Consumption as Driver in Terry Tempest Williams’s *Refuge* and the works of Simone Weil

By Stewart Stone

Student, University of St. Thomas Master of Arts in English Program, St. Paul, MN

nsstone@stthomas.edu
I’m going to look at the theme of consumption through the eyes of two writers: Terry Tempest Williams and Simone Weil. For these purposes, consumption takes shape in two different ways: one is the idea of something being used up, of one thing devouring or taking over another. The second form is being a consumer economically, where we make purchases and acquire things. While the two writers are quite different in their practices, I pull them both together because each of them makes strong statements toward clothing and food, which are the two angles of consumption that I’m specifically reviewing. Furthermore, their ultimate goals and motives remain surprisingly aligned, which is to build community and help other people. They just believe differently on the best way to get there. And finally, this paper is the product of a class on spiritual autobiography, so spirituality has a role in the authors’ lives and in analysis.

Clothing and Appearances

I want to start with Terry Tempest Williams and her book called *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*. *Refuge* was published in 1991 and takes place in Salt Lake City. It’s the story of Williams’s mother dying of cancer while at the same time the water level of Great Salt Lake is dramatically rising, wiping out critical bird habitat as well as human developments. Williams’s favorite place to visit during her mother’s illness is a bird refuge at Great Salt Lake, where, as the title implies, Williams gains as much refuge from the world as the birds that she observes there. Her connection to the birds, the landscape, and all her natural surroundings comes through strongly in the book.
To begin talking about consumption in this book, I’ll first say that *Refuge* could be described as being almost entirely about consumption. There are multiple descriptions of things either consuming or being consumed. As examples, the government spends large amounts of money to control the flooding of Great Salt Lake, while the flooding lake overtakes its surroundings. Fire consumes a number of human developments. Humans consume the environment, as certain birds lose their breeding habitat (145). A group of aggressive starlings live at the dump and crowd out other birds. Additionally, cancer cells consume the body of Williams’s mother (44). And finally, Williams is consumed with her mother’s illness, saying that she wants to have her life and her marriage back (164). So the consumption pattern recurs frequently throughout the text, and *Refuge* would be a thin book without it.

The first form of consumption to examine more closely is clothing and appearances. Williams regularly calls attention to the clothing that she and her mother are either wearing or acquiring. The two of them shop at Nordstrom’s together, where her mother buys satin (24) and suede clothing. Their shopping continues with the purchase of many Christmas gifts for other family members (198). The two had also been in New York together, where they shopped and had makeovers and went to the theatre (25).

Knowing Williams’s affection for the landscape and the birds, her going shopping may seem out of character. But the key is that the mother’s incentive drives these excursions, not Williams’s. Williams readily admits that she dresses colorfully in order to “entertain mother” (212). Clearly, her mother enjoys shopping, new clothes, and fine stores, and Williams accompanies her as a way to have meaningful time together. Since Williams is close to her mother,
and her mother’s illness and eventual death are painful for her, the shopping and clothes are a way for Williams to be generous with her mother and do something for her where they can continue growing closer.

Now I’d like to turn to Simone Weil on this topic of clothing. Weil was born in Paris in 1909 and died in England at the age of 34. Rather than tell a story in her writings, as Williams did, Weil’s work is more toward philosophy in the form of letters and essays. She wrote a great deal on religion and the Church and her place within those constructs. Much of her writings—including one of her books, called Waiting for God—came about as part of her correspondence with a friend named Father Perrin.

Coming back to consumption, Weil differed greatly from Williams in her attitudes toward clothing and appearances. She would have nothing of the shopping or nice clothes that Williams found a way to value. She devalued appearance and possessions, and wanted to reach others with that message. Her chief mission was to those still “submerged in materialism” (Fiedler ix), so she dressed to show humility and attention to her inside journey rather than outside appearances. Her typical outfit was an oversize brown beret, a shapeless cape, and large floppy shoes (xvii).

And even going further than the clothing, Weil manipulated her body itself to express humility. She wanted to destroy what in her was ‘beautiful’ and superficially charming, to make herself the opposite of an appealing young girl. So any pictures of her show her trying very hard not to be charming (Fiedler xvii). Weil wrote, “A beautiful woman...looking at her image in the mirror may very well believe the image is herself. An ugly woman knows it is not” (xvii). So a person who sees beauty would identify herself as only that, as
though tricked to believe that is good enough. But a person without the
physical beauty will go beyond the looks to see a spiritual force pursuing God
and truth. So Weil, like Williams, also wanted to help other people, though it
appears to be humanity in general rather than one specific person.

So there is a difference in practice toward clothing between the two
writers. This difference is heightened when flashed against a society that does
often thrive on appearances. The things that Williams does or has, like good
clothing or shopping at nice stores — are signs of success. Yet if we look at the
value of a person by what they represent rather than how they look, Weil would
be right on – perhaps ahead of her time – even though she herself was making
an effort to look a certain way. But Weil was also more independent than
Williams, who shopped and dressed as a way to build community with her
mother, itself a noble act.

**A Well-Fed Refuge**

The other form of consumption I want to turn to in both writers is eating
and food. Starting with Williams and *Refuge*, I’ll say that the book is fairly
inundated with descriptions of meals. This imagery is manifested both by
Williams’s family and the eating that the birds do. To the latter, Williams often
watches the birds eat when she’s at the refuge. Indeed, she’s trying to catch
the birds in the act. We sense the urgency, for example, when she writes, “One
egret spears a small frog. A blink and we would have missed it” (49). Seeing
this action is important because it connects Williams with the birds. It helps
her understand their fight for survival and thus she gains inspiration to keep
fighting herself, despite her mother’s looming death. She writes, “I could not
separate the Bird Refuge from my family” (40), indicating how closely she’s tied to the area. As the birds eat, then, so do Williams and her family. It’s important for her spiritually to see the intake of nourishment, helping her maintain the will to feed herself - emotionally and physically - and keep her own life going.

Along with helping her will to live, Williams also creates a shared experience by making sure that any companion she has with her sees the birds eating. Whether it’s employees from Parks and Recreation or her mother, she’ll go out of her way to inform the other person about the eating, despite their interest level. She doesn’t want to see it alone. Scenes such as these are undoubtedly why critic Richard Hunt points to one “of the book’s central themes – the importance of community” and “the rejoining Williams seeks always to initiate” (184). By witnessing the same unique natural phenomenon, those present are brought closer together.

If Williams is not directly watching the birds eat, she’s studying their diet patterns as a part of science. On one occasion we learn that different colonies of pelicans breed at different times because that staggers the demand for food among young pelicans. So while a certain number of pelicans will be born in a season, not all are born at the same time. This means that the pelican food supply is like a high school cafeteria, where eating times are juggled for different grades and groups. Many young pelicans would die without this adaptation. Williams is impressed with this system, calling the birds a “finely tuned society of pelicans” (107).

There is also a historical perspective on birds eating. The gull, for example, used its appetite to become Utah’s state bird (70). In 1848, crickets
had invaded wheat crops and threatened the farmers’ primary food source. The farmers prayed for help, and the prayers were answered when gulls appeared and devoured the crickets, protecting the crops and ultimately saving the farmers from hunger. … So the various ways of studying the birds’ eating habits create an avenue of understanding for Williams, just as the clothing provided an avenue into her mother’s life.

And finally, by describing the birds eating, Williams shows the parallel between the birds and her family, the members of which are also frequently eating. The reader often knows what’s on the menu for dinner or a picnic or even a snack. This acknowledgement is important for Williams.

The question is, why make such a declaration? Well, *Refuge* is nonfiction, and eating is what families do together. But also, if we look at the illness of Williams’s mother, then eating becomes a sign of normalcy, an indication that things are the way they should be - that, in effect, her mother is healthy. When her mother is feeling better, she eats along with everyone else. But when she doesn’t eat, that’s a manifestation of the advanced cancer. So the meaning of eating can be determined by examining its absence – the lack of eating. Many passages tell how her mother has not eaten for days or weeks, and at their Christmas dinner, everything was described as being “normal” until everyone gradually noticed that their mother was not eating. So the façade of having peace and a normal holiday meal was shattered at the sight of their mother not eating. In this light, then, in its most important role, eating is an indicator of health, stability, and family well-being.
Waiting to Eat

I now want to turn back to Simone Weil and her relationship with food. It’s quite different than Williams, but her opinions are just as strong. Leslie Fiedler, who wrote the introduction to *Waiting for God*, said that “The whole pattern of [Weil’s] life is dominated by the concepts of eating and not eating…her virtue seems naturally to have found its expression in attitudes toward food” (xxx). And while having different methods from Williams, as she did with the clothing, Weil’s ultimate goals remain similar – to empathize with others and help them live longer and better lives.

Weil denied her body food for much of her life, beginning at the age of five by refusing to eat sugar, knowing that the soldiers of World War I didn’t have any. Her death was at least partially caused by self-starvation. At the end of her life, when she was in a hospital, sick and needing nourishment, she still refused the food ordered by the doctors. Instead, she kept to the rations her compatriots had (156). Her refusal to eat stems from two reasons - the first being to share the hardship of those in France that were unemployed or in war who didn’t have enough to eat. She wanted to empathize with them by not eating any more than they did.

But Weil also avoided eating because the food interfered in her spiritual goals; the lack of it helped her in advancing towards God. She wrote, “All the things that I see, hear, breathe, touch, eat... deprive the sum total of all that of contact with God” (Anne Carson 195). Furthermore, a book called *Holy Anorexia* outlines a number of holy women and their relationship to food (Rudolph Bell). One passage states, that in theory, “The suppression of
physical urges and basic feelings [such as] – fatigue...hunger, [and] pain – frees
the body to achieve heroic feats and the soul to commune with God” (13).

The most meaningful hunger for Weil, then, is hunger for God. We
should be eternally hungry, and welcome hunger, because it is the proof of the
reality of God, who is the only sustenance that can satisfy us (Fiedler xxxi).
This, then, is how Weil feeds herself. Not with food in her stomach, but rather
intellectually and spiritually. Weil writes, “as far as possible I only read what I
am hungry for at the moment when I have an appetite for it, and then I do not
read, I eat” (27). So when she reads and pursues God as she wants to, she
considers herself as having “eaten.”

The two writers’ attitudes toward food, then, reveal their strengths.
Clearly, Weil is highly principled, and believes she will help even those she does
not know, while Williams brings those around her together through a distinct
will to live.

In conclusion, consumption becomes a lens through which the authors
see the world and through which we see the authors’ lives. It is a personal
statement that declares what they see as being valuable. Williams likes to
watch consumption, participate in it herself, and then express the concept in
various forms. Much of Refuge revolves around one thing getting bigger while
another is swallowed up. Weil, on the other hand, prefers not to consume. She
would rather remain empty and “decreate” herself, getting herself out of the way
so she can have complete union with God. But they both use consumption to
find purpose in their lives and a way of relating to the world. Their long-term
motives – of helping others and building community - are more consistent with
one another than it initially appears.
Works Cited:


