MEANWHILE THE WORLD GOES ON:

PROVINCETOWN'S PLACE IN AN AGE OF TRAUMA

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation explores the ways in which landscapes have acted as healing agents during trauma and loss. Viewed in the light, the natural world can become a resource not for human exploitation but for connection and encounter. Furthermore, this work analyzes the ways writers, specifically poets, have allowed landscapes to influence their work, especially in relationship with trauma and loss. The specific landscape explored is Provincetown, Massachusetts. The intersection of environment, trauma, and poetry as witness and testimony is at the core of Provincetown's evolving identity in the 21st century.

One major framework I will be using to understand trauma will be Shelly Rambo's theological work. Rambo's term for the experience of trauma is "The Middle Day" or "Middleness". A key characteristic of her work is the notion of trauma survivors being in the middle, or in the midst of an experience of death and life. Trauma occurs when a death event intrudes on life, changing the nature of that life, including one's experience of time and place. While Rambo uses Christian theology to better frame the experience of trauma and survival, this paper moves that terminology into the environmental and literary world. The coastal space of Provincetown witnesses to a kind of Middleness, while poets are able to testify from this territory about the experience of living in the aftermath of trauma and loss.

A place on the very end of the continent, Provincetown has been a refuge for artists for decades, particularly artists in the gay community. There, out on the edge of

town, gay men and women have been able to find a connection with the natural world that has offered healing, creative inspiration, solace, and companionship.

In this way, this dissertation seeks to help restore humanity's appreciation of nature as a resource during trauma and loss, providing even more reason to protect that nature from destruction. Writers like Mary Oliver and Mark Doty create out of this space of both landscape and loss, pointing toward a new, ecocritical aesthetic emerging from the Middleness of Provincetown's coastline in the 21st century.

DEDICATION

To all those who have found refuge on Provincetown's curvature of coastal space after an ending.

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Dr. Shelly Rambo introduced me to middleness and "The Middle Day". Our long walks down the coastal space of Cape Cod have been a treasure and gift. Shelly, her husband, Michael Juhl, and their dog, Finn, provided their own refuge for me as I researched this project.

Thank you to my family and friends who have supported me during my own times of middleness. You buoyed me when the seas have been rough and listened on the shore with me when those storms quieted. Thank you for being with me in coastal space.

Finally, I want to thank the people of Provincetown, Massachusetts, especially Jay Critchley, for their help and guidance during this project. Your resilience and care for others who "do not belong" is a testimony in itself. Thank you for nurturing the refuge that is Provincetown.

Wild Geese

You do not have to be good.

You do not have to walk on your knees

for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.

You only have to let the soft animal of your body

love what it loves.

Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.

Meanwhile the world goes on.

Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain

are moving across the landscapes,

over the prairies and the deep trees,

the mountains and the rivers.

Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,

are heading home again.

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,

the world offers itself to your imagination,

calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting –

over and over announcing your place

in the family of things.

Mary Oliver, *Dream Work*

1986

INTRODUCTION

Mary Oliver saved my life. I am tempted to say, as Tim O'Brien writes in his novel *The Things They Carried* in regards to stories, that she didn't save my body, of course, but my life. However, with Mary Oliver I think it was both- the body and the life within it. She helped me love "the soft animal of the body" in ways I was too ashamed to do before. Her poem *Wild Geese* arrived in my life, as it has in so many others', at the perfect time and its first line, "You do not have to be good", ushered in a new kind of philosophy, theology, not to mention, maybe most importantly, a deep, deep breath offered to my anxious and shame-filled being. I didn't know poetry could do that.

I arrived at The Oregon Extension, a semester program in the Cascade Siskiyou National Monument, about an hour up from Ashland, in late August of 2001. I had just spent a semester at Oxford University, and these next four months would be yet another attempt to break away from the confines of the evangelical university in the Midwest I had been attending. Oxford, no doubt, provided me with a different kind of pedagogy, filled with independence and unique opportunities for scholarship. However, The Oregon Extension (the OE) provided me with its own way of doing education, its own rigorous and contemplative set of days. What the OE had over Oxford, though, was its landscape. It's hard to describe the majesty of towering Ponderosa pines in crisp, dry air for a kid from the humid Jersey Shore. I could literally breathe differently there. Come to think of it, maybe the landscape's ability to do just that, allow me to breathe, helped prepare me for what I was about to discover.

Each morning, the students and faculty would meet together for our main lecture before heading into smaller group discussions, and eventually toward some place on the

mountain to read and write for the remainder of the afternoon. Before each lecture, a professor would read a poem to set the tone for the day, a kind of literary prayer. This was where I was first introduced to Mary Oliver. A 21-year-old, closeted gay man, I heard her decree in her poem *Wild Geese* that I did "not have to walk on my knees for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting." It washed over me with the gentleness of one of the crisp breezes between the pines outside of our 'campus' library. Not overtly a queer poet, nor a queer poem, what struck me first was Oliver's dedication to the natural world as a place of healing.

Later, I would learn how Oliver escaped the trauma of her childhood and was "saved by the beauty of the world." I would get to know more about her chosen home, Provincetown, Massachusetts, and its importance to her work. Furthermore, Provincetown's landscape held significance to other trauma survivors, specifically during the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s. Poets like Mark Doty and Marie Howe would continue Oliver's tradition of writing from this particular place.

Therefore, Provincetown becomes the intersection of landscape, trauma, and poetry. Its unique curvature at the end of Cape Cod provides a landscape that resonates with the traumatic experience. The coastal space of what Dr. Shelly Rambo calls 'middleness', for example, speaks to the reality of trauma survival being a living on after a death, or an ending. Coastal space contains both ebb and flow, both a living breath and a receding one. Moreover, this "spit of sand at the end of the world" as resident Jay Critchley refers to Provincetown, acts itself as a continuation after an ending, a move west and then east and then west again after what one would think would be the ending of Cape Cod. Instead, the land curves and creates a harbor, a safe harbor of refuge. From

this point of view, therefore, Provincetown speaks in a particular way to an age defined by trauma and recovery.

This dissertation is, essentially, an attempt to explore how Mary Oliver saved my life. Starting with the importance of landscape, exploring the nature of trauma, and reflecting on Provincetown, Massachusetts' place in the world and the poets who found refuge there, this work will be interdisciplinary in its breadth and scope. Still, in a way to keep me grounded and focused, I keep coming back to Oliver's poetry and its impact on my life.

CHAPTER ONE

THE PRIMACY OF THE NATURAL WORLD

> Ecocriticism expands the notion of "the word" to include the entire ecosphere. If we agree with Barry Commoner's first law of ecology, "Everything is connected to everything else," we must conclude that literature does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether, but, rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system, in which energy, matter, *and ideas*, interact (Glotfelty 123).

Introduction

Literary critics often ponder what roles gender, class, race, or the psyche play in texts. Toward the end of the 20th century, a new concern arose in conversation with the growing threat to the planet's ecosystem: what role does the environment, the natural world, play in the text? When placing landscape and setting as primary starting points for analysis, how might King Lear's encounter with the storm read differently? How significant were the mountain air and its sheep for Ennis Del Mar and Jack Twist in *Brokeback Mountain*? This lens, placing the natural world in a crucial focal point, is the home of ecocriticism.

Although ecocriticism emerged toward the end of the 20th century as climate change began to truly threaten the existence of the planet, it has its roots in Romanticism. At the heart of Romanticism, present since the late 18th century, is an appreciation for the natural world in opposition to industrialization and mankind's often brutal treatment of the earth. In his *Introduction to Literature and the Environment*, Timothy Clark writes, "The 'Romantic' ecology' reverences the green earth because it recognizes that neither physically or psychologically can we live without green things; it proclaims that there is 'one life' within us and abroad, that the earth is a single vast ecosystem which we destabilize at our peril" (16).

William Wordsworth, one of the key founders of British Romanticism, is essential in understanding the contemporary ecocritical moment. One of his poetic goals was to bring language out of the stuffy halls of the elite and into the hands and minds of the common people. His language was intentionally focused *toward* humanity. Wordsworth himself was surrounded by trauma. He lost both of his parents by the age of 18 and was tormented by the outcome of the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror (Abrams 220). In between periods of despair, he would hike through the French Alps, or nearby Wales, in order to reconnect with his truest self. In fact, Wordsworth's devotion to nature, in response to trauma, is an early precursor to poets like Mary Oliver and Mark Doty, analyzed later in this project, who are truly kindred spirits to Wordsworth and his poetics. In her essay on Wordsworth, Oliver describes one of his journeys as a child on a rowboat. On this quiet evening, Wordsworth perceives the mountain in the distance and feels overcome by both his awareness of the mountain, as well as the mountain's awareness of him. She marks this moment in Wordsworth's young life as a turning point. From then on, Wordsworth's home in the world would be nature. Oliver writes:

> Wordsworth, though he did not think so on that summer evening, was a lucky boy. I, in my hut of leaves, was a lucky girl. Something touched, between us and the universe. It does not always happen. But if it does, we know forever where we live, no matter where we sleep, or eat dinner, or sit at a table and write words on paper. And we might, in our lives, have many thresholds, many houses to walk from and view the stars…But the real one-the actual house not of beams and nails but of existence itself-is all of earth" (*Upstream* 114).

In *Lines Written in Early Spring*, written in 1798, Wordsworth laments humanity's disconnection from nature, as well as its harmful treatment to mankind. Indeed, the two were not mutually exclusive for Wordsworth. In the second stanza of this poem, Wordsworth praises, "To her fair works did Nature link / The human

soul that through me ran" only to then lament, "And much it grieved my heart to think / What man has made of man" (Abrams 226). In the fourth stanza, Wordsworth again contrasts the state of the natural world with what "man has made of man" in describing "The birds around me hopped and played, / Their thoughts I cannot measure - / But the least motion which they made, / It seemed a thrill of pleasure" (ibid). It would be contrite to say the opposite of pleasure is pain, and I do not think Wordsworth is dealing in the total binaries of nature and humanity here, but it is worth noting that mankind has lost this natural experience of pleasure, in part by removing himself from nature during the Industrial Revolution, by placing the machine above all. He ends his poem with a final lamentation: "If this belief from heaven be sent, / If such be Nature's holy plan, / Have I not reason to lament / What man has made of man?" (ibid). For Wordsworth, what is lost in our pursuit that places nature as secondary is the sheer experience of pleasure, an antidote to the traumas of his early childhood.

What concerned early Romantics were the ways in which industrialization also affected the nature of work and its effects on art. It is out of this concern that poets, especially, like Wordsworth emerge. In this way, *poetry* emerges as a kindred spirit to ecocriticism. Clark writes:

> In effect, literary or poetic language is seen as inherently 'green', 'ecological' in a loose sense. The poetic or mythic offer more holistic modes of language enabling less repressed forms of engagement with things. Art and the poetic, so understood, can be offered as a therapeutic antidote to psychic alienation and division. Bate's argument in *Romantic Ecology* and *The Song of the Earth* belongs to this romantic tradition, with this speculative wager: 'to see what happens when we regard poems as imaginary parks in which we may breathe an air that is not toxic and accommodate ourselves to a mode of dwelling that is not alienated'. (21)

Romanticism helped allow the poetic to mirror, or even metaphorically become, a 'mode of dwelling', a landscape in and of itself. It is no wonder then, that poets like Mary Oliver and Mark Doty found poetry to be the necessary genre to come alongside the 'mode of dwelling' at Provincetown. Its unique curvature at what seems like the end of the world, something this paper will discuss in more detail later, can be captured, in some ways, especially through the poetic.

In his groundbreaking work *The Song of the Earth,* Jonathan Bate helps define the ecopoetic:

> Ecopoetics asks in what respects a poem may be a making of the dwelling place- the prefix eco - is derived from Greek *oikos*, 'the home or place of dwelling'...[I]t could be that *poiesis* in the sense of verse-making is language's most direct path of return to the *oikos,* the place of dwelling, because metre itself - a quiet but persistent music, a recurring cycle, a heartbeat - is an answering to nature's own rhythms, an echoing of the song of the earth" (77).

The significance of the ecopoetic is that the poem grounds itself in the earth as its home, instead of anything anthropomorphic. As seen in Wordsworth's *Lines Written in Early Spring,* his lament about what "man has done to man" places the pleasures of the earth's early spring as its focal point and dwelling place. Bates argues against the anthropomorphic tendency to look at nature from a distance, as something 'picturesque', as an attempt at mastery *over* nature, and instead posits that the ecopoetic "submits instead to an inner vision which enables one to 'see into the life of things'. The ecopoetic has a connection *with* nature, not a mastery *over* nature. It does not look at the natural world as something 'cute', external, or 'picturesque', but as its dwelling place, its home, an essential part of its being: "Paul Klee spoke as an artist, not a critic: 'In a forest, I have felt many times over that it was not I who looked at the forest. Some days I felt that the

trees were looking at me, were speaking to me…I was there listening...I think that the painter must be penetrated by the universe and not want to penetrate it'" (Bates 166). This is a fascinating declaration. What this means is that the earth is *speaking to us*, or as Bates would say, *singing to us* through the means of the poetic. A key aspect of the healing of trauma, as will be mentioned later in this project, is testimony and witness, the ongoing act of speaking and listening. The earth's experience can speak to our human experience in a way that speaks to us not being separate, binary, entities, but in a relationship and union.

Bates points out that Wordsworth is the poet who began being inspired by place as its own entity. Place spoke first, before "a patron's request, perhaps, or a historical event or association" (205). This relationship becomes one that breaks the separation of the mind with the natural world, of mankind being separate from, or above, nature. Wordsworth worried about the alienation that technology can cause to the human being, especially as it distances the human from her natural environment. In his famous poem *The World is Too Much with Us*, Wordsworth describes this human exile with an ironic use of the word 'world'. In the first octave of this Petrarchan sonnet, Wordsworth diagnoses the problem: "Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers: Little we see in Nature that is our;" (Abrams 297). Using the language of commerce, Wordsworth foreshadows the 20th and 21st centuries' obsession with capitalism and profit at the cost of, well, the earth itself. This "getting and spending" has removed us from Nature. In the next line, Wordsworth reveals what we have given in this exchange, what we have sacrificed to the world of commerce: "We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!" (ibid). This disconnection from Nature is a sacrifice of our truest selves, our deepest

hearts. It is a dirty gift we have given to the lords of industry. This is not our natural state. In the second half of the first octave of the poem Wordsworth compares the human to a musical instrument, capable of song: "This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon; / The winds that will be howling at all hours, / And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers; / For this, for every thing, we are out of tune;" (ibid). In personifying the Sea who "bares her bosom to the moon" Wordsworth illustrates the unity between Nature and mankind. Nature has not separated from humanity; it still sings. Mankind, however, is a discordant guitar, achingly off key from its natural state. The final sestet of the poem shifts from a lamentation of what has been lost to a declaration of admiration toward the Pagan worldview, one that has a unity with Nature that has been tragically lacking in Wordsworth's Christian England. One cannot help but be reminded of the dangerous interpretation of the biblical decree for man to have "dominion" over the earth. Wordsworth writes, "Great God! I'd rather be / A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn; / So might I, standing on this pleasant lea, / Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn; / Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea; / Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn" (ibid). In addition to the declaration (to God!) that Wordsworth would prefer the Pagan mindset, he also reminds us that we have lost something mythological and essential to our understanding of being human. Alluding to Proteus, an old man who is native to the sea, and Triton, a mythological sea god, Wordsworth harkens us back to what is at the core of the human experience, a union with Nature as opposed to a separation from it in exchange for "getting and spending". It is crucial in understanding Wordsworth's contributions to the current ecopoetic moment, and for understanding the term ecopoetry itself. Bates writes:

> Romanticism declares allegiance to what Wordsworth…called 'the beautiful and permanent forms of nature.' It proposes that when we commune with those forms we live with a peculiar intensity, and conversely that our lives are diminished when technology and industrialization alienate us from those forms. It regards poetic language as a special kind of expression which may affect an imaginative reunification of mind and nature…. I have described this broadly conceived Romanticism as an 'ecopoetic', a *poiesis* (Greek 'making') of the *oikos* (Greek 'home' or 'dwelling place'). (245)

Poetry as an "imaginative reunification" of the alienated self from the natural world is key to ecopoetry. While Wordsworth's main concern was the technological and industrial, 20th and 21st century poets would imagine this reunification as essential after a trauma. In addition to "laying waste our powers" and "giving our hearts away", we have also lost an essential component to healing as the natural world is often a crucial component for the reconnection to the world necessary for recovery from trauma. Later in this paper, we will see how Mary Oliver and Mark Doty continue in the spirit of Wordsworth's reunification poetry, in this way, these poets and their poetry "speak 'earth'" (Bates 251). In their poetry they allow the earth to sing and embody Bates' main thesis: "Poetry is the song of the earth" (ibid).

However, it would be naive to say that humans can do without technology. The ecopoetic is not that immature. What it does say is that we can reprioritize our lives and remove the technological from in many ways owning us. The poem creates a new dwelling place with the earth at its core. Martin Heidegger believed that this is the reason poets are so crucial as they bring forth a new way of being in the world through language: "In his *Discourse on Thinking* of 1955, Heidegger asserted that 'We can say "yes" to the unavoidable use of technological objects, and we can at the same time say "no," in so far as we do not permit them to claim us exclusively and thus to warp, confuse, and finally lay waste to our essence" (Bates 258). Heidegger's use of the phrase "lay waste" is no

doubt an allusion to Wordsworth's *The World is Too Much With Us*. Heidegger is proclaiming here that we do not need to "give our hearts away" to the technological. He goes on to suggest it is the poet who can do this reclaiming of the heart through poetry: "'Revealing' lays claim to the arts most primarily': poetry is our way of stepping outside the fame of the technological…For Heidegger, poetry can, quite literally, save the earth" (ibid). Essential in this "saving of the earth" is realizing and embodying our union with it. Poetry can speak that into being, imagining a new way forward that is not one of alienation and disconnection, but of unity, wholeness, reconnection with our truest selves, the hearts we gave away in Wordsworth's "sordid boon".

As society moved beyond Romanticism, while still maintaining some of its deepest beliefs, "nature writing" emerged in non-fiction. Indeed, Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* became the father of this branch of writing, inspiring the likes of Edward Abbey, Annie Dillard, and Terry Tempest Williams. This early form of "nature writing" would blend into the genre of memoir toward the mid to late 20th century with many writers including their relationship with the natural world as part of their spiritual autobiography. Memoirs such as *Wild* by Cheryl Strayed and *Heaven's Coast* by Mark Doty are included under this ecocritical umbrella. Still, scholars look to the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* as a pivotal moment in the emergence of ecocriticism. It was Carson's work that truly alarmed the world about the imminent dangers that mankind's treatment of the earth would soon bring if not quickly corrected. While race, gender, and class all provide important avenues and lenses to interpret literary texts, the natural world's importance would soon eclipse other categories, or rather encompass them under its wide umbrella. Indeed, under this

umbrella of the natural world's lens, intersectionality becomes essential. Glen Love writes:

> Race, class and gender are the words which we see everywhere at our professional meetings and in our current publications. But curiously enough…the English profession has failed to respond in any significant way to the issue of the environment, the acknowledgment of our place in the natural world and our need to live heedfully within it, at the peril of our very survival. (227).

Indeed, the stakes are that high in the field of ecocriticism.

A Brief History of Ecocriticism

The term "ecocriticism" first arose in the 1970s (Hiltner 1). In her essay *Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis*, Cheryll Glotfelty lists some of the early ecocritical concerns:

> Ecocritics and theorists ask questions like the following: How is nature represented in this sonnet? What role does the physical setting play in the plot of this novel? Are the values expressed in the play consistent with ecological wisdom? How do our metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it?...How has the concept of wilderness changed over time? (122)

The early ecocritics took new looks at the works of Shakespeare, Francis Bacon, and even the Bible. One of the key components of this lens is to take a look at the ways in which anthropocentrism, placing the human at the center, played out in texts, at times over and against the natural world. Instead of anthropocentrism, critics called for an "ecocentrism", especially in light of the harm being done to the planet and our growing awareness of that harm in the late 20th century. For ecocritics, it was time for mankind to step aside and let the earth breathe more in the text and our interpretations of it.

In his essay *Revaluing Nature*, Glen Love discusses the dangers of our anthropocentrism. Using the tragic voyage of the *Titanic* as a metaphor for our primary concerns with humanity over nature, Love explains that perhaps we should pay as much, if not more, attention to our surroundings:

> How can the discipline of English-which purports to deal with the human value systems of the past and present, which seemingly engages literary representations of our relationship with our surroundings, and which thus both influences, and is influenced by, that relationship- fail to address such issues? Why are the activities aboard the *Titanic* so fascinating to us that we give no heed to the waters through which we pass, or to that iceberg on the horizon? (229)

Importantly, by placing the natural world as primary in our focus, we actually wind up helping humanity *more* than by such devout anthropocentrism. By looking at nature, it "reveals adaptive strategies far more complex than any human mind could devise" (Love 231). These adaptive strategies will be essential when confronting the traumas of the 20th century and will be discussed later in this paper. Perhaps, ecocritics argue, we have missed the forest for the trees and have had healing resources and natural refuges right in front of our faces. Love borrows from the work of Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* as well as Erich Fromm's *The Sane Society* to argue that society itself can be sick, and that the cure for that sickness might not come within the sick society:

> And, as Freud says, the means for curing a communal neurosis cannot come from those afflicted by the neurosis. Rather, it must come from elsewhere (Alcorn 108)...One place, properly regarded, serves as well as another. As anthropologist-writer Richard Nelson says, "What makes a place special is the way it buries itself inside the heart, not whether its flat or rugged, rich or austere, wet or arid, gentle or harsh, warm or cold, wild or tame. Every place, like every person, is elevated by the love and respect shown toward it, and by the way in which its bounty is received" (xii). We become increasingly aware, as our technological world begins to crack beneath our feet, that our task is not to remake nature so that it is fit for humankind, but as Thoreau says, to make humankind right for nature. (Love 235).

This paper will focus on the particulars of the place of Provincetown, Massachusetts and its offer of healing to trauma survivors of the 20th century. Within its dramatic tides, salt marshes, dunes, and unique light, this place provides a unique offering to humankind.

In the 1980s, building on the work done the decade before and its concern about placing human needs and perspectives before the earth's, writers like the poet Gary Snyder called for a "deep ecology", a radical rethinking of, particularly, Western values regarding the earth and our place on it. Early ecocritics called into question the interpretation within Christianity that mankind is to have dominion over the earth. "Radical ecologists" like Snyder argued that other religions, specifically Buddhism, might offer other ways of looking at mankind's relationship with the natural world (Hiltner 2). Indeed, the growing threat to the planet called for change that was more revolutionary in scope, less incremental. In fact, *Time* magazine's person of the year in 1988 was 'The Endangered Earth' (Glotfelty 121).

What is crucial for this project are the ways in which, because we can look at the text as an ecosystem, we can see interconnections between nature, culture, and literature (Glotfelty 123). If one main characteristic of the 20th century was our growing awareness of our ecological crisis, another would be the experience, and awareness of, trauma. Therefore, before moving on to a look at ecopoetics, a crucial component of ecocriticism, I find it necessary to look at the 20th and 21st century through the lens of trauma. Through this interconnected ecosystem, I believe the ecopoetic will provide a unique response to trauma. Glotfelty writes about the inherent interconnectedness of ecocriticism:

> Some scholars like the term *ecocriticism* because it is short and can easily be made into other forms like *ecocritical* and *ecocritic*. Additionally, they favor *eco-* over *enviro-* because, analogous to the science of ecology, ecocriticism studies relationships between things, in this case between human culture and the physical world. Furthermore, in its connotations, *enviro-* is anthropocentric and dualistic, implying that we humans are at the center, surrounded by everything that is not us, the environment. *Eco-*, in contrast, implies interdependent communities, integrated systems, and strong connections about constituent parts. (123)

Part of this ecosystem of the 20th and 21st centuries is trauma and our emerging societal awareness of its nature. Placing the natural world in conversation with trauma theory, one finds a unique location for reconnection after the separation and disconnection from trauma. While the trauma survivor may find human relationships difficult and problematic in the initial stages of recovery, the environment offers a transition back into a state of belonging.

Conclusion

In the midst of the current global climate crisis, it is necessary for literary scholarship to take the earth more seriously, to place it in the forefront of any discussion. By doing so, we at least pay more attention to its value as well as its devastation. The Romantic poets of the 19th century were prophets, ahead of their time, warning us about the dangers of industrialization and drawing us closer to the natural world and its splendor in response. Wordsworth leads the way in this endeavor. His poetry can easily be defined as ecopoetry. This genre makes the earth *the home* of the poem, eventually fusing poem and earth as a dwelling place of being, a refuge. In large part thanks to Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and the environmental movement that began in the 1970s, the ecopoetic has had a resurgence. Finally, scholarship surrounding the ecopoetic has emerged in the form of ecocriticism. While generations of scholarship

focused on class, gender, and race as primary lenses with which to view literary texts, this newer field of scholarship centers itself around the natural world. The possibilities are myriad. One can go back to the works of, say, Hardy or Austen, and see the earth desperately trying to speak to the characters, to influence a set of values that places the earth as primary, above industry and capital. Or, one can look at more modern ecopoetry, like that of Mary Oliver and Mark Doty, to see what the earth is saying to us today. Because the natural world as a lens is so encompassing, it can hold the intersections of culture within it. In this way, when looking at the contemporary ecopoetic, one can see ways in which the earth itself is helping us live through and survive in a world of trauma.

CHAPTER TWO

AN AGE OF TRAUMA

> Students of trauma attempt to discern and witness the marks of an event - a wound - that remains long after a precipitating event or events are over. These studies attempt to account for the marks of violence on human persons and communities. Trauma is often expressed in terms of what exceeds categories of comprehension, of what exceeds the human capacity to take in and process the external world…A central way of expressing this excess is in terms of the relationship between death and life. (Rambo 4)

Introduction

Placing the natural world at the forefront of our discussion allows for the possibility of ecosystems of study, intersections between fields. Specifically, while the global climate crisis has occasioned an urgent need to refocus on the environment and landscapes, it coexists with another key characteristic of our time: trauma.

One key characteristic of the 20th and 21st centuries is both the experience of trauma as well as a better understanding of the traumatic experience and its aftermath. Judith Herman's groundbreaking work, *Trauma and Recovery*, is essential in understanding the development of trauma studies. In some ways, the history of trauma studies mirrors coastal space in its frequent ebbing and flowing at the turn of, and well into, the 20th century.

Herman begins her study with women at the end of the 19th century who experienced 'hysteria.' What Herman discovers is that these women had been sexually abused and the emergence of their testimony was so damning to a patriarchal society, that the study of trauma went underground until, as Herman recounts, the return of soldiers from the Vietnam war. The lead "studier" of hysteria was the French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot. He turned a once-neglected facility for the downtrodden in Paris to a

state-of-the art laboratory for the study of psychology, welcoming physicians such as Pierre Janet and Sigmund Freud to visit and research (Herman 10).

While Charcot took to observing and categorizing symptoms of hysteria (convulsions, amnesia, etc.), Janet and Freud wanted to find out the *cause* of the hysteria and decided to treat the women suffering from these symptoms differently. They began to talk with them. As they listened, what they found was transformative:

> These investigations bore fruit. By the mid-1890s Janet in France and Freud, with his collaborator Joseph Breuer in Vienna had arrived independently at strikingly similar formulations: hysteria was a condition caused by psychological trauma, Unbearable emotional reactions to traumatic events produced an altered state of consciousness, which in turn induced the hysterical symptoms. (Herman 12)

While he discovered a profound breakthrough in understanding the causes of hysteria, namely a traumatic experience, Freud would later recant from his findings in part because of what the endemic nature of these accounts said about the society of the time and, specifically, its treatment of women. It was too much of an indictment of "Freud's cherished patriarchal values" (Herman 19). After this brief moment in which trauma became a focus of study, studies retreated until the onslaught of the First World War.

During the horrors of the First World War, psychological trauma returned to the forefront of global human experience. Defying the societal norms of an archaic 'manhood', soldiers experiencing war became subject to the terrors of warfare and were often helpless underneath its weight. Herman accounts:

> They screamed and wept uncontrollably. They froze and could not move. They became mute and unresponsive. They lost their memory and their capacity to feel. The number of psychiatric casualties was so great that hospitals had to be hastily requisitioned to house them. According to one estimate, mental breakdowns represented 40 percent of British casualties. Military authorities

> attempted to suppress reports of psychiatric casualties because of their demoralizing effect on the public. (20)

Traditional psychiatrists viewed these men as weak, even morally invalid. Some men were even given electroshock therapy to their throats if they experienced the traumatic symptom of muteness (Herman 21). Importantly, the poet and soldier Siegfried Sassoon helped to break this stigma with the help of his psychiatrist W. H. R. Rivers. Sassoon testified to the experiences of trauma in combat. Although Sassoon returned to the front, in large part to rejoin the fraternity of his soldiers, his conversations with Rivers helped restore a sense of safety lost during the war. Still, after the war, Sassoon continued to be "haunted by the memory of those who had not been so fortunate" (Herman 23). Then, once again, the study of trauma went underground after the war ended. The societal implications about what war does to human beings was too much for the civilian population to admit.

However, during the Second World War, there began to be a slight shift in the treatment of men experiencing the symptoms of trauma. Although the change in treatment was more concerned in having soldiers return to the front, it still acknowledged the realities of war on men, and the stigma around these experiences slowly began to dissipate. The military began to realize that "the strongest protection against psychological breakdown was the morale and leadership of the small fighting unit" (Herman 25). Therefore, soldiers were given a quick medical intervention close to the front, and then returned to battle. Sadly, the state of these men *after* the war was not considered, and the public concern regarding trauma receded once again.

Finally, in the spirit of Siegfried Sassoon, soldiers both during and after the Vietnam War began to speak out against the war and its effects on soldiers. Veterans

banded together to form support groups with sympathetic psychiatrists. Herman records this stirring testimony from marine Vietnam veteran Michael Norman:

> Family and friends wondered why we were so angry. What are you crying about? they would ask. Why are you so ill-tempered and disaffected? Our fathers and grandfathers had gone off to war, done their duty, come home and got on with it. What made our generation so different? As it turns out, nothing. No difference at all. When old soldiers from "good" wars are dragged from behind the curtain of myth and sentiment and brought into light, they too seem to smolder with choler and alienation…So we were angry. Our anger was old, atavistic. We were angry as all civilized men who have ever been sent to make murder in the name of virtue are angry. (27)

By the end of the 1970s, the cultural zeitgeist had shifted and society became more able to consider, honor, and witness the experiences of these soldiers. In 1980, the American Psychiatric Association finally included post-traumatic stress disorder into its manual.

Traumatic Characteristics

In her work *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* Shelly Rambo begins with an anecdote from a Deacon in New Orleans shortly after Hurricane Katrina. While speaking with him, Rambo notes how many people urged him to "get over it." The storm, they said, was gone. He replied, "But the 'after the storm' is always here" (Rambo 2). While Rambo seeks to place trauma theory in an intersection with theology, her work also provides a unique lens through which to approach literary texts as well, specifically when looking at her use of *middleness.* This project will look more closely at Rambo's work later, but for now the state of being *in the midst of both life and death* is crucial in understanding the traumatic experience and its aftermath.

One major component of a traumatic event is disruption in the linear notion of time. It is the intrusion of death into life:

> Trauma is described as an encounter with death. This encounter is not, however, a literal death but a way of describing a radical event or events that shatter all that one knows about the world and all the familiar ways of operating within it…. The event becomes the defining event beyond which little can be conceived. Life takes on a fundamentally different definition, and the tentative and vulnerable quality of life in the aftermath means that it is life always mixed with death. (Rambo 4)

Part of this "life always mixed with death" is the experience of disconnection that often occurs after a trauma. Indeed, part of the healing that can occur after the traumatic event, a healing that can be aided by the mirroring of the natural world, is a reestablishment of some *kind* of connection. According to Herman, "Traumatic events call into question basic human relationships. They breach the attachments of family, friendship, love, and community. They shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others. They undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience…[They] destroy the victim's fundamental assumptions about the safety of the world, the positive value of the self" (51). As mentioned, the traumatic experience creates a duality of life in the midst of death, a state of being in the middle, a place of the ebb and flow, at times causing the traumatized person to "feel that they belong more to the dead than to the living" (Herman 52). Rambo's term 'middleness' comes into play here as it represents this state of being in-between, or in the midst of, both life and death.

A tragic side effect of the death event in life is the loss of a sense of protection. Herman writes, "Traumatized people feel utterly abandoned, utterly alone, cast out of the human and divine systems of care and protection that sustain life" (52). Indeed, one aspect of the natural world's importance is its ability to reconnect the trauma survivor with that protection that was lost. Specifically, the curvature at the end

of Cape Cod where Provincetown begins, creates a kind of cove and harbor for victims of trauma. The place itself is an embrace. For many who experienced trauma at the hands of humans, the natural world offers a safe entry back into connection and healing that may not be available to people who cannot trust humanity yet. There are many layers to this disconnection from others that occurs after a traumatic event.

In extreme cases, the body itself is violated and any sense of personal autonomy is destroyed. The gains made from childhood, where the self learns value and confidence under the benign protection of a parent or guardian are erased. Bodily functions may even fail (Herman 53). This erasure of the self, seen horrifically in the rape victims disregarded pleas, makes the individual not only unavailable for herself, but also negates the possibility of connection with others: "The traumatic event thus destroys the belief that one can *be oneself* in relation to others" (ibid).

At the core of this loss of self is a sense of shame and worthlessness. The trauma survivor often feels diminished to the point where her own being is deemed worthless. Combined with this sense of shame is also the feeling of guilt, of having done something wrong. Devoid of confidence and self-esteem, the trauma survivor begins to direct the feelings associated with the erasure of the self. While not comparative to the horrific bodily trauma of war or rape survivors, the feelings experienced by members of the LGBT community during the process of moving from the closet to the freedom, of claiming one's identity anew, mirror this sense of disconnection and initial shame from others.

Part of my own experience as a gay man has been the feeling, since I was a young age and knew I was 'different' from the other boys, that I was somehow wrong. I was

defective. I needed forgiveness for my 'sin' of being gay. Indeed, this sense of shame directed the course of my life for nearly two decades, as I turned against myself and began a war against my own sexuality. Transferring to an evangelical college in the Midwest would, I hoped, be part of the first front of this war. The key word from this time period for me was discipline. I even remember the theology I was reading at the time placing a major emphasis on this important trait I was to acquire in order to defeat my feelings, deemed unnatural. Morning and nightly prayers, self-determination to not look at other men, pleas for forgiveness. All of this occurred under the umbrella of shame: I was not just doing something wrong or feeling something wrong- I was wrong as a self, as a person, to the core. Any sense of connection with others I had was tentative, knowing that the real me was hidden and that the 'relationships' I had were based on the reality that, if people found out I was gay, they would leave me. When I finally came out in my mid-twenties, almost all of those relationships did just that. My closest 'friends', once they heard I was gay, left me. Herman writes about this betrayal:

> Traumatic events, once again, shatter the sense of connection between individual and community, creating a crisis of faith. [Robert Jay] Lifton found pervasive distrust of community and the sense of a "counterfeit" world to be common reactions in the aftermath of [trauma]...The damage to the survivor's faith and sense of community is particularly severe when the traumatic events themselves involve the betrayal of important relationships.

Psychologist Abram Kardiner treated a navy veteran who had been rescued during war, but felt a sense of betrayal during that rescue. After waiting in the water for over 12 hours after his ship was destroyed, another vessel came to rescue the veteran. However, the officers in lifeboats were rescued first, leaving the enlisted soldiers, who were clinging to rafts and not safe in lifeboats, waited another seven hours in the water:

> The patient was horrified at the realization that he was expendable to his own people. The rescuers' disregard for this man's life was more traumatic to him than were the enemy attack, the physical pain of submersion in cold water, the terror of death, and the loss of the other men who shared his ordeal. The indifference of the rescuers destroyed his faith in his community. (Herman 55).

This betrayal caused the feeling of disconnection from others. One of the other effects of trauma on the individual is the contradictory nature that can occur due to this betrayal. The traumatized person feels both disconnected from others, and yet, when a possibility of connection occurs, the traumatized person can latch on to this sense of protection and connection and move from the extreme of isolation to desperation:

> The profound disruption in basic trust, the common feelings of shame, guilt, and inferiority, and the need to avoid reminders of the trauma that might be found in social life, all foster withdrawal from close relationships. But the terror of the traumatic event intensifies the need for protective attachments. The traumatized person therefore frequently alternates between isolation and anxious clinging to others. The dialectic of trauma operates not only in the survivor's inner life but also in her close relationships. It results in the formation of intense, unstable relationships that fluctuate between extremes. (Herman 56)

It would take me over a decade to regain a sense of trust, to rebuild my sense of self, to no longer live under the guise of shame and guilt. Religion, a place I went to under these feelings of shame, became at the very least an advocate for shame. To this day, I have not regained my trust in those kinds of institutions. Therefore, the first place I found that understood me, that accepted me, was the natural world. It's also why, when surrounded by the beauty of the pines and peaks of the southern Cascades in Oregon, I began the process of healing. Reading Mary Oliver's first line of her poem *Wild Geese*, was the beginning of my liberation from this shame: "You do not have to be good / You do not have to walk on your knees through the desert for a hundred miles, repenting".

In her chapter "Reconnection", Judith Herman compares this stage of the trauma survivor's journey to that of a refugee "entering a new country" (196). This is interesting

language when intersecting the ecopoetic with trauma studies. Mary Oliver and Mark Doty, two ecopoets who travel to their own new country after trauma, explore this stage of reconnection in their testimony. The new country for both poets was Provincetown.

Literary Testimony and Witness

Literature that stems from the 20th and early 21st centuries is often literature that testifies to a traumatic event. The importance of the testimony is precisely because the traumatic event itself often occurs in an excess, making it difficult to grasp at the time of its occurrence. Because it is a disruption in linear time, the excess of the event returns to haunt the survivor. Part of the need for testimony is to clarify the event itself. In his essay *Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle*, Dori Laub writes about the need for the survivor to testify:

> The survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their stories; they also needed to tell their stories in order to survive. There is, in each survivor, an imperative need to *tell* and thus to come to *know* one's story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself. One has to know one's buried truth in order to be able to live one's life. (63)

This elevates storytelling and testimony to an entirely new level. It is both a recovery of the past and the essential step to moving forward. It is the necessary hinge binding the past, the present, and the future. This Literature of Testimony is so crucial to our time that Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel thought it was the defining characteristic of contemporary literature: "If the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle, and the Renaissance the sonnet, our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony" (Rambo 23).

However, for the testimony to be heard, there must be a witness. The reader of the Literature of Testimony places a crucial role in the act of listening. Quoting the Holocaust scholar Geoffrey Hartman, Rambo writes, "trauma theory turns the study of literature toward 'more *listening*, more *hearing* of words within words, and a greater openness to testimony'" (30). A central question then becomes, what should we be listening for? This is where the notion of the hinge, or pivot, plays a crucial role. The testimony and the witness essentially are in a conversation between a death event and survival. In the introduction to the anthology *Trauma: Explorations in Memory,* Cathy Caruth notes, "To listen to the crisis of trauma…is not only to listen for the event, but to hear in the testimony the survivor's departure from it; the challenge of the therapeutic listener, in other words, is *how to listen to departure*" (10). This will never be a departure that completely severs from the traumatic loss, but one that shows signs of what Caruth calls the "drive to life." It is here that we begin to see what survival in the aftermath looks like.

One of Caruth's crucial encounters was with a group of traumatized children who had witnessed violence in Atlanta. The group was called Kids Alive and Loved and was created by Bernadette Leite whose son Khalil was shot and killed while out with his friends just before graduating from high school. She noticed that in the aftermath of Khalil's death, his friends would visit his bedroom and try to talk with him, still struggling with their own trauma of seeing his murder. They were in the belly of the beast of the hinge moment, the struggle for survival between a death event and life. Bernadette has a meaningful conversation with one of Khalil's closest friends, Greg. They go back and forth about some of Greg's belongings that Khalil still has (he

was buried in Greg's t-shirt, for example). In other words, there is an exchange of gifts in some ways from Greg to Khalil in death. However, when she asks him how Khalil's death has changed Greg's life, he responds, "I am more determined to make it in the music business somehow and I know it will be because of him" (*Literature in the Ashes of History* 14). This is where Caruth sees the 'drive for life.' While Greg gave Khalil the gift of his t-shirt, in some ways Khalil "gives Greg back to life" by making him more inspiration to succeed in the music industry. His success and his drive are linked to a death-event; it is a survival in life that will always be linked to the trauma. There is the hinge again, a constant conversation of sorts between loss and celebration of the life that remains. Greg and Bernadette are in some ways involved in the birthing of a new kind of creation. Caruth writes:

> This is a creative act, an act that bears witness to the dead precisely in the process of turning away. It is indeed a *new language of departure,* parting words that bind the living child to the dead one even as he takes leave from him, that bind him to his dead friend even in the very act of letting go. (*Literature in the Ashes of History* 14, emphasis mine)

Consequently, the intersection of trauma and literature involves this conversation, this creative act, between a death-event that disrupts time, testimonials, witnessing, and survival. Literature plays an essential role in trauma theory precisely because it is essentially engaged in this act of telling stories and of listening to them at the most fundamental level. Moreover, writers and poets are perhaps the best among us who can deal with this duality of death amidst life. It is toward these writers that we must gather in order to better understand this conversation, these hinge moments, so as to better address the unique phenomenon of living after an ending.

However, this project also seeks to understand why a certain place, Provincetown, Massachusetts, was a refuge for many trauma survivors of the 20th century, from Mary Oliver's survival from her traumatic childhood to Mark Doty's survival during and after the AIDS epidemic. Therefore, a better understanding of this *place* is crucial in terms of putting the natural world and landscape as primary in our discussion. Key to this place is its coastal space, which embodies this reality of ebb and flow, of a loss and a renewal, in the landscape itself. Looking at coastal space through this lens, it provides a witness to the reality of death and life and their oscillations.

The Middle Day and Middleness

As mentioned earlier, Shelly Rambo's theological work *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* provides a unique perspective on the traumatic experience. It is not uncommon for religious and theological terms, like epiphany, for example, to merge into the literary world. Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, for instance, is a quintessential piece in understanding this move from the religious understanding of the term epiphany to a more secular one in literary language. On one of his famous walks on the strand, Stephen Dedalus looks at a woman down the long stretch of sand and discovers that, instead of the priesthood, he will become a high priest of beauty. Maybe even more than the impact of *Ulysses* is Joyce's contribution to the using of religious terms for the literary. Anyone reading or teaching the genre of the short story will draw on Joyce's influence in discovering the epiphany in the text, the watershed moment, even a spiritual experience.

Rambo provides an understanding of the traumatic space, the traumatic territory, of what she defines as the Middle Day, using theology as her lens for this profound

interpretation of place in which both death and life oscillate with each other in the aftermath of trauma. It is neither a place solely of death, nor a place solely of life. It is not as clean as either of those binaries. Instead, it is a middle space, one in between, in which the trauma survivor lives. In order to achieve a better understanding of Rambo's work, and how it might apply to this project *about* a place, a place I believe that embodies the Middle Day and 'middleness', I spoke with Dr. Rambo. I began with introducing the scope of this project:

Forrest: I start with Mary Oliver's *Wild Geese* and how that really helped save me as a closeted gay man, really. And then I follow her to Provincetown, basically. And I'm asking, what about Provincetown, Massachusetts and its place in the world was a refuge for people, for trauma survivors. Mary Oliver is one of them. A lot of people don't know that about her that that she suffered severe sexual abuse. And then Mark Doty with the AIDS epidemic. I actually have another interview on Thursday with… Jay Critchley. He started the Provincetown swim for life, and he's been there for 45 years.

You and your work were really the introduction for me. Oh, you know, what is this? How long does this go back, 20 years ago or more about trauma? And your entry was through theology. And what I found so interesting about your work is this middleness. And later I'll get to where I think that might apply to landscape, to the landscape itself, speaking to

middleness. But I wanted just to talk with you a little bit about an overview of what you think about what you call the middle day.

Rambo: So, in different academic disciplines, the question of suffering is engaged in particular ways, and in theology, the most recognizable frame for thinking about suffering is the philosophical and theological framework of Theodicy. So the kind of "why" questions around the nature of suffering. But particularly in Christian theology the location for addressing those questions of suffering is the theology of the cross. And what happens? The Christian cross as a locus for answering the question "Where is God in the suffering?" in particular, and that there's something enacted by the figure of the Son Jesus, who takes on suffering and as the story goes, transforms it through that act of suffering. And so I was very aware that as a theologian, some engagement with a theology of the cross was pretty essential to either my teaching and theology. But particularly thinking about my research trajectory and what I was learning from interdisciplinary studies and trauma is that different disciplines were approaching questions not only of suffering, but more specifically trauma, or the phenomenon of trauma, from these different angles. So I was interested in what theology had to bring to that conversation, and what I discovered was that a theology of the cross was not sufficient, one, to address questions of suffering, but that it really was the wrong location.

When we think about the story of human living and human origins, like how that all is told in Christian settings, it largely has this narrative arc of creation. the fall and redemption, and the cross fits in there somewhere between, like a response to the fall and the good news of redemption. And so the cross is very important. And so when I was thinking about the particular phenomenon of trauma the insights that stood out were particularly around a form of suffering that doesn't simply go away. That gets stuck. That repeats. All of what we know about trauma is that it returns, often outside of the context and time in which it happens. So you have narrated through multiple disciplines of trauma studies something distinctive about suffering not being contained, it returns in some way. And when I looked at the narrative of the cross, that was certainly an event of suffering, but it turned me to think about what happens after that event that is narrated in both Biblical text but also in the theological tradition…how theologians have interpreted the relationship between the crucifixion and resurrection.

So, the middle day was my discovery of how Christian teachings narrate that relationship between crucifixion, the Cross as a site of suffering and resurrection, as something like the alleviation of suffering or the transformation of suffering. I realized that both of those were kind of bookends to a more complex narrative about suffering and trauma that is located somewhere in between. So the middle? Middleness? Is that something? Something of both is present. So there's something of death

and there's something of life. But that middleness refers to a much more messy or mixed situation that I believe matches narratives of trauma, that something happens to you. Something happens to people, an event, but that it doesn't simply go away because it is unintegrated. This is the major insight from trauma studies because it is not fully processed or integrated. When it happens, it returns.

So, when I call it a day, we can talk about this a little bit, but are we talking about time or space? And so the middle day is about time. So that there's some day in between, in Christian settings that's Good Friday. That, remember, is a remembrance of the cross. Sunday is Easter, and that marks resurrection. But this day, in between, this middle day on Saturday, is a day that correlates with the creedal affirmation of Jesus descending into hell. It’s very obvious that if there's something that remains of death and isn't quite transformed into life, that Saturday middle day, that there's something there to pay attention to. It's a day that marks something that is under-narrated about human experience.

You know, literary people, and psychologists, and these other disciplines have always emphasized the importance of narrative right? If you tell the story, if you can recover the story and tell it you heal, you know. And I think the middleness helps you do that, the importance of place and space. So the middleness is actually a territory and you can get that out of my theology, because it's the space of hell. In the Biblical text, it actually has

a place. So it's like the ones who remain at the foot of the cross who witnessed death are outside of the tomb. So it actually moves from a temporal middle day to middleness, or a kind of territory in which the presence of death is still palpable and life is not yet discernible.
So in African American traditions, it is like making a way out of no way. There's something of the wilderness. It is wilderness really. The wilderness of hell, the wilderness of not being able to really know whether something good is going to come out of it.

Forrest: I think that's such an interesting point about space and time. And I'm also glad you talked about narrative, because those are the two areas I wanted to talk a little more about. But it's interesting. That journey, physically, very physically, on to the end of the Cape, is this sort of converging into one. There's no real way out. You enter into what looks for a while like desert landscape, you know. And I think of Gethsemane. You know the different places of contemplation prior to, I guess, the middle day. But knowing it's coming, you know, and then the emergence of the coast. And then you see the ending, but you keep going, and it curves. And also, this idea of messiness. When I'm in Provincetown, am I North or South, am I East and or West? You know, even knowing what's West End versus East End on Commercial Street. It's like, you know, it's very disorienting. So I do want to look at that a little bit myself in the project because that's such an interesting point that, like you said, middleness is a territory. But in your book, *Spirit and Trauma*, you say something about narrative that I

wanted to just get your thoughts more on. And you said, “Pneumatology is tied to finding new forms of theological writing to the practice of finding new ways of speaking beyond platitudes and dogmas. But the oscillation serves as an important function in that it marks the irreducibility of God to certain frameworks of thought. Spirit initiates a new language of poetics. The image of breath is also helpful. Here, without breath, speech cannot arise, breath wraps around, words. Rhythm disrupts them, stutters and gasps and contains the weight of words, silences.” I do find it interesting that poets, specifically queer poets, narrate out of, I guess, to use your words, narrate out of this territory, you know, of middleness on the Cape.

Rambo: I could talk about that a little bit because part of middleness is addressing the question, which is the Theodicy, “Where is God in the suffering?” There were turns in post-Holocaust theology. Someone like Jurgen Molten who really said, you can no longer claim a God that is separate, out there, omnipotent, all the Omnis; God is on that cross. That was a response to suffering that was pivotal in the twentieth century. He was grappling with Christian theology, you know, after the Holocaust, as a German. What's interesting is that what survives the death? If you're thinking in Trinitarian terms, what survives the death? What witnesses to something else emerging, that's not quite triumphant? Life is the figure of the Holy Spirit. So, in Christian theology the spirit is the forgotten third, right? Like, there's Father, son. And then like, Oh, yeah, something about the Holy

Spirit. So the fact that the spirit is often called the Cinderella of the Trinity, there's a kind of otherness about the spirit that is important to think about. And what does it mean to be the third which breaks the binaries of ossified alternatives? You're either this or you're that. Well, why not a third alternative? Right?

So queer poets, they in a sense, disrupt the ossification of words by breathing an alternative into the story. Mary Oliver, being a spiritually oriented poet, what she's producing is a kind of poetic queerness or middleness. There's an alignment there between the spirit that is under narrated in Christian theology. And yet I locate the spirit as the surviving element or dimension of God. The Spirit survives in hell to witness what remains. Then you also have the bodies of people like the beloved disciple, the women, Mary Magdalene. You have these figures who embody, they stand in that space to witness the chaos or messiness of whatever remains, so that turns from a Christology of the suffering Jesus who takes on suffering and an act of redemption for the sake of all of humanity, to this much more nimble theology of spirit. In the Greek and Hebrew terms, the notion of spirit is breath, or Rua. You know the spirit is the untamed member of the Trinity. So what I didn't say in the earlier response was that this is a theology of the spirit which is, then, the Poetics.

If the Logos is the word that the spirit breaks up, moves between words, and poetry uses words very carefully, and it's always what is kind of unsaid between the words that are chosen. So that's the poetic that I want to disrupt dogmatic theology with. The embodiment of breath is also primal, sustaining, elemental. It's a witness to the elemental chaos of creation coming into being. And so the disordered landscape, or the chaos of Provincetown as you're narrating it, is a kind of untamed place that animates the experience of queerness or gay experience, so that you have the freedom to be other than what has been determined is your identity. So there, I think you've got something.

Forrest: Yeah, it's beautiful that theologians really pick up on this spirit as the queer third who breaks down binaries and cannot be tamed. It's beautiful. You know, you said on the third day, almost nothing happens, and I'm reminded of Urs von Balthazar, who said, there was an ooze of love that that remains. You write, “Read through the lens of trauma, the witness of Mary Magdalene, the beloved points to the impossibility of envisioning life ahead. They depict the messy and inconclusive experience of living beyond a death. But in the aftermath of Jesus' death, their survival is haunted by Jesus’ words of farewell, and instructions about remaining. Survival is given shape through the curious imperative to remain and to love. Instead, death remains in the experience of survival, and life is reshaped in light of death. not in light of its finality, but its persistence.”

Rambo: But then there's the element of the witness from Elie Wiesel to Cathy Caruth. There's something like an ethical imperative to remain to witness, so that the cycle of trauma repetition is broken. I get critiqued a lot, for this notion of surviving. Well, that just means we're stuck in Holy Saturday, right? That the remaining is a kind of stuckness? And you know, that's kind of the biggest critique: well, then, we're just all remaining. And initially, when I got that critique, I was like, yeah, actually, that's important, because nobody wants to be in that. I mean, it's what Bessel Van der Kolk says: trauma is what you don't want to see and what others don't want to see. So that the witness is about being willing to see.

For instance, Mary Oliver, people didn't know, necessarily, this trauma history, but she wrote out of that, it's somewhere there. You know that people carry past histories, and that is somehow informing the present, that's just a very practical insight. You just don't assume that when something's over it's over. Witness functions there to say, you're not alone in that space, that you're not crazy. Something did happen to you but it also holds possibility. And I think that's what I wasn't able to articulate so much in the first or even second books, which is you know what is hope? Hope is continuous witness.

You asked about my work with chaplains. I became very interested in people who do middle work. They kind of have an inside perspective on suffering, but it's not their own, so that they're working in this middleness. And I'm interested in instead in saying, Oh, what is the promise? After

trauma? I'm more interested in listening to people who spend a lot of time there as witnesses. So the chaplain piece seemed very obvious to me, and that's what I'm writing about now. I'm working on this set of interviews with chaplains. I just wrote up the chapter. I'm interested in what this theology of witness actually looks like on the ground. And they have all sorts of interesting ways of spatially narrating what it is. I'm more interested in hearing these people from the middle talk about the work that they do and the insights that arise from them. I'm reading some of them like a poetics. Right? It's like you take a text. And my text now is the interviews with the chaplains. I'm very interested in the images that they use to describe the work. For instance, one guy was saying “I get in the mud with people”.

These are very, very interesting. Somebody who studies trauma says that you're not saving them from the mud. You're not getting them out of the mud, but you're in the mud with them. So that's the link. Certainly, there's something different than survival, certainly. But I didn't write that because it's an important point of emphasis of intervention into Christian theology. Because, Christian theologians, you know, the mode is to always turn to the good news. Yeah, where's my Easter? And I'm like, well, my Easter is he returns with wounds and says, your life is about wound work.

Forrest: I want to ask something real quick because I wrote a little bit about this after rereading Judith Herman's book about one of the main characteristics

of the trauma being disconnection and then reconnection and what I find interesting about Mary Oliver is, as she sort of the beginning of this, and then I'll move on to other poets, is how much the natural world saved her, and in some ways spoke to her, or witnessed her trauma in a way that humans couldn't. And I'm wondering if that's also part of the queer quality of, like you said, breaking the binaries and the messiness of the middle space. Because for me, in my own trauma and my own coming out and everything, the natural world was the place I could go first before human reconnection and language. And so I understand why, you know, the poet, is trying to give words to that which has no words. There's something about that that I want to explore a little bit. The place itself is witness or ally.

Rambo: It is a witness that witnesses something. You're not alone. You're not rescued. But that there's something elemental…I mean Howard Thurman would call it these elements of life that are witness to your experience in a way that tells you this connection is the starting point, you're not alone. But you're also not saved from the experience, or redeemed. But that witness is a critical component to coming to life again. And so why do people turn to Mark Doty's poetry? Because it witnesses something of the experience.

The "something of the experience" Rambo acknowledges at the end of our interview is the space of the middle, of middleness. It is the place where a death event (loss, grief,

trauma) occurs within life. Provincetown's coastal landscape embodies this, witnesses to this human experience, and becomes an ally of sorts for poets like Oliver and Doty. Their "landscape poetry" is also the poetry of testimony and witness. For Oliver, her trauma as an abused child led her to the territory of the middle day, using Rambo's terminology, to a place that testifies to being in between life and death. For Doty, as we will explore later, the trauma of the AIDS epidemic, and the loss of his partner, Wally, occasion his poetry of testimony.

In both instances, landscape, the natural world, becomes essential in its intersection with trauma. Rambo's terminology is so essential here as it provides a name for the coastal landscape of middleness. As aforementioned in Chapter One, when placing the natural world as the origin point, intersectionality becomes essential. The natural world can *hold* these intersections of landscape, trauma, theology, and poetry. While Rambo's field is theology, her terminology, much like the previously mentioned use of the term "epiphany" becomes helpful language in understanding the specific landscape and history of Provincetown.

Conclusion

When intersecting ecocriticism with trauma studies, yet allowing the natural world to have primacy of focus, what emerges is a *new* kind of testimony and witness in an age of trauma. One finds a potential for healing and a way to recover from a traumatic event. First, in placing coastal space as a metaphor for the sense of being in between, in the midst of both death and life, the natural world provides a physical space for the trauma survivor to feel understood, if not by other people, then by the movement of the tides. The earth itself becomes both a testimony to the ebb and flow, the in-between of

life and death, and also a witness to this experience for any human who ventures to the shore. Furthermore, at the heart of a trauma is the feeling of isolation and disconnection from both one's self and the world at large. Coastal space helps bridge that disconnection as an entry way back into belonging and *re*connection. Trauma scholars like Caruth and Rambo provide insights into both the importance of the literature of testimony and witness (Caruth) and the reality of the Middle Day and Middleness (Rambo). However, the ecological crisis of the 20th and 21st centuries demands the inclusion of the natural world into the discussion around trauma. In adding to this discussion, the environment provides a place for recovery.

Therefore, it is important to take these theoretical claims and bring them down to earth, quite literally. Provincetown, Massachusetts, provides a unique case study in both landscape and trauma. For decades, even centuries, pilgrims have sought this "spiral spit of sand" at the end of Cape Cod as a refuge away from the norms of civilization. Specifically, queer poets and artists have found a community of belonging after trauma in this coastal space. While the town's identity has changed over decades, from a whaling port to a colonial tourist town to a gay haven, I find it speaks uniquely to this age of trauma at the intersection of landscape. Eventually, what emerges from this space is poetry, testimony, and witness. First, however, a look at the town itself is crucial.

CHAPTER THREE

PROVINCETOWN

> Provincetown is, has always been, an eccentrics' sanctuary, more or less the way other places are bird sanctuaries or wild game preserves. It is the only small town I know of where those who live unconventionally seem to outnumber those who live within the prescribed boundaries of home and licensed marriage, respectable job and biological children. It is where people who were the outcasts and untouchables in other towns became prominent members of society. ..It has been attracting refugees, rebels, and visionaries for almost four hundred years
> (Cunningham 61).

Introduction

By the time I've reached the outer Cape, I've traveled up the Garden State Parkway, over the Tappan Zee Bridge, and through the congestion of Connecticut's I95. Reaching the eastern edge of Massachusetts, a few bridges transport me onto the Cape, signaling that I am slowly leaving behind the metropolis of the Tri-State region, moving toward the outer edges of the continent. 4 lanes turn to 2, which turn to 1 and I am heading straight out toward what seems to be the end of the earth.

This is when the anticipation grows and my focus clarifies. Heading East. Leaving behind. Moving toward. Provincetown. Coastal haven of artists and fishermen awaits. As far East as I can get. And as soon as I think I can't go any further, the land speaks. What had been a seemingly straight line out now curves northward, only to eventually turn westward, then southward, and then quickly eastward once again, back into itself. In his book *Land's End* Michael Cunningham remarks about Provincetown unique landscape:

> Provincetown stands on a finger of land at the tip of Cape Cod, the barb at the hook's end, a fragile and low-lying geological assertion that was once knitted

> together by the roots of trees. Most of the trees, however, were felled by early settlers, and now, with the forests gone, the land on which Provincetown is built is essentially a sandbar, tenuously connected to the mainland, continually reconfigured by the actions of tides. (13)

Cunningham is right, what is essential in understanding the specific landscape of Provincetown is its placement on the outside, as far East as one can go. Moreover, it is vulnerable space, susceptible to change, weather, and, above all, the ebbing and flowing of tides. In this sense, Provincetown is coastal space, a space marked by this ebb and flow, this state of being in the midst of, in between. Once there, you've reached the end. The land, you think, will tell you this. But now you must continue on, following the curve. You must find out what's after the end. *This* is the space I have provided you, it says. Here you will look outward toward that endless Atlantic, but also inward, into that internal bay. On both sides, oceanic and bay, the tides will turn, and I will be that land in between them. This small piece of land has so much to say. Who will listen?

A Brief History of Provincetown

Famously, the *Mayflower*'s first landing in the New World was in Provincetown, Massachusetts on November 20, 1620. However, the land itself was not new to the inhabitants who had been there before the *Mayflower*'s arrival. In her encyclopedic history, *Provincetown: From Pilgrim Landing to Gay Resort*, Karen Christel Krahulik writes about the town's earlier inhabitants:

> Most historians agree that the Pamet (Payomet) Indians, a group affiliated with the Nauset tribe, lived in Truro and farther west on Cape Cod but hunted and fished in Provincetown, which they called Chequoket (or Chequokette). Although their numbers dwindled as Europeans exposed them to smallpox, bubonic plague,

> and other diseases, the Pamet Indians were well acquainted with Provincetown before the *Mayflower* Pilgrims arrived. (24)

The initial Pilgrims only stayed about five weeks in Provincetown, eventually heading west for more fertile land. The sand dunes and seascapes of the harbor, although beautiful, were not enough to keep the passengers on the *Mayflower* for too long. Instead, they would journey onward toward Plymouth Plantation. Still, this important historical moment places Provincetown as a Pilgrim's home, a place for travelers from elsewhere to come and find solace.

Moreover, Provincetown's physical placement at the end of Cape Cod welcomed people who would act outside of the law and customs of the time. Almost from its origin, Provincetown became a home for the "unruly":

> Throughout the seventeenth and into the eighteenth century, Provincetown remained a semi restricted refuge frequented by Native Americans and foreign-born explorers, fishermen, traders who devised their own regulations to keep the peace in Provincetown's harbor. Yet from time to time, officials from Plymouth patrolled the area, bringing Provincetown its first taste of institutionalized discipline and punishment, as is evidenced by the 1667 arrest and whipping of three Pamet Indians apparently caught stealing liquor from a boat moored in Provincetown Harbor. Still, this incident failed to bring order to what had become known as a playground for outlaws. (27).

This tension between "law and order" became part of Provincetown's negotiated identity for centuries. The juxtapositions between a spit of land at the end of the Cape that welcomed outcasts and outlaws and the more provincial mores of Yankee New England would twist and turn in different directions, but ultimately have at its core the spirit of independence rubbing up against tradition. This tension even existed during the French and Indian War, as well as the Revolutionary War. Provincetown's physical location, while being a place for the 'unruly', was also a vulnerable piece of land that would be ransacked by the French in the 1750s and used by the British as a naval supply base in the

late 1770s. Therefore, in matters both local and global, Provincetown became a negotiated space, often going back and forth between independence and 'outside' rule.

By the early to mid-1800s, Provincetown began to grow in prominence as a seaport and whaling center, ranking as the fifth largest in the United States (Krahulik 32). As Yankee whalers went out to sea, they would return home from their voyages with foreign fishermen, particularly from Portugal. This would be the beginning of a major cultural addition to Provincetown. Although in 1865, there were only 245 people of Portuguese descent. However, "from 1870 to 1910, Yankees slid from forming a comfortable majority to representing half of all residents in Provincetown" (34). The remaining population was overwhelmingly Portuguese. This would create a newer tension, one between the Yankees, who occupied most of the East End of the peninsula, and the Portuguese, who occupied most of the West End. Soon, this tension would grow when petroleum oil was discovered in 1859, causing Provincetown to have another identity crisis. This time, as the whaling industry would die down and eventually vanish, the community struggled to both maintain an economy and renew its identity.

One way to keep Provincetown economically afloat was to revive its identity as the first place the *Mayflower* landed. Toward the end of the 19th century, New England began branding itself as 'colonial', a place where middle- and upper-class white Americans could visit to remember a certain kind of pastime. However:

> Aside from celebrating all that came with the building of the thirteen colonies, the colonial movement conveniently 'forgot' or, more accurately, glossed over, the lethal troubles of the seventeenth century, including the clashes with Native Americans…It was also a movement that carried implicit racial connotations, as it galvanized white Anglo-European Americans while simultaneously distancing itself from more recent immigrant groups. (37)

Underlying the movement to appreciate Provincetown's 'colonial' past was also the motivation to reclaim the space for the Yankees who were there before the Portuguese. Again, this tension between the two groups would be a major part of Provincetown's shifting identity for centuries. Provincetown's Research Club, born at the start of the twentieth century, would be the leading group to mark the town as a 'colonial' landmark, placing signs throughout town. The completion of the Pilgrim Monument in 1910 helped the Research Club's efforts immensely. Anyone who travels to the tip of the Cape can see the monument rise in the distance. It sits at the center of town on Bradford Street. Based on the architecture of the Torre del Mangia in Sienna, Italy, the 252-foot Pilgrim Monument became the symbol, in the early part of the twentieth century, for the town's colonial heritage. However, this symbol would change throughout time, as the term 'Pilgrim' could be and would be redefined. Indeed, the Portuguese saw themselves as certain kinds of Pilgrims to a New World, as did artists later, the gay community even later. Still, at its birth, the Pilgrim Monument arose out of this initial desire to attract tourists and help the economy while remembering a certain kind of past. This identity, though, would soon evolve:

> Soon after Yankees promoted Provincetown's colonial past, Portuguese immigrants invoked similar narratives of liberation to claim their place as citizens of Land's End. And less than a decade following the monument's grand dedication ceremony, "maiden ladies" and "bachelors" began to seek out Provincetown because it was rumored to be an accepting enclave. Over time, gay men and lesbians would not only visit Provincetown en masse but would also call on Land's End to live up to its name as a haven for oppressed pilgrims. (44)

These original "maiden ladies" and "bachelors" were largely welcomed at first by the Portuguese population, who would rent out their rooms and private spaces, ushering in a new era of Pilgrims.

In addition to the turn of the century's emphasis on the colonial heritage of Provincetown, slowly but steadily, an artistic community began to emerge at the end of Cape Cod. Most historians credit Charles Webster Hawthorne's founding of the Cape Cod School of Art (CCSA) in 1899 as the beginning of this artistic pilgrimage. When Hawthorne left the William Merrit Chase's Long Island painting school to found CCSA, other painters followed him to Provincetown, including Edward Hopper (Williams 18). This new artists' colony emerged alongside the emphasis on Provincetown's colonial past as another attraction for tourists as "viewing native-born artists was a patriotic function, that being a good tourist was linked to being a good American (69). Interestingly, what drew these initial artists to Provincetown was not some sort of nostalgia for the colonial past, but an appreciation of the *place itself*, the landscape and the unique light. In the summer of 1916, about six hundred artists and students stayed in Provincetown, no doubt helping the economy again as it transitioned away from its source as a whaling center. Therefore, at this stage in its history, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Provincetown could market itself as a place for colonial heritage, Portuguese culture, and artistic excellence. The artists' arrival foreshadowed Provincetown's welcoming of a certain kind of creative spirit, searching for something different in American culture. Melen M. Hatch noted this in her book *The Log of Provincetown and Truro* when she stated:

> Provincetown was 'discovered' by the turn of the century by those strange people who like to put paint onto canvas…The artists live all over town, domiciled in everything from the shabbiest of shacks to what passes, at the Cape-tip, for mansions….Perhaps more will find, in time, that the Cape-end, with wide dunes and the great sea, is a good place to search one's own soul (Krahulik 71).

Part of this artistic and soulful search intersected with the birth of Modernism in painting.

John Taylor Williams' *The Shores of Bohemia*: *A Cape Cod Story, 1910-1960* offers a thorough and personal accounting of these years of Provincetown as an artist's colony. Importantly, he depicts the impact of the 1913 Armory Show in New York City on not only the artistic world, but on Provincetown as well. Hawthorne's CCSA focused mainly on representational and realistic painting-landscapes, fishermen, seascapes. However, the Armory Show introduced the Modernism that began in Europe to America. Picasso, Van Gogh, Duchamp, Matisse, and Cezanne all began to challenge the more Victorian and realist American artists (Williams 24). At the time, Provincetown was home to many of these realist painters, including Hawthorne. The Armory Show would introduce these artists to a new way of looking at the world:

> Provincetown artists flocked to the show not only because it embraced their thirst for change but because many of them…had work in the show. That is not to say they were all in *Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2),* which depicted a series of angular forms descending the surface of the work. The less serious reviewers seized upon this work in particular to express their dismay and horror at the show…President Teddy Roosevelt, not known as an aesthete, angrily shouted, "This is not art!" (25).

Hawthorne and his fellow realist and neo-impressionist painters would gather together at the newly formed Beachcomber's Club in an old beached ship on Commercial Street in Provincetown. There, they would gather for drinks and transition together into this new world of Modernism in American art, though somewhat begrudgingly. In 1927, "the tension between the realists, including impressionists, and the modernists reached its apogee…when a large group of modernists…successfully petitioned the Art Association to allow its first modernist exhibition" Williams 29).

In addition to the community of visual artists in Provincetown at the beginning of the twentieth century, a literary community also began to emerge as writers fled Europe during World War I. Many of these writers would travel back and forth between Greenwich Village and Provincetown. Mary Heaton Vorse was the founder of this literary community. After visiting with her husband for a summer vacation in 1907, she returned to Greenwich Village to tell her friends about this creative outlet at the end of the Cape. Importantly, one of the most prominent of these writers to join Vorse in Provincetown was Susan Glaspell and her fiancé George "Jig" Cram Cook. Together, with the arrival of Eugene O'Neill in 1916, they would create the foundation for the Provincetown Players, a group of playwrights and writers who would transition the American local theater:

> The commercial Broadway theater at the time was based on either classic European work or Victorian melodrama. Cook and Glaspell were influenced by four modernist themes - the new politics (socialism), the New Woman (sexually and creatively the equal of men), the new psychology (Freud, Jung, and psychoanalysis), and the new theater taking shape in Europe (Ibsen, Strindberg, Wilde, Shaw, and Synge). (Williams 32)

Specifically, Glaspell's highly anthologized play *Trifles* showcases the plight of women under an abusive patriarchal culture. In conversation with Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, *Trifles* begins the American Modern theater in many ways as the voices of those previously ignored emerge onstage.

One result from this artistic experimentation, both visual and literary, was the furthering of Provincetown's identity as a place where people with 'alternative' lifestyles were welcome. Queer artists like Tennessee Williams would spend time at the end of the Cape due to its acceptance and creative inspiration:

> Queers and the bohemian artists who joined them helped make Provincetown into a place where alternative relationships were possible. They did so by integrating socially and economically as they became seasonal visitors as well as year-round residents and merchants…In the words of native Clement Silva: "We could tell [they were gay], but we never made anything of it. I mean it was no big thing, they were just people like I was a person, and we tried to treat them all just like that… (Krahulik 103).

This time period would mark yet another transition in Provincetown's shifting identity from whaling center, to colonial outpost, to artistic haven, and now to a welcoming refuge for gay and lesbian men and women. These shifting identities would converge to create a unique opportunity for tourists that would help, albeit barely, the Provincetown community economically survive the Depression and World Wars of the first half of the twentieth centuries. Even during the often-hostile anti-gay culture post World War II, when some citizens of Provincetown tried to crack down on the gay community, others revolted by explaining how central the gay community was to the town's economic survival. Krahulik writes:

> In no uncertain terms, these business owners pressured local officials into looking the other way when it came to Provincetown's gay visitors, and in so doing, they disabled the purity campaign. The owner of the Provincetown Bookstore, Paul Smith, spoke for many entrepreneurs when he argued in 1960 that first, his business nearly always reflected the general economic climate in Provincetown and, second, this year, because of the selectman's arbitrary policing, business was down 22 percent from last year. (150)

Unlike in areas around the rest of the United States, Provincetown's economic market relied on the gay and lesbian population. Somewhat sadly, if acceptance and appreciation for this community suffered during the post War time period, economics would help save this community from surrendering to the bigotry and homophobia of the time.

In the section of her history entitled *Gentrifying Provincetown 1970-2000*, Karen Krahulik provides an important anecdote from Diane Corbo who started visiting

Provincetown in 1970 primarily as a way to find peace after her grueling shifts as a nurse on an oncology ward in Connecticut. Once there, she found the place welcoming to people with alternative lifestyles:

> Corbo's first connection with Provincetown bordered on the spiritual. "It was really very refreshing and renewing to me," she explained, "and being able to walk the beach any time of the day or night and find solitude and peacefulness really helped me in my work. I'd go back rejuvenated and I'd be able to continue." (156)

Eventually, Corbo and her partner Valerie Carrano would move to Provincetown year-round, eventually owning Snug Harbor, a successful restaurant they owned with Ted Alexander and John Mercer, another gay couple. Business was successful, but when the AIDS epidemic hit Provincetown in the mid-1980s, Snug Harbor was hit hard. Both Alexander and Mercer would eventually die of AIDS related complications by 1991. Corbo and Carrano would eventually sell Snug Harbor to one of their waiters, Glen Martin (158). The AIDS epidemic would transform Provincetown once again. While becoming a mecca for the gay and lesbian community, a place to celebrate and be one's authentic self, its status as refuge and harbor would take on a new meaning during and after this traumatic time period, a subject I will address in more detail later in this paper.

Provincetown and the AIDS Epidemic

On July 3, 1981 Lawrence K. Altman, writing for *The New York Times*, published an article titled *Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals*. He addressed concerns from doctors in New York City and San Francisco who had been treating 41 gay men with a rare and deadly disease. Within 24 months, eight of those men had died. The main symptom of these men was the cancer Kaposi's Sarcoma, a disease that caused bluish,

purple lesions all over the body. The mean age of these men was 39 years old, far younger than previous patients with this type of cancer. The cancer causes the lymph nodes to swell as it spreads throughout the body, depleting the immune system.

Alice Foley, co-founder of the Provincetown AIDS Support Group (PASG), saw signs of what is now known as HIV/AIDS much earlier than the *New York Times* article. In the mid-1970s, Foley had resurrected her nursing career and was the town's nurse, now referred to as the Director of Public Health (Wickedlocal.com). She remembers hearing stories of men getting strangely sick, and recalls graffiti written around town with the words "Gay? Got AIDS yet?" (Foley). One of the first cases she remembers was of a local waiter at the restaurant Poor Richards. He had been sick for about a year with chronic diarrhea that no one could diagnose or cure. She recalls visiting him and seeing him covered with Kaposi lesions all over his body. Foley recalled, "It looked like someone just took a paint brush and just shook it at him" (ibid). Eventually, Foley sent this man to Beth Israel Hospital in Boston for better care than she could provide locally.

Another story Foley remembered for the documentary *Safe Harbor*, was of Billy Ouellette, a bartender at The Atlantic House. He also had Kaposi lesions all over his body, but his were most noticeable on his legs, which had swollen immensely. It took Foley and another nurse to bathe Billy due to his inability to move his legs. When she called Beth Israel for advice at the time, they responded, "Well, there is nothing more we can do" (ibid). She later realized the doctors were explaining that HIV was a death sentence.

The death of Billy Oullette prompted Alice to seek out a car, one of the most essential components of the Provincetown AIDS Support Group. She needed a reliable car to transport men from Provincetown to and from Boston. Her fellow volunteer, Pat Shultz, wound up securing a brand-new Ford Escort wagon, for free. This allowed Alice to be able to use some of the money she had recently raised at a local dinner fundraiser for other pressing needs.

What was characteristic of the Provincetown AIDS Support Group was this paying attention to local needs. First, the car, and then, whatever the patients needed that could help on a day-to-day basis, in addition to nursing help. If someone needed a veterinarian bill paid for, Foley recalled, they would help with that. Another key aspect of the PASG was the implementation of the "buddy system" in which a volunteer would buddy with a patient to simply spend time with them. These local solutions were enhanced when Foley separated the PASG from other institutions and became its own 501c3. She believed that once they established themselves as their own unique entity, the group became more "tender":

> We didn't belong to the Outer Cape Health or the VNA. And we didn't belong to the town. So, a free standing charitable organization, 501C3. So that worked quite well. Some of the people who wanted information were quite angry. They pursued us, but that covered us right from the beginning volunteer right up to me…. So that worked out well. And I think actually The Support Group became, I would say, more tender with each other. Because it seems as though we were in a tender space…We're free to take care of people the way we see fit. (ibid)

What occasioned the need for Foley to create a separate entity was the pressure she was getting from local officials to "out" HIV patients. She felt this violated their privacy and would lead to discrimination.

One of Foley's most touching memories of this time in Provincetown's history was of Dennis, a patient who had AIDS related dementia. It was the first case like it she had seen. His speech was confusing and he couldn't walk without falling immediately to the ground. Foley arranged for volunteers to be at his home for 24 hours each day. She remembered telling one of the volunteers, George, that this patient needed a shower desperately:

> I said, "We've got to figure [out] a way to get him in the shower." George said, "I'll take care of it." I went over the next day and George was in the shower with him. And with his bathing trunks on. And Dennis was in the shower and sitting on one of the kitchen chairs. He was showering him up and singing. It was just remarkable, just even to think of that, to go in the shower with him in your bathing trunks. (ibid)

This is perhaps one of the most touching images I've encountered while doing my research on Provincetown and the AIDS epidemic. It showcases the care and nurture provided by this small, coastal village. While the trauma of the epidemic was gut-wrenching, the community, heralded by Alice Foley and her fellow volunteers, came together to hold and bathe, to offer even a glimpse of some kind of relief. From the practical beginnings of car transportation to the organization of a separate 503C, to the communal sharing of tips and tactics of ways to help, the Provincetown AIDS Support Group, mirrored the green light present from the Race Point Lighthouse in stormy weather. It was a beacon and helped establish a truly safe harbor.

During one of my visits to Provincetown to conduct research, I stumbled upon Tim's Used Books, hidden away behind some of the shops on Commercial Street. It is a gem. While looking through the section on Cape Cod, I noticed that I was still looking for some testimony on the AIDS epidemic and the journey of so many gay men to Provincetown. When I asked the owner of the store where I could find more information

about this topic of trauma and Provincetown, he told me to reach out to a town legend, Jay Critchley.

In addition to the AIDS Support Group emerging at the outset of the AIDS crisis, Jay Critchley began an annual Swim for Life that donated money to the Provincetown Positive/PWA Coalition. The PWA was set up separately from the Provincetown AIDS Support Group and was more invested in political action and awareness than health care. Over time, the PWA was synthesized into the Provincetown AIDS Support Group. However, the money raised from the first few years of the Swim for Life went directly to PWA.

A main motive of Critchley's Swim for Life campaign was to provide an awareness of the ecological beauty of Provincetown's harbor. In an interview with Catherine Russo for Provincetown's Oral History Project, Critchley states:

> In 1988 Walter McClain and myself were hanging out on the beach in front of the Boatslip, swimming and just hanging out. It was the summer that a lot of debris was washing up on the beaches in New England. Needles and medical stuff and a lot of beaches were being closed…So the initial intention was: let's just bring attention to this amazing harbor that we have here. (Critchley)

Importantly, Critchley saw how essential the ecological landscape of Provincetown was to the sense of refuge and protection offered to its citizens. He set out to protect the waters surrounding Provincetown. In addition to bringing ecological awareness, Critchley used Swim for Life as a fundraiser to help local citizens living with HIV/AIDS. A large percentage of swimmers came from outside of the Cape, finding what Critchley called their "spiritual hometown" (ibid). The swim is about 1.4 miles across the harbor. Critchley sees the immersion in the waters around Provincetown during the Swim for Life a "kind of self-healing". In this way, the Swim for Life became

a ritual for the Provincetown community, centered around the natural world and recovery from trauma.

Critchley was also involved in the first Forum for AIDS information and awareness in Provincetown, which occurred on July 18th, 1983. Some of the impetus for the Forum was the fear from Boston and national press over the AIDS crisis and how it was affecting local businesses. There were growing tensions in town as a result, in addition to the local police beginning to question who was HIV positive, as mentioned earlier by Alice Foley's account. Therefore, Jay set out to create another healing ritual, influenced by his time away in Australia and New Zealand, where he studied the native aboriginal culture and their rituals. Critchley has also created a symbol for the Provincetown AIDS Support Group, merging the peace sign with the lambda sign. The symbol was also a motivator for what Critchley called the Immunity Mandala, Community Ritual. A self-described born-again artist, Critchley organized this ritual in September of 1983. Six dancers, a few drummers, all in costume, arrived on shore by boat and placed a sand mandala on the sand, with the acknowledgment that it would be erased with the incoming tide. Critchley wrote a prayer for the event and read it that evening:

> We stand on the edge of a vast ocean which never stands still. Twice daily great volumes of sea water fill and drain our harbor…We, like past inhabitants here, come to the waterfront to greet this liquid movement, to be cleansed and purified once again after a beautiful, but trying summer…. Oh God of the universe, give our community the strength and resilience to continue our upward movement on this fragile, spiral spit of sand. Give us the energy to fulfill the historic and spiritual mandate of our community. Opening our arms to artists, writers, gay people, and tourists from around the world, providing refuge and nurturing to all those lured here by these shores. (Ibid)

Eventually, Jay and I got in contact and sat down for an interview. The first half of the interview is about the place itself, the landscape and its ability to attract the outcasts of societal norms. The second portion of the interview deals more explicitly with the AIDS epidemic and will be included later in this project. To begin, I began explaining the scope of this project to Jay. Importantly, when discussing trauma and Provincetown, Jay begins with the importance of the natural world and Provincetown's unique landscapes. In a dissertation about the importance of testimony about trauma, it is crucial to hear Jay's own story. The following discussion was edited down from its original length in order to provide more focus on Provincetown's physical landscape and the HIV/AIDS crisis that landed on its shores in the latter part of the 20th century.

Forrest: Well, thank you for talking with me about everything. My dissertation is about Provincetown, and why people went there after trauma and what about the landscape there? What was healing and helpful for them. So I'm coming at it from a different, a few different places. But yeah, if you don't mind, I'd love to hear a little bit about your experience there, you know, maybe even going back to the beginning. You said you were there for 40 something years.

Critchley: Yeah. I got stuck here.

Forrest: Yeah, not a bad place to get stuck.

Critchley: Well, I know. I think this is obviously a big topic. There's a lot of ways of

approaching it. I mean, specifically, you're looking at people with HIV. Coming to Provincetown?

Forrest: That's part of it. Yeah. It starts with Mary Oliver. Using the natural world. Her trauma earlier in her life was sexual abuse. She says in an interview, a few interviews, the natural world and poetry saved me. And so then I follow her. Basically, I start with her poem, *Wild Geese* and how that poem saved me in many ways and I follow her to Provincetown, where she lived and wrote. A lot of people don't know that she went there out of a way to survive her own trauma and then from Mary I will go into AIDS and some of the writing that came out of that, particularly Mark Doty's work, and Marie Howe. I've done some research already and I've been reading a lot, you know, about some of the women, the women nurses who would take care of the men because the hospitals didn't take them in and about men who wanted to go there to die. So I found that also provocative and interesting. What about Provincetown made it a place people wanted to go at the end? In *Safe Harbor* they mentioned it was different from New York. It was different from San Francisco.In that it was a village. So you knew everybody, or you knew there was much more connection. So when I asked, I guess I asked the gentleman at the used book store and I think he's the one who gave me your name. so I really appreciate you contacting me.

Critchley: Well, going back to Mary Oliver, and I think yes, Provincetown has always been a destination, I mean, I tend to look at it historically and environmentally, among other ways. I mean, the pilgrims came here to avoid persecution. Of course. Then they ended up committing, you know, genocide, here. So the land has been traumatized. Yeah. I think it's an important element of looking at the geopolitical and cultural history of the land itself and the scars that the land has and then, of course the scars that have continued to be perpetrated on the land. Climate change and over development and other things. But you know human degradation of the ocean, sea level rise. You know all, all of the kind of traumas that a lot of us, including myself, tried to escape to come here are happening, you know, are at our doorstep right now.

I think historically people came here for opportunity. After the after the Native American genocide that happened in New England, I think people were coming here especially starting in the late 1800s as a place of refuge, as a place of creativity. You mentioned New York City. Provincetown has an incredibly fertile connection with New York City, particularly beginning with the late 1800s and early 1900s, with a lot of Bohemians and Radicals and artists and actors coming to Provincetown as a place of creativity.

Forrest: But no, you're right on. You're right on the mark there. I find it so interesting talking with you because I'm starting with eco-criticism as my

way of entering, even before queer studies, moving it out to the natural world an entry way into understanding and the emergence of eco criticism in the 1970s, really, after *Silent Spring* and the need, because of climate change and the earth's crisis, the need to ask, you know importantly, what role does the natural world play in the text? When I was an English major, it was class gender, race, sexuality, psychoanalysis, or psychoanalytic theory. And since, you know, there's been a much more resurgence of almost what the romantic poets were doing. But our crisis has heightened the need for an eco-reading of texts, really. So that you started with the land itself was traumatized is very interesting to me.

Critchley: Right? Well, you know the land can be a place of healing. But we need to remember that the land is also traumatized. You know when I say land, I mean the environment, the way that we have extracted from the land has traumatized us all. You know, maybe we're not conscious of it. But yeah. So we've all been traumatized. And obviously, now it's so apparent. Extreme weather, everything that's going on everywhere. I mean, we had a big flood in Provincetown last December.

Forrest: What you're saying is very interesting. My interpretation of a trauma is a death event that occurs in life, but that life keeps going on and a theologian I interviewed yesterday from the Cape, from Barnstable, Shelly Rambo, she teaches up at BU and she's written about trauma and she calls it the middle day, but she helped me with that definition. And you're

saying that we're all in a sense traumatized by the way that the earth is experiencing a death event.

Forrest: You mentioned the healing waters of the harbor. I'm just wondering, like you said from the beginning Provincetown was always a place for people who lived outside of the norm. It's interesting to me, like you said that that there's almost this brotherhood between the human trauma survivor and the earth as it's trying to survive that I had not thought about before or not, as clearly as I am talking with you. Were there other aspects of the place, the physicality, the landscape of Provincetown that were, I don't want to say healing, but maybe that witness to trauma or were reasons people stayed in Provincetown. I'm very fascinated by the curvature. It's a very unique place, and I know, going back to what you said about the artists going there, a large point of that was that the light itself was so unique, artists went there because of that. So, I am just wondering if you could talk a little bit about the place itself, and how that might have intersected or been in conversation with the Aids epidemic, if at all, I don't know.

Critchley: Well. Yes, I mean, you know Provincetown is a spiral, as I call it, a spiral spit of sand and so the spiral, you know, we people here talk about the energy of the spiral. It's just disorienting coming here because you don't know what is east or west, or north or south. It takes you awhile, and you have to get your bearings, so to speak. You have to connect to the to the ground when you're here. But the ground is the shifting sand. So, as an

artist I worked with sand. Sand is one of the elements that I work with, encrusting cars and buildings and objects with sand. it's about the fragility of the land and our concept of time. And there's a timelessness here. It's constantly, you know the sand is shifting. I mean, I don't know if you know that Provincetown, the entire town, is a sand dune. So geologically, Provincetown did not exist when the glaciers started melting 6 to 8,000 years ago. There's a very clear demarcation between the glacial deposits of the Cape and Provincetown cause. What happened is as the ice melted and the sea level rose, it started eroding the Cape and transporting these grains of sand and particles to create Provincetown. So the entire town is a sand dune. It's all sand. There's nothing else here but sand.

Forrest: That's beautiful. I love what you're saying. I mean, what you said is poetry. I've noticed that myself. What's West? What's East? You have to connect to the ground, but the ground is always shifting. And then, you [mentioned] our concept of time. There's a timelessness here. Why do you say that?

Critchley: I say that because, first of all, we are on the edge. So, you know, it's almost like we could take flight from here. It's a place to take flight. That's how it feels. The breeze is here. This is also one of the major stopping off points for birds. This is one of the places that birds stop on their way migrating north and south.

Forrest: Which would make the shifting sands helpful in a way.

Critchley: Yes, it created possibilities and unexpected situations that you couldn't predict. I think it's important to recognize the obvious. But the way that the town is situated is laid out, you know it's within the embrace of the harbor. It is one of the largest harbors, natural harbors in the world, and it's a harbor of refuge. Yeah. That's an official designation. It's a harbor of refuge, the place for ships to come in when there's a storm. So, the layout of the town is so compact it's embraced by the harbor, and then the national seashore behind it. So it's really in the middle of a biodome and the fact that the seashore is protected land. Of course, that's what really brought me here. It was just the ecology of the place.

But you know, it's so compact. It’s one street, basically 2 streets. But basically, one long street along the harbor. It. It beckons communication. it necessitates people connecting, bumping into each, even people you don't want to see, you know, like. And so, it allows you, or forces you to deal with the past as well as the future. Because you know the people that you've had experiences with that you may not want to see, you have to find a way to deal with them.

So, you're constantly shuffling between the past and present and the future here. Yeah. And so, it requires a certain amount of I don't know, if dexterity is the word or openness. Yeah.

Forrest: Not to beat a dead horse, but it's part of the shifting. One of the things I find in my own trauma, you know, as a gay guy coming out I was drawn

first to the Eco. Like you said I was first drawn to the shore honestly and before I could reconnect with humans. I found the natural, the seascapes to be a place I could reconnect before I figured out how to make human connection. And Mary Oliver, I think, helps me speak to that or I understand what she says there, when she says how the natural world saved her. But I think it's important. If I start with Mary Oliver, it's because of that emphasis on the Eco.

Midway through our conversation, we pivoted to focus more on the impact of HIV/AIDS on Provincetown:

Critchley: And directly relating to AIDS. I mean, the reason you know, these pandemics happen is because of the disruption of the natural systems. You know the concept of spillover where, where ecosystems are destroyed and these viruses you know, have to find a place to go. They spill over to human beings. So I mean HIV wasn't invented. It's been around just like Covid. The environment got disrupted and destroyed. I don't think you can talk about trauma without talking about the eco disaster that we perpetrated.

Forrest: In terms of the AIDS epidemic and Provincetown, what about that place, do you think made people want to go there? Like you said the Bohemians, and the artists sort of became their own pilgrims in a way. But what was that like? I mean, I know this is a very hard question to answer. What was it like in the eighties and late seventies in terms of HIV/AIDS?

Critchley: A lot of people came here over the years, not just for HIV. People came here to free themselves from, to deal with trauma, to deal with divorce, to deal with identity, abuse. This was a retreat, a place of retreat. It might not have been textbook trauma, but it is. It always has been a place of reinvention and experimentation which in many people's lives there is no room for that. so, we, you know, we've been, you know, we've been hemmed in by cultural norms. Of course, the 60 opened everything up. We're talking, going way back before then, and also Provincetown was one of the world's first global enterprises. We had a global whaling business. We were the third largest whaling port in the world. Yeah. So we, you know, we have always been a place of, pirates and wannabes and moon crosses, and people that lived outside of the norm.

So I arrived in 1975, when Provincetown was still in its full glory as a fishing community and run down beautifully. No condos, a lot of families, a lot of kids and that attracted a lot of people. And of course, queers. And we like to find beautiful places. Yeah, and so I actually came to Provincetown married to a woman. My son was born here in 1975 and I didn't know when I came here, didn’t know I was gay, and I didn't know I was an artist. So obviously, I was drawn to the place for, you know, subliminal reasons.

Forrest: Was there a moment that you remember being specific to AIDS really making an impact on the place itself?

Critchley: Yes. 1981.I had been working at a free hippie clinic, Provincetown Drop-in Center. I don't know if you've heard of it. The Provincetown Drop-In Center existed from 1970 to 1980, and it was a response to all the hippies that were coming into town and the drugs. And so it was a free clinic for medical crisis intervention, counseling, and 24 hour crisis intervention. So I ended up coordinating all the programs and services at this agency. And then it folded in 1980. The biggest issue we had in the medical clinic was anal warts. That was like the big scare. So a year later HIV appeared in town. I was working at a rest at the Moors restaurant my first year or second year. I think it was my first year, and one of the ex-employees was the first person who died of AIDS in Provincetown.

I'm not sure when the New York Times used the word AIDS or HIV. They described it as a gay plague. It was around that. Yeah. Nobody knew, of course, why this young, healthy gay man died. And then people started dropping. I know at least 2, 3, or 4 of my friends who one day they were perfectly fine, and then a few days later, they got pneumonia, and then they're in the hospital, and they died within a week or two. You know, it was that literally that fast. And so,

you know, because everyone was traumatized…what's going on here? What is this about? And so, a group of us got together and started providing services to some of the people that were sick at the time. I was also a massage therapist. So, we were providing massages. We started

providing services, and then we had some public forums about bringing in a doctor, and we had some fundraisers and eventually the AIDS Support group was formed, and also the people with AIDS Coalition. The people with AIDS Coalition was a response to the medical model of treatment. It was about empowerment. It was about alternative therapy. It was about a community challenging the medical establishment in the way they treated HIV and discriminated against people with aids and people who were gay. So, it was a major move, and it was part of Act Up. I mean, it was similar to some of the things that Act Up was doing. It was national - the people with AIDS coalition. So anyway, the AIDS support group was formed and the PWA, People with AIDS coalition. And you know they both existed for many years. And anyway, that's sort of the beginning of what happened here

Forrest: Could you say something more about the Swim for Life?

Critchley: As an artist I've had a lot of projects relating to HIV and the community Swim for Life is one of them. But I founded the Provincetown Community Compact as a nonprofit. That would be an umbrella for other art projects and community endeavors. But before I talk about that in ‘88, we started the Swim for Life. My friend Walter and I were swimming in the harbor, and again, the Swim for Life really came out of an ecological concern. What was happening in New England at that time is that a lot of beaches were being closed because of debris and needles and things washing up on

beaches. and we're sitting on at the edge of the harbor looking at the beauty of it, saying, you know we're still here. We should celebrate the harbor. It's open. It's you know, it's an incredible identity for the town. And so, we eventually got a boat, and we went to Long Point, and we swam back, and you know, of course, people told us we couldn't do it, and that the Blue Fish were feeding and so we made it, and then we said, Well, let's have a swim and raise money for AIDS. So, two weeks later we had the first Swim for Life. That was in September. It's always been the weekend after Labor Day. But It started as an ecological concern. It was about the environment. Yes, and the whole idea of the healing waters of the harbor and people coming together in their grief and joy to create community and celebrate ourselves, and the way that we are taking care of each other.

Forrest: That's beautiful.

Critchley: So, it really provided an antidote to despair and sadness and tragedy that was going on.

Forrest: That's beautiful and does it still take place in the harbor? Does it still go from one place to another every year?

Critchley: Oh, well, again the environment intervened again because of the sharks. In 2019, you know that there's been a frenzy about shark sightings and shark attacks. All of them have been on the back shore on the Atlantic side, not

in the harbor. But the national seashore, which we needed a permit to start to swim at Long Point, refused us a permit because of their perceived danger of sharks in 2019. So, we had to change the route to a shoreline route. So now we swim along the East End shoreline from the Snail road area down to the new park that the town created near the center of town.

Forrest: So, do you think that's why there was a feeling of wanting to go there during a death?

Critchley: Yeah, I mean, you know, I think I think people had, and people with AIDS coming here, you mean? Everyone articulates it in a different way. But I know that many people said if they're gonna die they wanna die in a really beautiful place, and they wanna die in a place that is accepting of them because a lot of people, their families were not accepting them. I mean, not only did they find out they had HIV they found out they were gay at the same time.

I have a tenant upstairs who had HIV for many years, and he died. I don't know. don't know if it's 10 years. A very quiet guy, really sweet you know. He loved Judy Garland. He used to do Judy Garland in drag and he died. And the police tried to contact his parents in New Jersey, and you know, they said, your son has died, and the parents said, we don't want to have anything to do with him. This was 10 years ago. It was that recent. So, multiply that. The trauma wasn't just HIV. The trauma was society.

> The trauma was the nuclear family, the trauma was religion. That was part of the trauma of why people came here. It wasn't just HIV. They had to create their own family here. This is a place to create your family, recreate your family.

The final aspect of Critchley's experience in Provincetown during the HIV/AIDS epidemic involves his creation of the Provincetown Community Pact, which he founded in 1993. The main goal of this group was to integrate the arts, the environment, and the local economy. Importantly, Critchley became focused on the creation of art as a response to the trauma of AIDS. In the aftermath of so many artists' deaths due to HIV/AIDS, Critchley sought a way to try and preserve their artistic contributions. He began contacting the family members of artists who had died to see if they would donate any works to the Community Pact. In the transcript from *Safe Harbor*, he recalls at least two anecdotes of men who were about to die, and went to Jay with some of their artwork. Kevin Driskel's headdress that he made out of the clear plastic tubes from the hospital was one such piece. Another moment involved Critchley being handed as box filled with paintings and drawings. He also traveled to local yard sales and got photographs of some of the men who had died. In this way, Critchley's Provincetown Community Pact incorporated the arts into its healing and recovery from the trauma of HIV/AIDS. In this way, Critchley's artistic endeavors mirror the efforts of queer poets who lived on Provincetown's shores and created out of their own traumas, being given refuge by the unique landscape of the town.

Critchley's closing comments in our interview summarize the uniqueness of Provincetown and its importance for those, throughout history, who have searched for a

new home, a new place to belong. During the latter part of the 20th century, this "spiral spit of sand" at the end of the Cape became just that for people living with HIV/AIDS. Its distance from the mainland provided a sense of relief from the homophobia of a right-leaning culture of the time, while its small physical area created a village, a tight community of people who were able to pull together resources, through the Provincetown AIDS Support Group, the Provincetown PWA Coalition, and the Swim for Life, and take care of each other.

Michael Cunningham's *Land's End: A Walk in Provincetown* provides an intimate account of just that, a walk through this unique space in the world at the end of Cape Cod. His description of the impact of the AIDS epidemic on Provincetown is both beautiful and haunting. He writes,

> Provincetown has been widowed by the AIDS epidemic. It will never fully recover, though it is accustomed to loss. Over the centuries men and boys in uncountable numbers have been swallowed up by the ocean. Provincetown possesses, has always possessed, a steady, grieving competence in the face of all that can happen to people. It watches and waits; it keeps the lights burning. If you are a man or woman with AIDS there, someone will always drive you to your doctor's appointments, get your groceries if you can't get them yourself, and take care of whatever needs taking care of. (119).

Cunningham's account is another testament to the nature of Provincetown as a village, a community of closely-knit people who take care of each other in the midst of trauma and loss. While walking through one of the major town squares in between Commercial Street and Bradford Street, one can find a humble, yet striking, AIDS monument. It is horizontal in nature and doesn't get much taller than about 3 feet; it is 9 feet in width. The surface of this dark block of stone is one of waves. It is as if the sculptor took a block out of the harbor itself. On the sides of the monument are inscriptions from poets and writers impacted by the AIDS epidemic in Provincetown. The final poem on

this side of the monument is from Marie Howe' *Without Music.* Marie's brother John died of HIV/AIDS. She was also with Michael Cunningham after the death of their mutual friend Billy, who also died. She and Cunningham were together when they spread Billy's ashes on a dune "halfway between town and water" (Cunningham 124). To use Rambo's terminology from the previous chapter, Billy's remains were spread in a Middle Space. In *Without Music*, Howe recounts the powerful silences surrounding this space at the tip of Cape Cod. Anyone traveling to this coastal space knows that often the only sound one can hear is that of the nearby harbor or ocean, slowly ebbing and flowing in a constant flux somewhere close. Howe writes, "Most of it happened without music, / the clink of a spoon from the kitchen, / someone talking. Silence. / Somebody sleeping, Someone watching somebody sleep" (CITE).

Conclusion

Over the centuries, Provincetown's identity has shifted like the sands on which it is built. From a major whaling port before the discovery of oil, to a Portuguese fishing village, to a tourist attraction for colonial heritage, to a mecca of artistic ingenuity, this small piece of land at the end of Cape Cod has, through its changes, often been the place for those who lived on the outskirts of society. As an artistic community in the early 20th century, Provincetown was the home of the modern American theater. The Provincetown Players put on some of the most progressive plays of their time, including Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*, a play that conveys the social confines of the modern woman. Eugene O'Neill spent many summers in Provincetown working on his body work, as did Tennessee Williams.

Furthermore, Provincetown's unique history allowed the gay community to find refuge there in the latter part of the 20th century. There, men could walk Commercial Street holding hands, women could stand on Macmillan Pier and kiss. Cunningham appreciates the physical locality of Provincetown and its ability for pilgrims, for centuries, to go there and be themselves. He notes that part of Provincetown's appeal is "the fact that those who go there have made some effort to do so" (14).

During the HIV/AIDS epidemic of the late 20th century, gay men, in particular, found Provincetown to be a place they could go and be taken care of. Surrounded by a small army of volunteers like Alice Foley and Jay Critchley, these men could spend the last moments of their lives being held by this village. This transitioned Provincetown into yet *another* identity as it became the refuge for so many who had been outcast from their homes and society. It became a place for people to go in the midst of trauma.

A major part of this refuge and safety was provided by the land itself, the way it speaks to the experience of living life while in the midst of death. While driving out the end of the Cape, one thinks they've reached an ending. One of the most sublime parts of the drive out is first seeing the Atlantic on the horizon. Moving past what at first seems like a desert landscape, filled with dunes and small trees, the land itself *does not end*, but keeps moving on; it survives an ending. What one finds after this curve in the road is Provincetown, a home for those also living after an ending.

In addition to its obvious geographical shape, Provincetown's coastal space is the perfect natural landscape to mirror the sense of being in between both life and death. The tides are extreme there. They provide a physical testimony of being *in the midst of*, of being both of the ebb and the flow. It is, no doubt, why so many men living with

HIV/AIDS, their partners, and their community of supporters, found solidarity there both in others, and with the land itself.

Now, in the 21st century, I would argue that Provincetown has a new identity in the aftermath of so much trauma. It is a physical place to go, a physical testimony to so much loss, as well as so much renewal. In the same way that the Pilgrim Monument was built to attract visitors in order to showcase the town's colonial heritage, Provincetown, today, can be a spiritual place of remembrance and renewal in the aftermath of trauma. No monuments need to be built hundreds of feet tall. One only needs to dwell in the land there, especially its coastal space, its curvature after the end of the Cape, and find home.

CHAPTER FOUR

MARY OLIVER

> Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
> Meanwhile, the world goes on (*Wild Geese* 14).

> I listen. What I hear is almost a voice, almost a language. It is a second ocean, rising, singing into one's ear, or deep inside the ears, whispering in the recesses where one is less oneself than a part of some indivisible community…. I could not be a poet without the natural world. Someone else could. But not me. For me the door to the woods is the door to the temple (*Winter Hours* 98).

Introduction

As we move from ecocriticism, through trauma studies, and finally into the landscape of Provincetown, Massachusetts, we find poets who speak from this particular landscape, this curvature at the end of Cape Cod. The first poet to study when intersecting these fields is Mary Oliver, who journeyed to this landscape after her own traumatic childhood. If the earth itself bears witness to the experience of the in-between, of middleness, in its coastal space, Mary Oliver translates that testimony into poetry. She *speaks earth* in a way. Her poetry is emblematic of the connections between nature, trauma, place, and testimony. While Mary Oliver can be viewed as a queer poet, her identity rests more in the natural world than in any other "category." It is because of this allegiance that other avenues such as trauma and queerness can be explored under the umbrella of an ecocritical ecosystem.

As mentioned earlier, the genre of poetry is perhaps the most accurate in being "the song of the earth". It is worth revisiting Timothy Clark's comments from earlier. He writes, "In effect, literary or poetic language is seen as inherently 'green', 'ecological' in a loose sense…Art and the poetic, so understood, can be offered as a therapeutic

antidote to psychic alienation and division" (21). Having spent time in the field of trauma, we now can see why this ecopoetic matters to our "psychic alienation and division" (ibid). In his book *The Song of the Earth*, Jonathan Bate argues that "ecopoetics asks in what respects a poem may be a making of the dwelling place-the prefix eco- is derived from Greek *oikos*, 'the home or place of dwelling'…[I]t could be that *poesis* in the sense of verse-making is language's most direct path to return to the *oikos*, the place of dwelling" (77). This "place of dwelling", both the physical place and the poetry, is a refuge for the trauma survivor. They work in relationship with each other, and the poet speaks of this encounter, this healing process. Mary Oliver is one of our poetic geniuses of this space.

Mary Oliver as Ecopoet

Mary Oliver is one of the most popular and awarded of our modern poets. Her collection *American Primitive* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1984 and her *New and Collected Poems* won the National Book Award in 1992. Over the span of her life, Oliver published dozens of collections of poetry and prose. Many know her poems that cherish the natural world. She herself has acknowledged that her poetry is "praise" poetry. Whether contemplating the wings of a grasshopper in *The Summer Day* or the arrival of a swan in *The Swan*, Oliver gives voice to the experience one has when immersed in nature. Many find her poems healing as she often blurs the lyric "I" in her poems, fusing it with the ear of the listener, often addressing a "you", intermingling both first and second person into a combined experience of union.

The first key in understanding Oliver's poetry is that she *begins* with the cherishing of the natural world. In this way, she embodies the aforementioned ethos of the ecopoetic. The second key is understanding that Oliver moves directly to poetry after that cherishing. Later in this paper, I will analyze these two aspects of Oliver's poetry more specifically (the ways in which she cherishes and the ways in which she uses the poetic form to communicate that love).

First, though, it is helpful to hear from Oliver herself about what placing the natural world first means to her. Interestingly, although many misinterpret Oliver's poetry as simplistic and 'cute', Oliver goes out of her way to assure the reader that there is nothing about the natural world, nor the human being, that is 'cute'. In her chapter "A Few Words" in the collection *Blue Pastures*, Oliver offers her credo against anthropomorphism and for allowing nature to be our guide, our signposts:

> Nothing in the forest is charming…. And nothing in the forest is cute. The dog fox is not cute, nor the little foxes. I watch them as they run up and down the dune. One is carrying the soiled wing of a gull; the others grab onto it and pull. They fly in and out of the blond grasses, their small teeth snapping. They are not adorable, or charming, or cute…. Toys are not cute. But animals are not toys. Neither are trees, rivers, oceans, swamps, the Alps, the mockingbird singing all night in the bowers of the thorn, the snapping turtle, or the purple-fleshed mushroom. (91)

In case any reader missed it, Oliver here goes on a diatribe against "cute" and the way it minimizes the splendor and grandeur of nature. What she notices about the lack of "cuteness" in the mockingbird and the snapping turtle is transferable to her understanding of the human being as well, who comes from the same source. Importantly, in the next passage, Oliver warns that when you place humans *in charge of*, or ahead of nature in importance, we have the tendency to make nature "adorable and charming, diminutive and powerless" (92). Nature must be the guide instead, not human beings. Nature must

be what helps us understand ourselves and our own natures. When doing so, our connection to the natural world becomes paramount. We are humbled before it and our managerial egos go away. We see "humans and tigers, tigers or tiger lilies-note their differences and still how alike they are!" (93). Oliver closes this chapter with her final mic drop of sorts, much like she does at the ending of each of her poems. There is a shift in intensity and final purpose one hears from the words on the page:

> What is cute or charming as it rises, as it swoons? Life is Niagara, or nothing…I put my face close to the lily, where it stands just above the grass, and give it a good greeting from the stem of my heart. We live, I am sure of this, in the same country, in the same household, and our burning comes from the same lamp. We are all wild, valorous, amazing. We are, none of us, cute. (93)

Part of the liberation from this being 'cute', is synonymous with our need to not be 'good', as she notes in *Wild Geese*. Instead, the natural world offers an ability to be strange, to be different, to be other. And that is ok. Not only is it ok, it is in a relationship with and in a mirroring of the natural world. There, the self finds a home. Oliver writes, "In…the natural world…. I felt at ease; nature was full of beauty and interest and mystery…the world's *otherness* is antidote to confusion, that standing *within* this otherness…. can re-dignify the worst stung heart" (*Upstream*, 14).

Mary Oliver and Trauma

However, Oliver's work is often misunderstood. In fact, some in the world of the poetry elite (or those who write from that stance) "look down" on Oliver as being overly sentimental and, frankly, understood too easily (Franklin). In her essay *What Mary Oliver's Critics Don't Understand*, Ruth Franklin notes that the *New York Times* had never written a full-length review on any of her works, and when the critic David Orr

wrote about Oliver's interview with Maria Shriver, he mocked the idea that poetry could help someone "overcome personal challenges" (ibid). Franklin rebuts this pretentiousness by acknowledging that "the key to Oliver's appeal is her accessibility" combined with "a spiritual release that they might not have realized they were looking for" (ibid). Indeed, Oliver celebrates and tries to translate the beauty of the natural world in a way that allows it to speak to the reader. For Oliver, the key to poetry is paying attention. Many of her poems originate from walks around Provincetown, where she lived for most of her life. Franklin recounts the time when Oliver learned she had won the Pulitzer Prize. She was looking for wood at the town dump to help her with a project she had been working on at home. A friend who had recently heard the good news asked Mary if she was looking for her old manuscripts (ibid). Oliver has said that she appreciated the solitude and privacy that Provincetown gave her, along with there being no sense of elitism on this curved piece of sand at the end of Cape Cod. Moreover, what many do not realize is Oliver's praise and appreciation of nature comes from an experience of how the natural world rescued her from a truly traumatic childhood. By failing to place Oliver's poetry in the context of trauma, critics have missed what occasions these accessible and healing poems.

In a rare interview with Krista Tippet, Mary Oliver explains how the natural world saved her life. Growing up in rural Ohio, Oliver's childhood was extremely difficult. In this important interview, Oliver mentions the abuse and neglect that occurred in her household.

> Tippet: And then you talk about growing up in a sad, depressed place, a difficult place. You don't belabor this, I mean, and in other places — there's a place you

talk about you were one of many thousands who've had insufficient childhoods, but that you spent a lot of your time walking around the woods in Ohio.

Oliver: Yes, I did, and I think it saved my life. To this day, I don't care for the enclosure of buildings. It was a very bad childhood — for everybody, every member of the household, not just myself, I think — and I escaped it, barely, with years of trouble. But I did find the entire world, in looking for something. But I got saved by poetry, and I got saved by the beauty of the world.

This is quintessential Mary Oliver-saved by poetry and by the beauty of the natural world. However, in a later interview with Maria Shriver, Oliver gets more specific.

Shriver: You were sexually abused as a child?

Oliver: I was very little. But I had recurring nightmares; there's damage.

Shriver: Can you tell me about that?

Oliver: Well, that's why I wanted to be invisible, I'm sure. And it certainly made it hard to trust. But with the help of a few real good people, I finally feel healed—kind of late in life… I'm now able to understand, one, that it happened, which a child fights and doesn't want to acknowledge, and two, that it affected certain things in my behavior. It was probably the reason I left home the day after I graduated from high school—I couldn't wait a minute. And why I was needy a great deal of my life, because I didn't get sufficient mother-love and protection. That can make people very—well, there are millions of people walking around the world who had insufficient childhoods, and I just happen to be one of them.

In this candid interview, Oliver discloses, more specifically than in any other discussion, her early childhood trauma. While she acknowledges earlier in this interview that she is

not in the tradition of the Confessional poets, who often, according to Oliver, blur therapy with poetry. Instead, she emphasizes that her goal is to praise, to comfort. However, it is important to note that the impetus of this praise is its antidote to despair. It stems from an inner sorrow and loneliness that finds refuge in the home she finds in Provincetown, one alongside the curving land that creates the final commentary of the Cape.

In trying to better understand Oliver's poetry, it is helpful to look at her prose. There, she offers glimpses into her past as well as her own commentary about her work and its purpose.

In her collection of essays, *Upstream,* Oliver describes an early anecdote of walking in the woods as opposed to attending school. Eventually, she was "advertised on the hotline of help", but yet she still continued her path upstream, away from her parents and childhood home. Oliver explains the early benefits of being wrong, of going the supposedly wrong way, which turns out to be exactly what she needed. She writes, "So maybe it was the right way after all. If this was lost, let us all be lost always….My heart opened, and opened again. The water pushed against my effort, then its glassy permission to step ahead touched my ankles. The sense of going toward the source. I do not think I ever, in fact, returned home" (5). This is a key passage in understanding some of Oliver's poetic paradoxes. She leaves her native Ohio and becomes, in a sense, homeless while searching for another home. She finds this other home, this refuge without walls or structures, in the natural world. This is also critical in understanding Oliver's role as an ecopoet. She replaces the human-centered idea of home with one that is more rooted in nature. This is the key shift that occurs for her in her journey of recovery from trauma.

Part of Oliver's childhood trauma included the disempowerment that comes with the abandonment and abuse of a parent. In another anecdote from *Upstream*, Oliver recounts a time when her father took her ice-skating, and then forgot about her and left, leaving her to meander alone on the icy water. When he finally returned to pick her up (a family acquaintance found her and called her home), he sarcastically told the friend that "he had forgotten [Mary] existed" (18). As they drove home she remembers "he sat in the awful prison of himself, the old veils covered his eyes, and he did not say another word" (ibid). So, while Oliver's first pivot of survival is toward the natural world, her second is to poetry. Shortly after this anecdote, Oliver acknowledges that she "thought of [language] as a means to notice, to contemplate, to praise, and *thus*, to come into power" (18). Oliver's empowerment through poetry helped her reclaim a life that had been traumatized, whose story had been hijacked. She ends her reflections on this painful childhood memory, and the healing that came through literature by acknowledging:

> I don't mean it's easy or assured; there are the stubborn stumps of shame, grief that remains unsolvable after all the years, a bag of stones that goes with one wherever one goes…But there is also the summoning world…And there is the thing that one does, the needle one plies, the work, and within the work a chance to take thoughts that are hot and formless and to place them…with meticulous effort into some heat-retaining form…that is to say, having chosen to claim my life, I have made for myself, out of work, and love, a handsome life. (20)

Interestingly, Oliver notes the importance of going outside, of not being enclosed by physical structures. This desire to be outside is part of what helps Oliver heal from her traumatic childhood. In much of her own prose, she describes her daily ritual of walking, with notebook in hand, around Provincetown's shores and forests. She remarks how observers know it was a good walk when they see her stop and look at something for a prolonged period of time, and then jot down some thoughts on her notepad.

In this spirit, Oliver is our generation's Walt Whitman, going out, breathing in the sea air, and in the grand tradition of Whitman, "loafing". Indeed, she claims Whitman as one of her earliest friends. Raised in an emotionally vacant home, Oliver would venture into the woods instead of school, to the point that she was warned of not graduating (*Blue Pastures* 14). Oliver has said that both the natural world *and* poetry saved her life. Her first life-saver was Whitman. She writes, "Whitman was the brother I did not have. I did have an uncle, whom I loved, but he killed himself one rainy fall day" (14). The juxtaposition here is stark, contrasting the fraternity of Whitman with the extreme loss within her own family. So, what, exactly, does Oliver learn from Whitman? First, she realizes that the poem is not *at first* an intellectual endeavor but a place to be, a home or a dwelling in and of itself. It is "a temple" (15). The second 'lesson' learned from her friend and teacher Whitman is, arguably, the importance of loafing. She writes, "I remember the delicate, rumpled way into the woods, and weight of the books in my pack. I remember the rambling, and the loafing-the wonderful days when, with Whitman, *I tucked my trouser-ends in my boots and went and had a good time*" (16). Readers of Oliver's poetry will note this key characteristic of her work. However, it is important to note that this loafing comes in many ways as a response to earlier trauma. This seemingly insignificant act of loafing is in fact a mode of survival.

In his book *Poetry as Survival,* Gregory Orr posits that Walt Whitman is one of the poets who helps us turn trauma into what he calls 'transformation.' Like Oliver, Whitman's lyric "I" of the poem is not necessarily singular, but an emergence with the reader and the subject matter. It is a convergence, a mystical connector of sorts. Whitman's essential poem *Leaves of Grass,* one he would tweak and add to until

his death, was what he referred to as a 'new bible', one that would renegotiate the traditional Christian view of the body as a place of shame, whereas the soul was a place of the spirit:

> Whitman took over conventional spiritual terms and radically redefined them. He began with the terms "body" and "soul". Centuries of Christian theology had asserted that humans have a body and a soul. The body is material and carnal and rots after death; the soul is immaterial, spiritual, and immortal, and leaves the body at death to go to its reward in heaven….In the conventional Christian scheme, the soul is the source of all good, the body the source of all evil…In "Song of Myself"... Whitman entirely reimagines the nature and relationship of the terms "body" and "soul"...Whitman is determined to bring the soul into the body, incarnate it, and-finally, daringly-to absorb all spirituality into embodied being. (Orr 162)

A spirituality of "embodied being" is yet another characteristic Mary Oliver shares with Walt Whitman. Nowhere is this connected "I", one that joins with others in celebration of the bodily, more apparent than in Whitman's famous lines in *Song of Myself*: "I celebrate myself, and sing myself, / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (166).

Like Mary Oliver, Whitman does not go into too much detail about any early childhood trauma, although Orr acknowledges that Whitman alluded to an earlier transformative event in his childhood (159). However, Orr speculates, and with reason, that Whitman's early trauma most likely came from him being a gay man in a heteronormative, and hostile, world:

> Sufficient evidence is there in poems and journal entries, especially those related to a decades-long crush on a Washington streetcar conductor named Peter Doyle .... Can being a closeted gay [man] constitute trauma? Ample testimony from our own, more tolerant time indicates that this is so, especially among adolescents coming into their sexuality who discover that their inclinations and attractions are still regarded with enormous and often violent prejudice. (168)

Therefore, it is key to place Mary Oliver and her poetry that cherishes the natural world, in some ways in response to trauma, as the head of this school of Provincetown poets who go to this spit of earth at the end of Cape Cod and find refuge. Like Oliver's poetry, this refuge begins with the sense of home gathered by being outside by the rising and ebbing tides, or the beech forests, or the shifting sand dunes. It is outward, it is exterior, it is vulnerable. And there, the traumatized person finds a brother or a sister, a companion, who knows, often more than humans do, what it means to be exposed to the elements. I can relate. During some of the most traumatic moments of my own life, I have gone to the sea or to the dry air of the Cascades for a refuge of my own. Although human connection is crucial to the healing from trauma, sometimes it is too scary to start there. Sometimes, the natural world offers its own way of allowing us to reconnect and to find embodiment and empowerment from the disconnections and abandonments of trauma. This is why it is crucial to allow Mary Oliver's poetic voice to be the hinge from ecopoetic and traumatic *theory* into *practice*. Her poems courageously begin with a noticing, a watchful I/eye. This watchfulness and attentiveness is what eventually connects the speaker to a feeling of communion. Regarding her poetry practice, Oliver writes, "I listen. What I hear is almost a voice, almost a language. It is a second ocean, rising, singing into one's ear…whispering in the recesses where one is less oneself than a part of some single indivisible community" (*Winter Hours*, 98). It is this community, this blurring of the lyrical I with the natural world and the world of humanity who inhabit these places, that Oliver finds a home. It is not the confined household where her childhood traumas and sexual abuse occurred and it is not within the walls of the school she so desperately sought to avoid. Instead, it is outside, amongst the elements, where

rock and wind and sea and tide welcome her, and all of her mystery and grandeur, home.

Dream Work

In choosing to analyze Mary Oliver's poetry, one has hundreds upon hundreds of poems to peruse. However, in the interview with Krista Tippet on her podcast *On Being*, Oliver explains that her collection *Dream Work* delved deepest into her childhood trauma and survival from it. Ruth Franklin beautifully explains the significance of this collection in her essay *What Mary Oliver's Critics Don't Understand*:

> *Dream Work,* her fifth and possibly her best book, comprises a weird chorus of disembodied voices that might come from nightmares, in poems detailing Oliver's fear of her father and her memories of the abuse she suffered at his hands. The dramatic tension of that book derives from the push and pull of the sinister and the sublime, the juxtaposition of a poem about suicide with another about starfish.

In looking at this collection more closely, one sees the dance between rage, terror, and new life.

Dogfish

The first poem in the collection, *Dogfish*, is a prime example of this dance. *Dogfish* is separated into eight sections, with multiple stanzas within each section. The sections alternate between the contemplation of the fish and that of the speaker's life. The poem begins with the speaker's gaze outward toward the incoming tide, presumably in Oliver's hometown of Provincetown. While the speaker barely understands what is arriving, noticing it as "Some kind of relaxed and beautiful thing" that is "flickering" in the distance, by the second stanza a clearer picture emerges, and so

does the first use of the second person "you". The speaker and the reader have engaged in a discussion, a conversation of sorts, as is typical in so many of Oliver's poetry. This use of the second and first person in Oliver's poetry is not binary, but a kind of communal relationship emerging because of the spirit of the poem. Like Rambo's suggestion earlier that the spirit breaks binaries, so does the breath behind Oliver's words, merging the "I" and the "you" with the poem itself, the embodiment of spirit work in this collection *Dream Work*. The clearer picture mentioned earlier is one in which the speaker would draw smiles under each of the eyes, as well as "above the chin" of these emerging fish.

In the second section of the poem, the speaker turns inward, stating: "I wanted / the past to go away, I wanted to leave it, like another country; I wanted / my life to close, and open / like a hinge, like a wing" (*Dream Work* 3). Importantly, the phrase "I wanted" is repeated twice in this stanza, the emergence of the speaker's desire. This initial desire is for a break from the past life, a "close", that would open again and take flight like a bird instead of one trapped. The fourth section, one that returns again to the speaker's inner life after gazing on the fish, admits another desire: "Also I wanted / to be able to love" (*Dream Work* 4). This additional desire creates a new meaning out of this new life of the winged spirit: to love. To move outside of oneself in the act of caring for the other.

The fifth section, though brief, describes the continued movement of the dogfish as it "tore open the soft basins of water" (ibid). The key image here is one of breaking, tearing open, rupture from the past only to return quickly to the speaker's continued reflection of her life. In the sixth section, the second person "You" is invoked again, but

this time it is also a confession to the reader that the speaker is private and not interested in total autobiography: “You don’t want to hear the story / of my life, and anyway / I don’t want to tell it, I want to listen / to the enormous waterfalls of the sun. / And anyway, it’s the same old story - / a few people just trying, / one way or another, / to survive” (*Dream Work* 5). And here we get to the crux of the speaker’s old and new life: it is one of survival, just like so many others’ stories. She closes this section with the admission that “nobody gets out of it, having to / swim through the fires to stay in / this world” (ibid). The connection has now been clearly made. The speaker and the fish emerge as one. This is a tactic Oliver uses in so many of her poems, the merging of the human and the natural or animal life.

What emerges, therefore, in the last two sections of the poem is a deliberate confusion of speaker and fish, a messiness emblematic of timeliness, in which the reader is not sure whether Oliver is discussing the human or the animal, or both. However, it is an important call to attention that begins the penultimate section as the speaker urges the reader to “look! look! look!” (*Dream Work* 5). She hopes “those little fish” (or are they humans?) “wake up and dash themselves away / from the hopeless future that is / bulging toward them” (ibid). The final section is filled with hesitant hope as the speaker begins with her forecast that “probably, if they don’t waste time / looking for an easier world,” followed by the dramatic pause at the beginning of the final, one-line stanza that ends *Dogfish*. It is one of confidence not in the hopes of some easier life, but in the emergence in the actual, difficult, world of survival these fish, and the speaker herself, are immersed in. The final, confident reassurance is - “they can do it”, but only if not seeking that “easier world”.

This poem is essential in understanding Mary Oliver's body of work, seen at the beginning of this collection, *Dream Work*. Filled with the theme of humanity's deep connection with the natural world, Oliver finds solace in the sisterhood of these dogfish, who are also struggling to survive, but do so as they listen "to the enormous waterfalls of the sun" (*Dream Work* 4).

Morning Poem

The poem that follows *Dogfish* in Oliver's collection *Dream Work* is one that at the surface describes the beauty of beginnings. In *Morning Poem*, Oliver uses the image of the sun to remember how the beginning of the new day is always an act of creation in which the "ashes of the night / turn into leaves again". It is a daily rebirth. In the next image, ponds appear with summer lilies described as "painted islands" (Oliver 6). Then, Oliver addresses the reader, conveying how the imagination can then go on for the rest of the day "alighting everywhere". However, a noticeable shift occurs in the middle of the poem from this pleasing imagery to the reference to the reader's "thorn / that is heavier than lead" (ibid). At the center, then, of this poem of rebirth is the thorn, a reference to the place "somewhere deep within you" where there is a "beast shouting that the earth / is exactly what it wanted-" (ibid). The union at the heart of this rebirth is the human's connection with the sun, the lilies, the pond, the ashes of night. For Oliver, it is the "pond with its blazing lilies" that is "a prayer heard and answered / lavishly every morning" (ibid). The sacred is clearly the natural world in the universe of this poem. The morning ritual is one of connection to the earth. This connection is at the heart of happiness and the heart of prayer. In the final stanza, interestingly, Oliver uses

the word “dared” twice to suggest that this connection between speaker and earth is one brought on by connecting with one’s inner “beast” or “thorn”, and that this requires the speaker’s daring as she enters this complicated terrain.

Rage

Rage, one of Oliver’s most brutal poems, resides five poems in to her *Dream Work* collection. The first ten lines are addressed to a “You” who is “the dark song / of the morning” (*Dream Work* 12). Up until this point in the collection, especially in *Morning Poem*, the mornings begin with the sun. Here, the dark song is the genesis of the day. The “you” then “descend[s] the stairs / in [his] public clothes / and drive[s] away” (ibid). Here, Oliver points out the hypocrisy of the father’s public and private selves. His public self is one “who makes all the days / possible in the world” (ibid). He is powerful, “serious and “slow”. He is one of the Masters of the Universe, at least in the eyes of the speaker.

However, line 11 begins the first shift in the poem as the dark song of the morning is also the “red song / in the night” (ibid). This sense of foreboding continues until the image of the father “stumbling through the house / to the child’s bed” becomes apparent. Presumably drunk, with nefarious intentions, the once powerful public persona dwindles into something horrid. The father moves to the “damp rose of her body, leaving a bitter taste” (ibid). As is characteristic of trauma, the father’s molestation does not reside only in the traumatic moment, but continues with the speaker for the rest of her life. The middle part of this poem ends with the speaker’s acknowledgment that “forever those nights snarl / the delicate machinery of the days” (ibid). Not day, but days; not once, but forever.

The poem shifts again to the child's mother in line 19. This begins the immediate aftermath of the assault, in which the mother's smile contains "a truth [he] will never confess. This line hints at the real possibility that the child's mother has also been abused. The aftermath continues to depict the child growing up, "crouching in corners" and, "in the wide night", crying "the most mournful cry" (ibid). This is a house haunted by trauma and the loss of childhood innocence.

The final movement of the poem is a direct acknowledgment of the father's dreams. In a collection named *Dream Work*, this section begs a closer read and appreciation. Line 27 begins "In your dreams she's a tree / that will never come to leaf -" (ibid). Beyond the dance of the public and private persona, within the father's conscience and psyche, within his dreams, the truth of what happened to this girl resides. Her growth has been stunted, and her eventual blooming erased. Oliver uses the anaphora of "in your dreams" three times in the final section of *Rage*. The second use occurs in line 29 when Oliver writes, "in your dreams she's a watch / you dropped on the dark stones / till no one could gather the fragments-". This second use of the anaphora also includes the imagery of time, suggesting, once again, that time has been disrupted, an essential characteristic of the traumatic event. The daughter has been "fragmented", torn apart, shattered. The final two lines of the poem repeat the anaphora once again: "in your dreams you have sullied and murdered, / and dreams do not lie" (ibid). The stark use of the word "murdered" drives the brutal fact of the father's sexual assault home. This is a poem of testimony. The speaker is speaking of her trauma and addressing the perpetrator in a powerful way. While the facade of the father's public persona may fool others in real time, Oliver is saying that the world of dreams, within his psyche, will be the place

where the truth will eventually come out. The final four words, “dreams do not lie”, is a haunting remnant in this collection that suggests that part of this “dream work” is also processing this early childhood trauma.

Using some of her interviews with Maria Shriver and Krista Tippet as resources, one sees that these lines in the middle of one her most raw poems depicts Oliver’s own trauma. It rarely occurs in her poetry, but it does so here, a few pages into *Dream Work*. Therefore, the poems in *Dream Work* cannot be understood except with the inclusion of *Rage*. The trauma in this poem informs so many of the others. Importantly, one of Oliver’s most popular, and healing, poems, *Wild Geese* occurs immediately after *Rage* in this collection. This is no accident.

Wild Geese

As mentioned earlier, Oliver’s poem *Wild Geese* was my entryway into her poetry and it arrived in my life at a crucial time. While beginning to process my own traumas as a closeted gay man, as well as severe emotional abuse from an absentee and economically deadbeat father, my time spent in the southern Cascades of Oregon was nothing short of healing. Each morning, the professors there would begin our morning lecture with poetry. Forty students and 6 professors would huddle together in the cedar library with mugs of coffee, notebooks, and inquisitive minds. It was in this library that I first heard Oliver’s beckoning first line of *Wild Geese*: “You do not have to be good” (*Dream Work 14).* Arriving at the Oregon Extension, a semester program in Ashland, I was also leaving the confines of an evangelical university that seemed to prioritize “goodness” and “morality” above all else. This “goodness” and “morality” were

enforced by social restrictions and were, strangely, heavily focused on the dangers of being gay. Oliver's line washed over me like the cooling waters of my local Atlantic Ocean. I was refreshed. Cleansed in a different way. The toxic shame and severance from my true self joined the winds of the Ponderosa pines outside of that library. I was left in a new space, a clearer one. A freer one.

Moving on from that powerful first line, Oliver's poem has four essential movements within its 18 lines. The first movement is an immediate address to the reader, to the "you" who, as mentioned, will begin a journey of immersion with the natural world and the speaker of the poem herself. The first four lines address the reader, the "You", three times: "You do not have to walk on your knees / for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting" (ibid). The image here is one of sparseness. The desert is a dry landscape with the long trek of a hundred miles being an effort in futility. The reader does not have to repent in an effort to become "good." Instead, "You only have to let the soft animal of your body / love what it loves" (ibid). The use of the phrase "soft animal" immediately contrasts with the harsher image of the dry desert. Interestingly, the only indent in the entire poem occurs at the beginning of line 5 with the call to "love what [the body] loves." In this way, Oliver's poem moves to the sensual and embraces the bodily. For a queer reader, especially, this is an act toward healing and recovery from the trauma of being separated, cut off, from one's own body and sexuality. It seems so simple, so primal, so basic. Allow the body to love what it loves.

The second movement of the poem occurs briefly, in line 6: "Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine" (ibid). Here, Oliver begins the relationship between speaker and reader as they begin a discussion about each other's despair. It is an

acknowledgment, however brief, of real pain. Characteristically, Oliver does not spend too much time here, giving it this one powerful line in the universe of the poem. Still, the line acts as a hinge from trauma to recovery. The "despair" in line 6 contrasts with the refocusing on the natural world in line 7.

The third movement of the poem begins with the title of this dissertation and the speaker's realization that the natural world continues on, despite the speaker's and the reader's despair: "Meanwhile the world goes on" (ibid). Oliver repeats "Meanwhile" three times in this section. The second use of "Meanwhile" begins a four line description of nature, expansive in its juxtaposition with the earlier one line about despair: "Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain / are moving across the landscapes, / over the prairies and the deep trees, / the mountains and the rivers" (ibid). The picture here is clear. There is an ongoingness to the natural world that will help the reader move on, along with the "sun and clear pebbles of the rain" as they move over landscapes. This movement after despair at first appears very general. However, the final lines of this section get to the title itself: "Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air, are heading home again" (ibid). The movement now is one of homecoming. It is a movement from the barren desert, into despair, but then back home, following the path of the wild geese into healing and reconnection.

The final movement of this poem returns back to address the reader more explicitly: "Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, / the world offers itself to your imagination" (ibid). The mention of "whoever you are" makes the "you" of the poem so much more universal. The rules apply to all. The natural world offers refuge "no matter how lonely" a person gets as it "calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting - /

over and over announcing your place / in the family of things" (ibid). The loneliness and despair of my closeted 21-year-old self, sitting in the library in Ashland, took a giant breath when I heard the closing lines of this iconic poem. It was a homecoming, a renewal, a place of *reconnection* with the world, after the *disconnection* of trauma and shame. In the universe of this poem, and in the poetic imagination of Oliver and her speaker, I finally belonged.

The Journey

Mary Oliver's poem *The Journey* is arguably one of her most famous, her most iconic. Occurring a few poems after *Wild Geese* in *Dream Work*, the poem embodies the mythological journey away from home, and toward new one. What was learned in *Wild Geese* about not needing to "good", and allowing our body to "love what it loves" has led to the embarking on a new journey. The poems work in tandem with each other.

The first line, "One day you finally knew" is the beginning of the speaker's and the reader's awakening. Here, as in many of Oliver's poems, the speaker and listener join together in a pact of understanding. The poem's trick, in a way, is to blur the line between the speaker and the audience, as the speaker of the poem knows what the reader, the "you" of the poem is going through, having gone through it herself. Again, this unification of speaker and audience gives even more credence to the poem's mythological status. What the speaker acknowledges is that once this new knowledge is gained, there is a new beginning, a knowing of "what you had to do" and thus "began". Here, there is a profound before and after, a death of some kind ushering in

new life. In his book *Ten Poems to Change Your Life*, Roger Housden analyzes this concept of death and life in the poem:

> The pain of loss, grief, and despair is not essential for transformation. It is possible to step into a new life in more graceful ways. But for most of us, and certainly for me, pain and loss usually prepare the way. The moment itself may seem effortless, but a lifetime of suffering may have preceded it. A new life requires a death of some kind; otherwise it is nothing new…What we die to is an outworn way of being in the world. We experience ourselves differently. (14)

Immediately, once the decision has been made to begin, there is external resistance to this internal voice. The second movement of the poem is the description of these external voices: "though the voices around you / kept shouting / their bad advice - / though the whole house / began to tremble / and you felt the old tug / at your ankles. / 'Mend my life!' / each voice cried" (38). Interestingly, this section begins with the word "though", suggesting that the journey has already begun, despite these voices. The "you" of the poem "didn't stop" but "knew what [she] had to do". This stage of impediments that threaten the speaker's/reader's journey continues in the next few lines, again with the repetition of the word "though" suggesting, once again, that the journey goes on despite the external voices of stasis: "though the wind pried / with its stiff fingers / at the very foundations - / though their melancholy / was terrible" (ibid). Here, Oliver acknowledges a side of nature that can also disturb the journey, but it is nature personified as human, with its "stiff fingers". Interestingly, this human-like nature is the most threatening to the new passage. Housden comments on the need for the internal voice within the poem to make its own decisions:

> How many of us keep on walking, how many of us stay true to what we know our lives are crying out for, when those close to us implore us to stay behind and look to their needs? So much of your life can be spent in anxiety and worry over others, especially if you are a woman…Yet to walk on, as the person in the poem does, is to finally realize that you cannot shoulder another person's work for

> them. This life is a vale of soul making, Keats said; and each one of us must take the charge of our lives upon ourselves. (16)

As the poem ends this section of the potential cessation of the journey, the setting turns to night-time, darkness, and a road "full of fallen / branches and stones" (*Dream Work* 38).

However, this seemingly challenging darkness provides a certain kind of clarity for the path forward as "little by little, / as you left their voices behind, the stars began to burn through the sheets of clouds" (ibid). This new clarity provided by a much more benevolent nature, allows the reader to hear her own voice apart from the previous ones calling to "mend" their lives. This new voice is the internal one, the soul, the true self which the speaker/reader "slowly / recognized as your own, / that kept you company / as you strode deeper / into the world, " (ibid). The speaker's potential loneliness on this solitary journey ceases once she realizes that her soul can keep her company. Housden writes:

> However you understand it within the context of your own life, Mary Oliver's "The Journey" speaks to the birth of a new self, one not conditioned by the past. This is the self who slips through the cracks of the ordinary mind when the sentry is looking the other way. If there is one word that can describe its voice, it is the word *authentic*. It will carry your own true taste, free of the flavor of anyone else ...You might even say this new identity is self-born, an immaculate conception of the spirit in you that is on an altogether different frequency and level to the life you have lived so far. (19).

Therefore, the speaker/reader has an inner peace unmoved by the external chaos from earlier in the poem.

Finally, the poem ends with the repetition of the word "determined" (*Dream Work* 39). The "you" of the poem continues on the journey, which does not seem to have an end. And what has been the result of this process, this passage through the night under the clarity of the stars, is a life rescued and saved as the "you" is now "determined to do / the only thing you could do - / determined to save / the only life you could save"

(ibid). Harkening back to one of Flannery O'Connor's titles of one of her stories, the speaker realizes that the life she saves may be her own.

American Primitive

Crossing the Swamp

Mary Oliver's collection *American Primitive* won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1984. Within this collection, her poem *Crossing the Swamp*, is one that celebrates this rescue *by* the natural world, combining aspects of all of the previous poems analyzed so far. The physicality of the poem itself is crucial as lines stagger back and forth in a zig zag, conveying the sense of a crossing, a journey, a pilgrimage. It is not broken up into stanzas, but is one long series of movements back and forth.

The speaker begins noting "Here is the endless / wet thick / cosmos, the center / of everything - the nugget of dense sap, branching / vines, the dark burred / faintly belching / bogs" (58). We have entered into something sublime with the use of the word "cosmos", but this sublime is not some majestic mountain scape, but a "nugget" of "bogs". The repeated "b" sounds at the outset of the poem suggest initial impediments, stoppings and startings.

In the fourteenth line, the speaker introduces herself and enters not just the swamp, but the poem itself: "My bones / knock together at the pale / joints, trying / for foothold, fingerhold, / mindhold over / such slick crossings" (ibid). The knocking of bones provides a morbid tone here, while the repetition of "foothold, fingerhold, mindhold" conveys sheer exhaustion, from the body all the way to the mind. There is, finally, in this description of the swamp, a sinking "silently / into the black, slack /

earthsoup" (ibid). In these lines, there is a submersion *into* the swamp itself. Once a total immersion in this natural environment occurs, the speaker feels "not wet so much as / painted and glittered / with the fat grassy / mires, the rich / and succulent marrows/ of earth" (ibid). Here is the shift in the poem, the immersion into nature. While others may see the swamp as something ugly, an entity to be avoided, Oliver's speaker enters into this different aesthetic, and becomes "painted and glittered". The transformation has begun.

The final movement of the poem occurs with a metaphor of the speaker being " a poor / dry stick given / one more chance by the whims / of swamp water" (59). It is not in spite of the swamp that the speaker flourishes, as is often misinterpreted, but *because* the mires and succulent marrows of earth. The poem ends with a return to the sublime, this time not noting the "cosmos", although the spirit is still there: "a bough / that still, after all these years, / could take root, / sprout, branch out, bud - / make of its life a breathing / palace of leaves" (ibid). The stuttered "b"s that occurred early in the poem have not gone away, but they are now "branching" and budding, along with the swift "s" of sprouting. In this way, the language of the poem does not negate the importance of the initial struggle, but combines it with the transformative experience of the crossing. The swamp, *all of it*, has allowed the speaker to breath, to transform into a "palace of leaves", a living monument and testimony of the earth's ability to restore and renew even a "poor dry stick" (58).

Conclusion

Mary Oliver carries Wordsworth's torch into the 20th and 21st centuries. She embodies the spirit of Walt Whitman. She is one of the most popular American poets for her accessibility, her use of language that does not condescend, but welcomes the reader into a poetic experience that merges speaker, subject, and reader. In this way, her poetry becomes mystical, spiritual. Many, including myself, have credited her poetry for saving their lives. From *Wild Geese* to *The Journey*, her poems become templates for how to live.

However, her poetry is often misunderstood by failing to understand that so much of it stems from her experience of early childhood trauma. While Oliver does not bring this experience of trauma up often, it is the subtle undertone of so much of her writing about survival. Her journey to Provincetown after this traumatic childhood helped her heal and recover. Her "praise" poetry is of the earth, first and foremost. Coastal space is her temple. She is the most prominent ecopoet of her generation. By placing the ecocritical lens as primary in understanding Oliver's body of work, we are also allowed for the intersectionality of trauma to be included in our analysis. When doing so, Oliver's poetry provides healing in an age of trauma. This healing comes from a poet's immersion in her landscape. What she creates out of this immersion is a language that *speaks earth*, and the voice that arises is one that offers renewal for those surviving in the aftermath of trauma.

CHAPTER FIVE

MARK DOTY

> Here, at Land's End, in the superb setting of this landscape, our gems are the rich possibilities of human love, human pleasures, the splendid diversity and sameness of our longings. It is a place worthy of pilgrimage, where the elements arrange, as they conjoin, small tableaux of miracle and reversal. (*Heaven's Coast* 184)

> And if one wave breaking says
> *You're dying*, then the rhythm and shift of the whole
> says nothing about endings. (*My Alexandria* 76)

While Mary Oliver eventually found refuge on Provincetown's shores after early childhood trauma, Mark Doty began his sojourn in Provincetown during the HIV/AIDS epidemic of the latter part of the 20th century. Both poets found companionship in the landscape of Provincetown, the ability of its natural setting to comfort and testify in the midst of trauma. Another key difference in their poetry, beyond just time periods, is that while Oliver's sexuality was rarely the explicit topic of her poetry, Doty's body of work contains a direct correlation between the power of landscape and the experience of queer trauma and desire.

Mark Doty's poetry centers around survival after loss in a decaying, yet beautiful world. Auden mentioned that "mad Ireland hurt" Yeats into poetry. For Doty, the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the eventual death of his partner Wally are central in understanding what moves Doty to write much of his work. Recipient of the prestigious T.S. Eliot Award for poetry, Doty's presence in the canon is indelible. In addition to his poetry, Doty's prose has also won esteem. His memoir *Dog Years* takes into account his survival after Wally's death while his memoir *Firebird* is an account of his growing up

gay in a very heteronormative America of the 1950s and 1960s. Moreover, *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon* and *The Art of Description*, his prose on the nature and function of art, explore the pleasure inherent in the natural world around us. In the former, Doty remarks about the power of the still life painting, writing:

> Still life. The deep pun hidden in the term: life with death in it, life after the knowledge of death, is, after all, still life. The darkness behind these gathered things - a living darkness, almost breathing, almost a pressure against us - is the not-here, the not-now; what we see are the illuminated things right before us, our good company. The space looming behind them is the unknown of everything else-is, in other words, a visible form of death, and therefore what stands before that darkness stands close together. (70)

"Life with death in it" is a perfect description, precise and direct, of living in the aftermath of trauma.

Mark Doty and Provincetown

In *Heaven's Coast*, Doty's memoir about Wally's death and their time in Provincetown, he notes the importance of living at the end of Cape Cod, the community there, and the value of coastal space to his and Wally's trauma and love. After spending more than five years living in Vermont, teaching at nearby college while Wally worked on a display business, Doty and Wally spent some time renting a place in Provincetown. Bizarrely, Doty's ancestor was one of the pilgrims on the initial voyage over, seeming to draw him as if by ancestral force to this historic piece of land that Melville called "the great unbounded" (173). Spending time in Provincetown during the off-season is no small feat. The tourists leave and the locals remain. The warm weather recedes and the harshness of a New England late autumn and winter approaches. In many of his poems, Doty creates an angelic presence, a new and different version of a

traditional spirituality, much like Tony Kushner does in his play *Angels in America*. For Doty, one of his Provincetown angels first appears as a waiter at one of the two cafes open in the off season. He writes, "Our angelic waiter…welcomed us, a sort of everyday angel whose task it seemed to bless our meal, our visit, our days in a place that offered a sense of respite. After our dark northern days [in Vermont] of adjustment and strength-seeking, this town felt like a balm" (174). This brief respite renting in the wintery off-season soon became Mark's and Wally's permanent home. While returning from their visits to Provincetown, they would get back home to Vermont and long for the community and acceptance offered by Provincetown's inclusive community. Knowing that Wally's time on earth may be cut short at any time, the two had no time to waste. What they needed in the disconnection of the traumatic experience of living with HIV/AIDS was a community:

> We loved our house, I loved my garden, but these didn't seem enough; now we needed community, like-minded company. We needed both support and a place that would leave us alone to work on what was essential, which was trying to understand what was happening to us, feeling our way, finding how to live well. Who knew how much time we'd have left? Nothing, nothing erodes one's patience like that question. (175)

Once finally settling in Provincetown, a different sort of settlement than his ancestor, Edward Dotey, but a pilgrimage and settlement nonetheless, Doty finds refuge in the landscape of the outer cape. What is striking about Doty's experience in Provincetown is his acceptance of being on such a vulnerable strip of sand, exposed to storm and tide and wind. Looking West, one sees the mainland continent of America, while looking East, one can spot Portugal thousands and thousands of miles across a tumultuous Atlantic. The place itself is "a border town between worlds, and of them is perhaps our last wilderness, that sun-hammered, fog-claimed expanse which remains - at least from

here on the shore - unknowable, impenetrable" (181). It is hard not to see the metaphor of death and dying here as Doty speaks about "our last wilderness" while looking out to sea. Provincetown is a place both literally and figuratively at the ending. And what continues on? Who continues on? How? These are all questions Doty explores more in his poetry, a poetry that deals with both collapse and renewal, death and new life. Provincetown, the place, allowed Doty the freedom to relax into his queerness, and thereby be able to redefine a heteronormative culture's homophobic and demeaning terms and narratives for gay people, especially those dying of AIDS. Right around the time Doty and Wally settle down in Provincetown, politicians like North Caroline Senator Jesse Helms was saying the federal government should not waste its money on AIDS patients, saying it was their "deliberate, disgusting, revolting conduct" that caused their suffering (*New York Times,* 5 July 1996). There was also "Jerry Falwell's declaration that 'AIDS is God's judgment of a society that does not live by His rules'...and William F. Buckley's proposal that people with AIDS 'should be tattooed…on the buttocks to prevent the victimization of other homosexuals" (Landau 194). This is the cultural backdrop in which Doty writes his poetry. His poetry is in some ways an act of rebellion against these homophobic remarks and politicians as Doty *embraces* homoerotic pleasure, as well as pleasure as a more general concept as well. Doty sees, in the wreckage of the AIDS epidemic, while living in the landscape of Provincetown, a possibility for newness as well, a redefinition of terms, a reclaiming of one's gay identity as something to celebrate, instead of to hide from in shame. The open expanses of coastal space allow for this kind of freedom and liberation.

Toward the end of Doty's account of Provincetown as refuge in *Heaven's Coast*, he uses the metaphor of a houseboat swept up and upended during a fall Nor'easter. He will later write about this poetically in *To the Storm God* in his collection *Atlantis*. Here, he does so in prose. In the houseboat's new life, one of wreckage on a new stretch of the coast, a school of minnows were living in a newly created, though small, pool of seawater resting in the houseboat's new geometry:

> The storm cracked open and upended the containing house, and constructed a new house a hundred miles away, one that contained life more gracefully than the houseboat ever did. House became boat became wreckage, open to tides and fish; boat became the fishes' temporary house. So the world's order is constantly open to revision. The day's lesson was delivered with wit and surprise, as if the sea delighted in nothing more than contradiction and metaphor. This is the sort of pleasure which makes me want to live here forever. (183)

It is this unique combination of wreckage and pleasure, of destruction and beauty, that is at the heart of so many of Doty's poems. Doty's world, the order of it, was profoundly rearranged by the trauma of Wally's death as well as Doty's own experience as Wally's caretaker. The pleasure Doty finds in the ruined houseboat, come alive again to a pool of minnows, is a pleasure that acknowledges the miracle of life moving forward in the aftermath of destruction, the sheer awe and amazement of something seemingly as small as a minnow, living anew in this new landscape, one crafted out of loss. In her essay *"How to Live. What to Do.": The Poetics and Politics of AIDS*, Deborah Landau comments on Doty's ability to redefine out of the wreckage:

> Mark Doty transforms oppressive discourses about AIDS, enabling redemptive transport to a place beyond pain and misery…I am particularly interested in Mark Doty's ability to revise and transform dominant cultural narratives. Like [Timothy] Liu and [Thom] Gunn, Doty confronts loss, grief, and devastation; like [Paul] Monette, he exposes the homophobic social order that exacerbates the suffering of people with AIDS. But Doty's poems also provide an antidote to an

> oppressive world by offering readers access to a transformed space beyond brutality. (194)

Mark Doty's *My Alexandria*

Demolition

Doty refers to Provincetown as "a sort of border town…an Alexandria, in that here a mélange of cultures mingles, interlock, and remain separate at once" (181). The cover of his collection *My Alexandria* is bestowed with ruins, the destroyed facades of buildings with a crowd of men sitting at the foreground, beneath the decay. *Demolition*, fittingly, is the first poem in this collection.

Occurring in 11 tight stanzas, the poem's structure seems to belie the title. The poem itself, or poetry itself, provides a form that can *hold* such destruction. The poem begins with this contradiction of an "intact facade now almost black / in the rain" (1). "'The oldest concrete structure / in New England" is in the process of being torn down by a "backhoe claw". Immediately, Doty moves from what would seem to be a situation to mourn, the death of an ancient structure, to a "crowd beneath their massed umbrellas" cheering. Knowing what we know about Doty's aesthetic, it is safe to assume that he too celebrates the death of old structures, especially ones that close out the gay community and discriminate against those dying of AIDS. This collection occurs in the midst of this painful reality of old structures causing harm. No wonder we celebrate their demise. It appears as if the structure itself is tired, outdated, in need of collapse, as the "stairs seem to climb down themselves, / atomized plaster billowing: dust of 1970's / rooming house" (ibid).

The third stanza moves to describe the onlookers, naturally human in their love of watching "disasters that have nothing to do / with us" (ibid). The speaker goes on to remark that this is an ordinary occurrence, happening on a weekday with only those "out of work, unemployable or academics" waiting around to gaze. The fourth stanza pivots to the speaker's personal life with the inclusion of the first-person pronoun and a closer look inside the speaker's mental and spiritual state. "All summer, at loose ends, I've read biographies, / Wilde and Robert Lowell, and fallen asleep / over a fallen hero lurching down a Paris boulevard" (ibid). In some ways, the speaker alludes to himself falling apart, grasping at the literary to keep him afloat, to help him understand. Specifically, Doty continues to allude to Oscar Wilde, a man torn down by the homophobic structures of his time. In the eighth stanza, he writes, "'The unreadable,' Wilde said, 'is what occurs'" (2). Perhaps this suggests the limits of the speaker's literary dive, instead pushing him to face the metaphor of the collapsed buildings around him. This stanza ends with the youthful presence of skateboarders who will, very shortly, reclaim this ruined space as their own. Here is where Doty shifts to the aftermath of the destruction, which is one of playfulness and renewal amidst the ashes. Landau writes:

> As the "brutish metal" eradicates the building and its signs, the speaker muses on how "in a week, the kids will skateboard / in their lovely loops and spray / their indecipherable ideograms" (2-3). Nothing can remain blank, but the progression from an ordered, stable structure to this improvisational scribbling suggest hope for a new, fluid language that will shape this space less rigidly" (206)

The only structure that remains after the demolition is a "single standing wall / .... something Oscar / and [his lover] Boise might have posed before, for a photograph" (3). Above this single wall, is a limitless space of opportunity for renewal and redefining old

and harmful structures. The poem closes with an emphasis not on the old structure, but on the sky itself.

In the penultimate stanza of *Demolition*, the speaker acknowledges that "the gaps / where the windows opened once / into transient's rooms are pure sky", placing an emphasis on this new, strange beauty (3). One of the key lines in the poem occurs in the final stanza in which the speaker notes how this sky and its "openings" were something "someone meant us / to take for stone" (3). Instead, with the collapse of the structure, an openness occurs, a freedom. Landau comments, "By challenging the stability of structures that are meant to be take for stone, 'Demolition' sets the stage for later poems in the collection that discursively demolish constraining structures" (207). Again and again in his poetry, Doty makes us look anew at what at first might seem a meaningless destruction, only to have us see that something freer rises from the ashes.

Brilliance

Part of this reimagining involves the person dying of AIDS himself. Instead of focusing solely on death, Doty resurrects desire and its importance even, or maybe especially, at the end of life. His poem *Brilliance* is a shorter poem that depicts the relationship between the caretaker and the dying: "Maggie's taking care of a man / who's dying; he's attended to everything, said goodbye to his parents, / paid off his credit card. / She says *Why don't you just / run it up to the limit?*" (65). At first Maggie and the man have different approaches to his death. The man seems to want an orderly exit, clean, exact. He wants things tidied up in closure. In the fifth stanza he says "*I can't have anything*" to which Maggie replies, "*A bowl of goldfish?*" (65). Seemingly simple,

why not just this small gold of fleeting fish? By the sixth stanza, his initial refusal weakens with the inclusion of the word "maybe", as he describes potentialities: "They talk / about hot jewel tones, / gold lacquer, say maybe / they'll go pick some out" (65-66). Here, "'Brilliance' goes on to counter such reductive representations" of gay men dying of AIDS (Landau 216). Yes, to life, even at the end. Yes, to desire and the "gold lacquer" (65).

Halfway through the poem, the man leaves a note for Maggie: "*Yes to the goldfish*. / Meaning: let me go, if I have to, / in brilliance" (66). As the man leaves the world, he goes out focusing on this 'brilliance', "Fanning the veined translucence / of an opulent tail, / undulant in some uncapturable curve, / is he bronzy chrysanthemums, / copper leaf, hurried darting, / doubloons, icon-colored fins / troubling the water?" (67). The water that Doty, the poet, is troubling is the depiction of gay men as only the dead and dying. Landau writes: "The last lines of the poem present the fusion between the sick man and the scintillant fish as a subversive and defiant response to an oppressive world…Doty's poem is a soothing reverie that counters mainstream representation of people with AIDS and gestures towards a world beyond brutality and suffering" (216). The contrast between death and the brilliance of the goldfish is crucial in understanding Doty's notions of the poetic and the beautiful. The two go together, the contrast is deeply necessary. The one highlights the importance of the other. Both act in tandem, and both are part of this experience of living, and dying, on earth. Both are the experience of what Rambo, again, terms Middleness, this state of the both/and, the living and the dying.

Becoming a Meadow

In Doty's poem *Becoming a Meadow*, we see him move into the ecopoetic. Here, a bookstore, an ocean filled with gales and snow, and the waves themselves become the embodiment of what he sees as meadow. The poem begins with an anecdote of the speaker, presumably living with HIV/AIDS, and his partner at a bookstore in the off season of a coastal town which resembles that of Provincetown. The winter of this town, filled with "boarded storefronts (taffy, souvenirs)" has given way to a water tattooed with "the storm's million / fingerprints" (74). In the desolation of this February storm, a customer enters, ringing the doorway bell, signaling an entrance of something new. This is when the speaker hears the shopkeeper mention "*becoming a meadow"*, though the speaker is not sure of the context.

By the fourth stanza, the speaker has gone back in time: "Yesterday morning we walked a beach where the tide angled / and broke in beautiful loops, the waves' endless rows of bold cursive, / one atop the other" (ibid). The poem begins its oscillation between meadow and waves, separating them from the world of the binary, joining them together as one and the same. Yesterday's walk and this morning's book shop visit have reminded the speaker of "one barely articulated question" that keeps nagging at him (75). "*Becoming a meadow"* becomes "a sort of answer" for the speaker's question because "a meadow accepts itself as various, allows / some parts of itself to always be going away, / because whatever happens in that blown, / ragged field of grass and sway / *is* the meadow, and threading the frost / of its unlikely brilliance yesterday / we all were the meadow" (75). Therefore, the meadow contains the "various", both the living and the dying. *The meadow can hold trauma.*

Once acknowledged, the meadow allows the speaker to recognize his own trauma: "I am thinking of my terror / of decay, the little hell opening in every violated cell, the virus tearing / away- is it? - and we are still a part of the meadow" (ibid). The silence of the virus begs the question of what actually is happening within the speaker's body, to the speaker's body. However, regardless of what is unknowable, the meadow allows for a *place,* a middle space that can contain the multitudes of experience of the living-while-dying-while-living.

Moreover, this space is transformative as the book store *becomes a meadow* which *becomes* "one undulant, salt-swollen meadow of water, / one filling and emptying wave, spilling and pulling back" (76). Here, again, we have the ebb and flow of the middle space. The waves are "dissolving, faster, / only to swell again, like the baskets of bread / and fish in the story, the miracle baskets" (ibid). Alluding to the biblical miracle of the fishes in Jesus' story, here Doty uses the term "miracle", though in the meadow/sea, it is an earthly one, a natural replenishment. This space holds at least two seemingly contradictory truths: we are both living and dying at the same time. Poetry itself is the meadow that also can hold these contradictions: "And if one wave breaking says / *You're dying*, then the rhythm and shift of the whole / says nothing about endings" (ibid). Therefore, the waves themselves speak to a living-on after an ending, a survival and ongoingness in the aftermath of trauma. In this way, Doty's lines here echo Mary Oliver's in *Wild Geese*: "Meanwhile the world goes on"; the earth is a testimony to a natural renewal that can occur after what seems at first to be an ending. For both poets, the landscape of Provincetown helps provide them with this testimony and witness. Both poets speak out of this particular space.

Mark Doty's *Atlantis*

A Display of Mackerel

Nowhere does Mark Doty exhibit this centering on coastal space and middleness more than in his collection *Atlantis*. One of the first poems in the collection, *A Display of Mackerel*, does what Doty's aesthetic does best, it focuses on the art of description. Our focal point here is a group of mackerel. The first stanza alone introduces us to the contrast and complexity of where we're about to fix our gaze: "They lie in parallel rows, / on ice, head to tail, / each a foot of luminosity" (14). There is something morbid at the outset of this poem, a death event has occurred - these mackerel sit on ice, conveying the image of a body in a morgue. However, they also shine with "luminosity", containing both aspects of death *and* life. The next two stanzas do the same. "Black bands" contrast with the "radiant sections", and then "seams of lead" contrast with the mackerel's "iridescen[ce]" (ibid). As the poem moves into its middle section, the speaker and describer seem to favor the iridescence, the immediate death is too obvious: "think abalone, / the wildly rainbowed / mirror of a soapbubble sphere, / think sun on gasoline. / Splendor, and splendor, / and not a one in any way / distinguished from the other / - nothing about them of individuality" (ibid). Here, the poem hints at what provides this luminosity and iridescence, which is community in the midst of death.

The poem then shifts toward this contemplation of solidarity noting, as mentioned, that there is nothing in this display about the individual mackerel. Instead, "they're *all* exact expressions / of the one soul, / each a perfect fulfillment / of heaven's template, / mackerel essence" (ibid). The speaker then moves from the metaphor to the

audience, with a direct address, not unlike Mary Oliver's addressing the listener in so many of her poems. Both poets fuse speaker, subject, and listener, which is something characteristic about both their poetry and their emphasis on coastal space. The place itself seems to combine in unity all three entities into the "one soul" Doty speaks of in *A Display of Mackerel*. The poetic shift and pivot toward the listener is a welcome and inclusion in this in between coastal space that embodies both death *and* life. Doty writes, "Suppose we could iridesce, / like these, and lose ourselves / entirely in the universe / of shimmer - would you want / to be yourself only, / unduplicatable, doomed / to be lost?" (15). Here, we see Doty's defiant response to the death and dying of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the trauma that ensued. By joining in community, we shine and enter a "universe of shimmer". This does not negate the fact that the mackerel are lying on ice. The final description of these mackerel is one that notes their living quality even as they are dead: "Even now / they seem to be bolting / forward, heedless of stasis. / They don't care they're dead / and nearly frozen, / just as, presumably, / they didn't care that they were living: all, all for all" (ibid). As in so many of his poems, here Doty emphasis the trajectory of desire that includes both life and death, or the "all for all" that can embrace both. The poem ends, as so many do in *Atlantis*, with the emphasis on community: "How happy they seem, / even on ice, to be together, selfless, / which is the price of gleaming" (ibid). This death and dying need not occur alone. One is reminded here of the community of pilgrims who came together during the AIDS crisis in Provincetown, the Alice Foley's and the Jay Critchley's, who created a community in this coastal village that held both the living and the dying.

In the Community Garden

Doty continues this emphasis on the community surrounding the dying in his poem *In the Community Garden*. Here, the emphasis on each word in the title is necessary. Not *In the Garden*, as it would leave out the need for community. Not *In the Community*, as it would leave out the necessity of the natural world. Not *The Community Garden*, as it would leave out the need to be immersed in the grandeur of this field of late-summer sunflowers. The metaphor of dying is apparent at the outset: "It's almost over now, / late summer's accomplishment, / and I can stand face to face / with this music" (38). Once again, Doty combines the images of death with music. When one stands "face to face" with something, a confrontation of something difficult to acknowledge is occurring. Here, the difficulty is dying, but it is accompanied by music. In the second stanza, the speaker is "eye to seed-paved eye / with the sunflower's architecture:", once again fusing speaker and subject into one. One knows from experience that the "seed-paved eye" of the sunflower is its dark center, a metaphor for mortality at the center of things.

In the third stanza, the speaker once again begins the art of description, not a group of mackerel this time, but sunflowers: "such muscular leaves, / the thick stem's surge. / Though some are still / shiningly confident, / others can barely / hold their heads up; their great leaves wrap the stalks / like lowered shields" (ibid). Once again, the contrasting images of surging and sagging convey the duality of life and death. Doty personifies the sunflowers, again fusing subject and speaker. The simile of "lowered shields" suggests a battle about to be lost. In the context of Doty's poetry, one knows that often this battle is dying of HIV/AIDS. The sixth and seventh stanzas aim directly at the fact that the sunflower's "architecture" *contains* this duality of life and death: "Even

at their zenith, / you could see beneath the gold / the end they'd come to" (ibid). It was there all along. The heart of the sunflower, the center of its being, was always this darkness that alluded to mortality, while the outer flowers and leaves shone with the iridescence of the mackerels. Again, one hears the "all for all" from *A Display of Mackerel*.

Finally, the poem pivots again toward the silent listener, inviting her into the poem's experience. The speaker asks, quite bluntly, "So what's the use of elegy?" Here, Doty's poem is self-conscious in the sense that Doty's collection *Atlantis* rethinks the elegiac poem. Death, he is saying, is always part of life. Again, he asks, "Do you think they'd want / to bloom forever? / It's the trajectory they desire - believe me, they do / desire, you could say they are / one intent, finally, / to be this leaping / green, this bronze haze / bending down" (39). Importantly, this section of the poem focuses on "want" and "desire", key themes in Doty's body of work. The desire present in this community garden is one for *all* of life, its "trajectory". Like the mackerels before them, these sunflowers desire together, in community. There is nothing singular about any one of them. Instead, "they are a field / of lifting and bowing faces, / faces ringed in flames" (ibid). The flames themselves, the golden orange of the sunflower's leaves, suggest a finality as they, too, are connected to the original "seed-paved eye" of the flower.

Again, Doty's response to the death of his fellow gay men in Provincetown is not one of only noting the decay, the demolition, the ruins. Instead, his work also suggests a "skyrocket passage" with golds and bronzes, iridescent and gleaming. If Doty is "queering" the experience of death and dying, he is adding to it an appreciation for how it juxtaposes with life itself, and helps both "to shine so". In their essay *Queer(y)ing*

Nature, Mei Evans notes this ability of Doty's to redefine what was once defined as binary, life and death:

> What is "natural," he seems to ask repeatedly in [*Atlantis*], and what is "unnatural"? Who gets to say what belongs and what does not? Whose interests are served by such a contrived division, and what is the cost to all members of society when some are (mis)construed as "unnatural"? Doty challenges the reader to define what belongs to the Cape Cod setting, and to say what, if anything, is "out of place." (30).

As seen in *In the Community Garden*, nothing is out of place. Nothing here is unnatural. All for all. The trajectory of desire is all included in Doty's ecopoetic.

Conclusion

In her review of Mark Doty's *Atlantis*, Diann Shoaf writes, "among Doty's notable strengths is his ability to celebrate this realm of grief and loss as a place that nonetheless offers an array of 'gorgeous[ness]'" (203). Looking at Doty's body of work, one sees how he does this, or what informs his poetry in this way. His memoir *Heaven's Coast* places Provincetown as central to much of Doty's writing. His poetry embodies coastal space, the middleness of it, its ability to speak of both life and death as intertwined. In this way, his poetry *speaks earth*, like Oliver's.

However, Doty's work focuses specifically on the crisis of HIV/AIDS in his life, his partner Wally's life, as well as in the community of Provincetown. Susan Carlisle writes:

> How does one write lyric poems about the Holocaust of AIDS? The relentless dying of many friends, one's life partner? Mark Doty…turns to the intricacies of his landscape- Provincetown, Massachusetts - to seek the tropes for what is happening to his lover and to his own sense of the world. Provincetown is, quite literally, at the outermost reach of the land - a town built on a fragile sandbar. As the poet Mary Oliver has also shown us, the luminous, shifting natural world of this town is a rich place to study both beauty and impermanence. (206)

In listening to the landscape of Provincetown, Doty helps redefine the gay experience as one that is not only about death. He allows for the glimmer and iridescence of coastal space to also have voice in this experience of trauma. Like Oliver's blurring of speaker, subject, and listener, Doty's landscapes often blur, as seen in *Becoming a Meadow*, in which the bookstore, the meadow, and the sea, fuse into one being of undulation, a massive ebbing and flowing that can contain various experiences in one. His poetry reclaims the landscape as a natural place for gay men who were often deemed *unnatural* by society. In this way, Doty's poetry embodies the spirit of both the town of Provincetown and its landscape as his poetry itself becomes a dwelling place of belonging for those in the midst of trauma.

CONCLUSION

As mentioned in the Introduction, Mary Oliver saved my life. This project has been an exploration into how she did that. First and foremost, there is an emphasis on the natural world. Indeed, Oliver acknowledges that the woods around her traumatic childhood in Ohio, as well as the shores of Provincetown later in life, helped save *her* life. Continuing the tradition of the Romantic poets of the 19th century, Oliver praises the natural environment around her. While the Romantics were writing in response to industrialization, Oliver is writing in the midst of a global climate crisis. Concurrent with her body of work is the emergence of ecocriticism, a new field of literary theory, that places the natural world as the primary lens for looking at texts. In this way, Oliver's poetry embodies the ecopoetic. The ecopoetic is poetry that focuses on the natural world, but it also claims that the poem itself can become a dwelling place, a home, a refuge. So much of Oliver's body of work is a reminder that nature is our true home. Additionally, one helpful aspect of ecocriticism is its ability to allow for intersections, acknowledging the inherent ecosystem involved between fields of study.

In this way, by starting with the natural world as a focus, one can also get to the subtle, yet crucial, aspect of Oliver's work, which involves personal trauma. Oliver's account echoes with some of the larger traumatic events of the 20th and 21st centuries. If the crisis of the earth is one of the major concerns of our time, so is our age of trauma, as well as our ability to testify and witness to that trauma in ways that were not possible earlier in history.

A traumatic experience involves a death event that occurs in the midst of life; however, despite the death event, life continues on in some way. Part of the question of trauma in our time is how to survive in the aftermath. After taking a look at the history of trauma studies, mainly through Judith Herman's groundbreaking work *Trauma and Recovery*, we are able to get a context for approaching one of the main effects of a traumatic experience- disconnection from one's self, as well as from the surrounding world. Part of the reconnection process after a trauma involves the importance of testifying to the account, as well as having some witness, or listen, to that testimony. Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel claimed that the main thrust of literature of the 20th century is this literary testimony and witness.

Additionally, part of understanding the traumatic experience, as well as its aftermath, is having a language that honors this living amidst a death. Theologian Shelly Rambo's work on what she refers to as The Middle Day is crucial here. Though using theological language in her own work, the transition of this language to the literary is beneficial for literary trauma studies. Specifically, Rambo's theory of "middleness" posits that those living after a trauma are living not in either a state of living *or* dying, but living *and* dying. This is a state of being in between, in the midst of an ebb and flow.

It is no wonder, then, why poets like Mary Oliver and Mark Doty, after or during a traumatic event, found such refuge in a landscape that embodies this middleness, especially in its coastal space. Looking at the history of this specific place, Provincetown, Massachusetts, one sees a tradition of welcoming outcasts and outsiders on this "spiral spit of sand" at the end of Cape Cod. During the HIV/AIDS epidemic, it

became especially crucial for gay men dying of the disease, or living with a partner who was suffering, to come to Provincetown and its village of volunteers.

Mark Doty and his partner, Wally, did just that. After living in nearby Vermont for about five years, they decided to settle down in Provincetown. There, Doty writes some of his most beautiful work, focusing on the landscape of Provincetown. Whether it is a group of "dead" mackerel lying on ice, or a field of "dying" sunflowers, Doty has an ability to negate the totality of a death event, and acknowledge that something else exists in this middle state in addition to decay. His poems, intricate in description and detail, cherish the iridescence and shimmering of his coastal palette. Yes, death, but also life. So much of it. In this way, Doty's poetry also rebukes stereotypical notions about gay men during the HIV/AIDS crisis as weak and deserving of death. Doty transforms grief by placing it in the middle space of Provincetown's shores. When doing so, the experience is both painful and exquisite.

Therefore, while Mary Oliver helped save my closeted self at the age of 21, this journey into how she accomplished that has given me sustenance for living on in my own aftermaths. Death events will continue to occur – the loss of a stepfather, the betrayal of a friend, wars in the Middle East and Ukraine. However, by listening to both the earth and the poetry created out of its middle spaces, I find ways of living on. The town of Provincetown and its coastal spaces are a refuge for the ecopoet in an age of trauma, testifying to the receding ebb of the tide and this experience of loss, while also acknowledging a returning flow, somehow, a rhythm that acknowledges that meanwhile, the world goes on.

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