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Confluence: A Braided Essay

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Critical Introduction

Topic

Throughout my childhood, I explored the black veins of highways that snaked through Chicago, Alaska, and coastal California in our 1985 Dodge Caravan with my mom. Piled in the worn upholstered seats with our Dr. Seuss books, snacks, blankets and pillows, my siblings and I watched as America's varied landscape slid by through smudged windows. On a trip to Canada at age six, I remember my mom holding my body, hovering on the surface Lake Moraine, my nose sucking the air greedily. "That's it" her soothing voice told me. "Hold still—you're safe." She'd let me doggy paddle back to shore where my younger brother Logan waited in his life jacket, and then she'd repeat the process, her hand pressed to our backs until floating and staying calm became second nature. She let us routinely destroy the house with art projects—during Christmas of 2000, gingerbread decorating resulted in frosting stalactites hanging from the counter—and blanket forts would block off certain sections of the house for a week at a time. Mom taught us to be messy, to be wild, to be adventurous, to love living things with such ferocity that we often cried when we found a wilted petunia in the garden or a dead bird that hit the glass.

Dad was practical in his approach to parenting—he wanted our creative projects to have purpose and structure. As we kneaded our small palms into bread dough, he explained the chemistry of yeast as a rising agent. When I squealed "ew!" as he added lemon juice to a batch of pico de gallo, he told me, "Acidity adds flavor and depth—it's nothing to 'ew' at." Safety was of paramount importance to him—if we crested a hill beyond his sight on a hike, his deep booming voice echoed through the pines, instructing us to come back. He knew how to have fun, too—

underneath his doctor of psychology persona, a mischievous young boy peeked through his frank demeanor and came out to delight and entertain us. The black pavement outside of our home was often splattered with baking soda and exploded bottle caps as we blasted rockets using the bike pump. And when we were stumbling toddlers, he swaddled us in our baby blankets, making us fly all over the house as he carried his “baby purse.” Dad taught us how to be safe, taught us the intricate workings of bread dough and rockets, and gave us the language to explain the “why” behind the things we loved most in the world.

As we grew older, we became a model family to many of our friends and neighbors. My siblings and I excelled in school, sports, and extra-curricular activities. We volunteered at the Humane Society, playing with the dogs in the abandoned dirt lot behind the outbuildings. We attended environmental activism meetings, traveled often and far, read, made art in our spare time, and built a network of close friends. But when I entered high school, I began to sense that something was amiss—despite the clean, wholesome narrative that we presented to our community, a fissure seemed to be forming between my parents. The differences in their personalities that made them a brilliant team seemed to be causing a rift that was growing deeper as each year passed. Yet we were so consumed with our lives—making it to tennis practices, planning camping trips, and filling out college applications, that I barely noticed that their marriage was breaking apart.

*

In March of 2017 I first visited Bears Ears, an expanse of desert in southeastern Utah that holds spectacular geological formations, native pueblos and ruins, archeological artifacts, and wildlife species. Despite the skies carrying the heavy threat of bad weather, I drove deeper into the new monument, awe-inspired by the soaring spires of red rock, the smooth white stones in dry

riverbeds, and the swirl of dust devils that spun on the side of the long, desolate highway. Not even the spidery fingers of lightning that cracked across the sky could stop me—in fact, the swell of the angry indigo horizon only enticed me to keep pushing forward. As the desert roiled and heaved in the storm, the landscape seemed to mirror the boiling controversy that surrounded it.

In December of 2016, just a month before he left the Oval Office, President Obama designated 1.35 million acres of Bears Ears as a national monument under the Antiquities Act. This protected the land from further developments in ranching, oil drilling, fracking, mining, and other human impacts and economic interests. Native American tribes, outdoor retail companies, and environmental groups celebrated this monumental decision, yet quickly grew skeptical and fearful as Donald Trump's impending presidency loomed nearer.

In April of 2017, just three months after his inauguration, President Trump signed an executive order to have newly appointed Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke travel to, and review, twenty-seven national monuments around the United States. It quickly became apparent that the battle for Bears Ears was far from over, and each time I traveled there over the course of 2017, its future became less stable and certain.

I was attracted to Bears Ears because of its controversy and the challenges that it presents to Americans. As we surge full speed ahead into the twenty-first century, we are increasingly torn and divided over what's best for America's most iconic and pristine landscapes. Yet despite all the chatter and arguments, each time I descended into the wide expanse of desert, or into the deep navel of a gulch, I was forced to contend with silence—it was only the hollow wind that whistled through the dried fingers of juniper or the sharp cry of a raven that shattered the quiet. In spaces of silence, I began to think about the choices we make. In the calm of Mule Canyon,

watching a sunset bloom, and then quickly melt and die on the horizon, I was forced to ask the question that was beginning to tug at every part of my life—how do we choose?

*

Between 1989 and 1990, Aileen Wuornos murdered seven men on the highways of Florida. Working as a prostitute, Wuornos killed six men who solicited her for sex and one man who simply offered her a lift to the nearest town. All were victim to multiple gunshot wounds at close range, and Wuornos robbed and pawned any of their valuables for cash to support her and her girlfriend at the time, Tyria Moore. She was apprehended for an outstanding warrant and arrested at the Last Resort biker bar in Volusia County, Florida, on January 9, 1991. In exchange for immunity, Moore coaxed Wuornos to talk about her recent violent actions over a series of phone calls monitored by state police. Three days later, Wuornos confessed to the murders, although she initially claimed that she acted out of self-defense. On October 9, 2002, she was put to death by the state of Florida. She received five death penalty sentences.

I first encountered Aileen Wuornos's story when I watched Patty Jenkins' *Monster* my freshman year of college. Portrayed by Charlize Theron in an Oscar-winning role, Theron's eerie depiction of Wuornos made me feel simultaneously captivated and horrified. As each death was played out on screen, Wuornos increasingly became more calloused, emptying bullet after bullet into the men's bodies until their shirtfronts were completely soaked with blood. With the handle of a cold pistol tucked in her belt, she repeated the same line before she opened fire: "I fucking hate men."

While the film was difficult to watch, it offered a portrait of a woman marred by complexities—the pain and trauma of her life seemed to pull at every corner of her body:

prematurely aging her face, her wrinkled hands, her blonde hair streaked with thick strands of gray. And yet as the gun shot reverberations filled the thick Florida everglades, and Wuornos left bodies to rot in the woods, stole cars and wallets and spat thick black mud as she sped from the crime scene, I wondered where this hate for men, and the world, had come from—more specifically, how I should categorize Wuornos: victim, villain, or hero?

*

Our instincts as human beings rest in the desire for stability—we want one story, one version, one truth. When we have a version that we are satisfied with, we feel as though we can hold that, and thus derive truth and meaning from it. But in the instance of family, landscape, and a serial killer, we are not provided with one clean version. These subjects allow me to question what happens when we are unable to place criminals, landscapes, or our parents into narrow categories like hero, villain, and victim. Further, these stories help me think about how seeing an individual or a group of people in specific categories is to be complicit in erasure or denial. Damage occurs when we choose the story that makes us feel most comfortable, instead of holding the messy complications in our hands all at once.

Form

When examining our options in storytelling, we often desire the linear narrative. The linear form allows us to arrive at logical conclusions and follows a chronological order—a beginning, a middle, an end. This approach to storytelling makes sense when we are dealing with one version—when we have one voice on a particular subject or we can arrive at one truth. Yet when we ask difficult questions that have no obvious answers or solutions, a linear narrative cannot capture our inquiry and cannot accurately represent the complex struggle between writer and

world. The braided essay is composed of three distinct strands: research, a site visit, and personal. Woven together, these three strands invite the interconnectedness and messiness of the world onto the page. What the braided essay provides us is not clear-cut answers to our most pressing questions; rather, the essay begins in complexity and works toward larger thematic elements to illuminate the stakes of what we are asking. Out of the essay, the larger implications of the question sprout from the seeds of the strands.

Choosing the braided essay as a way of examining multiplicity in our stories offers me a greater amount of flexibility as a writer—the strands afford me the opportunity to loosen my narrative control. As Brenda Miller says of her students on the first day of a class in “The Braided Heart: Shaping the Lyric Essay”: “I might tell them: *I don’t know*. I might tell them, although they won’t want to hear it, that we’ve entered a realm of unknowing, a place where definitions are constantly in flux, a place where answers are not as important as the questions to which they give rise” (1). Since so much of my personal narrative is trying to examine or grasp the unseen, the unheard, and the unknown, it is only natural that I must ground these strands in other notions of the unknown, such as the case of Bears Ears and Aileen Wuornos. My parents’ divorce was a traumatic fracturing and rupture of our family, and, in trauma, there is no linear or chronological way of capturing unseen forces beyond our control, let alone forces that we do not necessarily understand. At the center of the braided essay, as Miller states, is the necessity of a willingness to dive into the unknown.

Author Ben Quick demonstrates diving into the unknown through his examination of a traumatic history in “Agent Orange: A Chapter of History that Just Won’t End.” Quick links the tangled deformity of his hand to the toxic chemical bombing during the Vietnam War. As Quick moves through his essay—his site visit to a warplane junkyard, his personal memories of living

with a deformity, and his examination of the long-lasting political and toxic effects of the U.S. government's presence in Vietnam—his strands begin to vibrate and connect. As political corruption and personal implications begin to meld together, the clear-cut answers evade both Quick and his audience. Through sharp pivots between each strand, the site visit, the personal strand, and the research begin to birth new implications, and, as Quick's essay title suggests, history is not linear—it is cyclical, political and personal, and lasting in its toxic impact. Yet we do not arrive at the meaning of the essay because Quick explicitly hands it to us; rather, we find the implications of war, trauma, and history in the gaps where the author is most vulnerable—the spaces where it is clear that he does not have an answer to these questions.

The central question of this thesis—what are the implications of choosing only one version: heroes, victims, and villains—arose the moment my parents announced their divorce, even if I didn't recognize it at the time. For the past six years, I have grappled with their fluctuating stories on what led to the dissolve of their marriage, and, in particularly rough times, I have felt that I had to choose sides, to decide which parent is a victim, and which parent is a villain. For me, coming to terms with the failure of my parent's marriage will be a process that will never fully end. In some ways, I feel as though I am still at the beginning.

I have always been fascinated with women's bodies and natural landscapes and how they reflect one another. When I set out to write this thesis, I assumed that I would write about the trauma that I carry in my body from a sexual assault and a bleeding disorder, and relate it cleanly to a landscape that is under threat. I was wrong. When I heard about the fight surrounding Bears Ears, I was compelled to visit a landscape that was roiling in trauma and threat. When I arrived, I immediately felt like I had come home—for some inexplicable reason, this landscape embodied my childhood memories. It represented danger, beauty, complexity, and duality. It was only

when I hiked to the confluence in Kane Gulch and wrote about how the towering red walls made me feel as though I was in a room of our old family home, I realized that this landscape could provide a space to talk about my parent's divorce.

I became interested in Aileen Wuornos's story after watching *Monster*, coincidentally not long after my parents announced their separation. However, it wasn't until I took a graduate course on crime literature that I began to understand how intersectional the crime world is—it is full of contradictions, faults, and has to be considered through the lenses of race, gender, sexuality, socio-economic status, and a myriad of other factors. With this new knowledge, I found myself wanting to return to and understand Wuornos—I wanted to get to the bottom of why she killed those men. Yet each time I attempted to make meaning, I found that I could not. No matter how many columns or scholarly articles I read or films I watched, I never found the answer to why. And while that might be frustrating to some, it provided relief—it allowed me to loosen the strains I put on myself to side with one of my parents, and it allowed me to let go of the anger that I had over Bears Ears and turn it into action. Brenda Miller speaks to this letting go in her essay “The Braided Heart”: “I abandoned my authority, and with that surrender came great freedom: I no longer had to know the answers.”

Literature Review

In preparation for my thesis, I read in these areas: memoir, the Wuornos murders, and literature on Bears Ears. I also conducted site visits, interviews and investigated both primary and secondary source materials.

To help me think about the connections between the personal and the political and to see how other authors have approached memoir, I read *Red* by Terry Tempest Williams, *The Glass Castle* by Jeannette Wells, and *Truth and Beauty* by Ann Patchett. *Refuge: An Unnatural History*

of Family and Place by Terry Tempest Williams was by far the most influential memoir in helping me approach the topics of landscape and family. *Refuge* poses the unlikely relationship between the author's cancer diagnosis and a bird refuge under threat from flooding. As she navigates a disease that has wreaked havoc on the women in her family, including herself, she witnesses her beloved Bear River Wildlife Refuge, along with its winged residents, being threatened from an unusually large flood that inundated the Great Salt Lake. Williams' memoir has a braided style—instead of just focusing on the devastation of cancer in her family, she cleverly weaves environmental and wildlife impacts to emphasize the importance of protection, love, and stewardship through the lenses of human impacts on Utah's fragile landscapes and women's cancerous bodies. Yet Williams emphasizes that she ultimately lacks control when it comes to the cancer growing in women's bodies, just as she cannot stop a flood from inundating a wildlife refuge. Instead, she focuses on the feeling of being immersed in states of the unknown—the intangible spaces of change: “It's strange to feel change coming. It's easy to ignore. An underlying restlessness seems to accompany it like birds flocking before a storm. We go about our business with the usual alacrity, while in the pit of our stomach there is a sense of something tenuous” (24). *Refuge* examines the multiplicity of narratives in both the environment and women's bodies, offering a sense of what's at stake when they are under threat from greater forces outside immediate control. What *Refuge* offered me as I wrote my own braided essay was a demonstration of complexity when we tie our emotions to a landscape—in the end, we must walk the fine line between anger and peaceably surrendering to the unknown.

To help me think about Bears Ears and the relationship of human to landscape, I watched videos from the Dine Bikeyah tribal coalition, which features tribal members speaking to the spiritual significance of Bears Ears. I read investigative pieces from *The Washington Post* and

New York Times that examined how politics, money, and power influenced Bears Ears decision-making. I read Edward Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang* to understand how protest in the name of protecting the American southwest is an expression of love. The most meaningful text on human interaction with landscape came from *Red Rock Stories: Three Generations of Writers Speak on Behalf of Utah's Public Lands*, an anthology edited by Stephen Trimble. Utah writers, residents, native tribal leaders, and children speak to the need for protection of Utah's public lands, including Bears Ears. The stories manifest themselves lyrically in poetry and linear forms—their words build a living monument of art that speaks to the wild landscapes of Utah. A particular favorite of mine is Jen Jackson Quintano's "Memory," an essay about returning back to her desert home with her daughter. Quintano says, "It is essential to experience beauty and truth neither conceived nor altered by minds and hands. It is essential to have something beyond us worthy of our seeking and striving. Worthy of return" (69). These stories inform my sense of what's at stake if we allow consumerist and capitalistic relationships to replace our emotional connections to landscapes. This anthology speaks to the deep history that Utahns have established with public lands, and it informs my sense of urgency that hopefully pushes through my site visit strand, presenting the high stakes of losing a landscape that has shaped and defined a vast array of people.

In examining the scope of the political controversy surrounding Bears Ears, I focused on Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke's visit to Bears Ears in late April of 2017 and President Trump's remarks on the Antiquities Act. The language that President Trump and Secretary Zinke use in order to characterize the Bears Ears landscape differs drastically from the narratives of those who want to protect Bears Ears. While native tribes, conservationists, and outdoor retail companies want to preserve the landscape for our enjoyment, Trump and Zinke want to protect

economic well-being in these regions for the benefit of their constituents. As President Trump stated in a press conference in April of 2017, protecting large swathes of land without consulting all stakeholders is “an egregious abuse of federal power.” Reading through the language that the Trump administration uses was important in informing my sense of how they read this landscape and what is at stake for them.

My sense of the complications in reading landscapes was informed by John D’Agata’s *About a Mountain*. D’Agata not only examines the stakes of designating of Nevada’s Yucca Mountain as a potential site for nuclear waste storage, but also investigates the prevalence of suicide in Las Vegas. D’Agata has a very unique approach in demonstrating competing versions of stories—his primary approach is to make lists, letting seemingly unrelated events put tension throughout a narrative:

The winds from the south were blowing palls of white dust, the stock market was low, unemployment rates high, the moon only showing half of itself, and Mars and Jupiter aligned, which isn’t particularly rare, and so there is no explanation for the confluence that night of the Senate vote on Yucca Mountain and the death of a boy who jumped from the tower of the Stratosphere Hotel and Casino, a 1,149-foot-high tower in the center of the brown desert valley (42).

D’Agata allows us to make meaning through these long lists, pulling connections between contemporary issues such as high unemployment rates, the Senate vote on Yucca Mountain, and teen suicide. Through these lists, we begin to see the ramifications of our naiveté, our silence, and even our attempts to find solutions to our most pressing problems—as D’Agata asserts, there is “no explanation for the confluence” (42). I appreciate the way in which D’Agata positions himself as a writer—he is willing to let go of narrative control and instead allows these

seemingly unrelated events speak for themselves. This helps inform my sense of how to approach writing my Bears Ears strand—while I have a strong personal opinion on why Bears Ears should remain under federal protection, I loosened my control over that strand by letting the Wuornos and divorce strand influence the overall tone of the essay.

Finally, for information on Wuornos, I focused on scholarly and newspaper articles on her life leading up to the murders, as well as her trial and the press coverage after the killings. I was primarily interested in how Wuornos initially sought the illusive protection of self-defense, yet later recanted this statement. I was also curious to see how Wuornos's own accounts of her traumatic life and childhood were difficult to pin down—some turned out to be “true” and some produced more questions. This establishes the illusive nature of characterizing Wuornos long after her death, as many have either taken more of an empathetic look at her life as a victim or have her pinned as a villainous psychopathic serial killer. “There's so much sensationalism attached to her life and story,” says Carla Lucero, a San Francisco composer who wrote an opera about Wuornos' life. “I really felt for this woman. She never gave up on the concept of love, and she's been betrayed all the way down the line” (*Orlando Sentinel*). I am interested in the complex takes and perspectives on Wuornos's life, from empathetic artistic representations, to police and prosecutors testifying that the sensationalism of her character led to inaccurate portrayals of her to the public. Many feminist groups took a more empathetic look at Wuornos, claiming that she was retaliating against the violence of men that she had been subjected to for most of her life. However, the prosecutor explains that taking a sympathetic stance on Wuornos's life is a mistake. “She has been made into something she's not. She truly hated men. I think it's a tragedy to make her into some type of heroine figure” (*Palm Beach Post*). Through my research strand, I hope to illuminate the multiplicity of Wuornos's characterization by both those who

were closest and most empathetic to her nature, and those who sought to bring justice for her victims.

In conclusion, I would turn to this quote from Terry Tempest Williams's *Refuge*: "Restraint is the steel partition between a rational mind and a violent one. I knew rage. It was fire in my stomach with no place to go." This essay was born from a place of anger—anger at my parents for hating each other, and anger at the Trump administration for slashing Bears Ears. Aileen Wuornos was born into a world of rejection, abandonment, and trauma, and that grew into a rage that manifested in the deaths of seven men. Yet anger always fails us, unless it can transition into something else, something beautiful—resistance, perhaps. Understanding, maybe. Love, definitely.

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