for those individuals who really have done the hard work and the heavy lifting. My role has been very minor I think. I hope that I've helped create an awareness of one of the most beautiful places on Earth. I certainly feel that my heart and its advocacy resides at the Lake, but I'm not the one that has really made the difference in terms of policy and the kind of community work that I see all of these extraordinary people doing.

GS: One of the questions I've been asking everyone is their favorite places on Great Salt Lake. And I know that your first answer will be the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge, so we're going to take that one off the table [laughs] and ask you about maybe one or two places around the Lake that people don't know about as much and that for you are very special places.

TTW: I love Antelope Island. I love the buckskin color of the grasses, its aridity, the way it floats, appears to float on Great Salt Lake. I love the curlews there. I love the long views. And I absolutely love this one secret beach over on Stansbury Island.

GS: And you don't have to give us GPS coordinates, so I don't want you to reveal secret places.

TTW: Yeah, I'm not going to tell you. But I remember—do you remember the Harmonic Convergence?

GS: Yes.

TTW: [laughs] What year was that?

GS: Oh, I don't know.

TTW: It was in the ’70s. So on the harmonic convergence, Brooke and I went out and it was just so magical. I’ll stop there. But that was a moment with just the two of us. And then we also were there with Rosaline Newmark, and I remember, we were naked the whole time and it was like being completely wild in this place that no one even knew. And I remember we picked sunflowers and covered Brook’s body with them and then swam in the heat of the day. It was just—where do you get to live like that? And of course it was the Harmonic Convergence and it felt like the perfect thing to do. That’s a memory that comes to mind.

I love the west side of the Lake. And when I think about the hours that I’ve spent walking alone; the power of mirage; recording the water line, the wrackline; watching the radiance of snowy plovers; rattlesnakes so huge and thick, the size of a man’s arm, wrapped around the trunks of greasewood. I just love the Lake. I love, love the Lake. I love—there’s a place on the north side that I remember exactly where I wrote a passage from *Refuge* about how the desert turns us into believers. It’s a spiritual place for me. I think . . . Well, you’ve put me into a trance. I could just weep.

Interestingly enough, I would say I go to Bear River less now. After the rise of the Great Salt Lake, so much has changed. I think that in the writing of *Refuge*, the Lake gave itself to me, much beyond the refuge. And so, when I think of the Lake I don’t think about the refuge so much anymore; that feels like it belongs to my childhood, and that the refuge I knew was lost in the flood. Now I feel a more full-bodied relationship to the Lake itself, even the ghost of Lake Bonneville. It’s a lake that not only exists in the land for me but in my imagination. Great Salt Lake gave me my voice, and I am forever grateful for that.

GS: Because you don't live in Salt Lake City most of the time now, most of the time I guess you spend in Castle Valley or up in Jackson Hole, do you make it a point to go out to the Lake, or how often do you get out there these days?

TTW: I make a point of driving to Salt Lake by way of Bear River, by way of the Lake, so that I'm always aware that I'm on the edge of the Lake, you know when you come down over Teton Pass through I-15. And then I always stop at Idle Isle for some chocolates and then find my way to the refuge. I go to Antelope Island a lot. I was just out there last year when we found a pair of harlequin ducks. How often do I go out there? Certainly every season. I just have to hear the flapping of wings. I have to hear the "Come-Here-Willie" bird. My email is ttwillet, no one hardly knows that a willet's a bird anymore. It's just part of who I am. So in that sense, I feel like I have this great ten-hour migratory path, from the Northern Rockies to the Colorado Plateau with the Great Basin in the middle. It really goes back to that first education at the Museum of Natural History where I found community here. We're lucky to live in a state that has these distinct bioregions: the Rocky Mountains, the Basin, and the Plateau. And that's how I see myself. Composed of all three.

GS: Here's another strange question: in *Refuge* the chapter titles are birds, and obviously instead of marking time with dates you mark time with lake levels, which of course, we've talked a little bit about that, but how did you select the birds? And are there birds that you left out that you wish you had included?

TTW: What an interesting question. You talk about what's been left out: I don't think there's one piece of hydrology in *Refuge*. But that's what I immersed myself in. I think I so fully saturated myself with the science of water and hydrology that my challenge was

to never speak of it. But that's where the lake levels came from. So in a sense, that was shorthand. The other thing—and you can't make this up, and it's why I love creative non-fiction so much—I didn't recognize the structure of the book until the very end, that it was the lake levels, that it was the lake levels that held that book together. What I didn't realize about the lake levels is that the lake levels corresponded exactly—it's hard for me to even talk about—with the emotional levels. So that when Great Salt Lake peaked the first time, at 4211.85, that was when my mother died. Then it dropped down. And when it peaked for the second time at 4211.85, that was when my grandmother died. So that if you did nothing else with that book but just chart the lake levels you would know what the emotional landscape of my family was. I love that.

In terms of the birds, I wish I could tell you that I had a grand, intellectual scheme of them, but it was largely intuitive. I'm an intuitive writer. Having said that, I knew that the first chapter—the birds that were so thoroughly linked to my childhood were avocets and stilts, I had to begin there, which I think formed the basis. Certainly the chapter on long-billed curlew, which is a bird I deeply love, is very much a foreshadowing of death, which is what they're associated with mythologically through time. I remember "Flicker" was the bird I saw right before my mother died. . . . I haven't read *Refuge*. I wrote it. So I don't remember what the birds are now. Can I see it?

GS: Sure. And of course in the back—what brought this question up to me is the very extensive list of the birds of Great Salt Lake. There are so many that use the Lake, that live there or migrate through it, that you have a lot to choose from.

TTW: Isn't that interesting? [gasps] See, I love as a writer you're just constantly learning. In my mind, the first birds were avocets and stilts, but that's where I ended it. And it started with Burrowing Owls. That's so interesting.

GS: The story about going out there and the workmen—

TTW: And that they died. So in a sense, "Burrowing Owls" could've been the last chapter, in terms of—but I must've reversed that. "Whimbrels," *that* surprises me, because whimbrels are birds you don't see that often. Why did I do that? I have no idea. . . . It was intuitive, that's all I can say.

But I think when you said "What are you surprised by?" I'm surprised that avocets and stilts were last because they were primary. I'm surprised that I put whimbrels first. I'm going to have to look at that. Let me look at it just quickly to be fair to your question. What bird would I include now that isn't there? . . . Long-billed marsh wren.

GS: Why? Tell us about the long-billed marsh wren.

TTW: Because that is the first bird you hear. I think that's a mistake. [both laugh]

TTW: Long-billed marsh wren, it has the most evolved voice of any bird. It's ubiquitous on the shores of Great Salt Lake, the wetlands. It's the first bird you hear when you get out of your car. It's all over the refuge. You rarely see them but you hear them in the cattails. And I think they're the sweetest things. And I apologize to them.

GS: Is there anything I haven't covered, or anything else that you'd like to say about Great Salt Lake?

TTW: I love that the Lake is forever tied with my mother and grandmother. I love that the power of story can take you to places that you didn't think you would dare go, or that you had no idea of knowing that there was even a connection there, meaning nuclear

testing, which is the epilogue of "The Clan of One-Breasted Women." And I think that the Lake has been large enough to absorb my grief and hold my joy. And I think that the Lake continues to teach me about the power of paradox, that nothing is as it appears. And it is bedrock for me; it is my ground zero. And I think, when you asked about advocacy, I think if you know one place well you can know every place. And when so much is being destroyed around the world, and climate change is upon us, and we wonder what the future will be, as we are in the midst of this "Sixth Extinction," it's easy to become angry; it's easy to become depressed; it's easy to become apathetic or overwhelmed. But when I think of all of those years in my childhood sitting on our grass hill on Commonwealth Ave. and looking out over Great Salt Lake, it would radiate this magnificent, sparkling light, this radiance of a shimmering world, even in the midst of storms . . . I think Great Salt Lake is and forever will be a reservoir for my spirit. And it's allowed me to take my anger and write out of my sacred rage. It's allowed me to know that my basin of tears is held; and that even with no outlet to the sea there is a quality of evaporation, a quality of letting go, and a quality of transcendence and transformation that resides at my core through lessons learned from Great Salt Lake.

GS: That is a touching place to leave us. We can always do a follow-up interview somewhere down the road if you feel like there's more that you want to add. It's just been a great pleasure talking with you today.

TTW: Thank you Greg.

END OF INTERVIEW