Finding Strength in the Natural World in Beth Brant's "Swimming Upstream" and Tomás Vallejos' "Piñons"

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Abstract:

Beth Brant's "Swimming Upstream," tells the story of a Native American woman, Anna May, who loses custody of her son due to her lesbian lifestyle and history with alcoholism. When her son drowns on a fishing trip with her ex-husband, Anna May finds herself struggling with alcoholic temptation. While on the brink of relapse, she watches an injured salmon fighting to swim upstream and leap over a dam. In doing so, she is symbolically reminded of her own strength. Similarly, Tomás Vallejos' "Piñons" tells the story of a young man grappling with his own sexuality amid his father's toxic masculinity. Feeling isolated and ostracized by his community and family, he, too, ventures into nature for solace and is reminded of his own strength through the symbolism of the piñon tree. Both Anna May and the unnamed narrator of Piñons find that while society seeks to stifle and silence their differences, in nature, differences are celebrated as miracles. These two stories of social outsiders emphasize the rejuvenating power of the natural world and suggest that reconnecting to nature gives strength of voice and identity to those who would otherwise be silenced by the patriarchal rules of society.

Keywords: naturalism, toxic masculinity, miracles, social outsiders, ecofeminism

Naturalism, a major influence on the literature produced during the 19th century, is still alive and well in two contemporary American short stories written by two very different American writers. In Beth Brant's "Swimming Upstream," a Native American woman, lesbian, and recovering alcoholic seeks solace in nature after the loss of her son. While on the brink of relapse, she watches an injured salmon fighting to swim upstream and leap over a dam. In doing so, she is symbolically reminded of her own strength. Similarly, Tomás Vallejos' "Piñons" tells the story of a young man grappling with his own sexuality amid his father's toxic masculinity. He, too, ventures into nature for solace and is reminded of his own strength through the symbolism of the piñon tree. These two stories of social outsiders emphasize the rejuvenating power of the natural world and suggest that reconnecting to nature gives strength of voice and identity to those who would otherwise be silenced by the patriarchal rules of society.

Both stories fall within the genre of literary naturalism due to the connection they make

between nature and human beings struggling with external conflict. Gregory Phipps, in "American Literary Naturalism and Its Descendants" explains literary naturalism through definitions provided by other authors. He begins his article by referencing Jennifer Fleissner's remarks that "naturalist texts often feature depictions of a 'beleaguered soul struggling against external forces'" (qtd. in Phipps vii). Later in his article he also references Anita Duneer and her observation that "both postcolonial and naturalistic literature explore the 'plight of characters trying to maintain humanity and dignity while subjected to forces beyond their control'" (qtd. in Phipps xi). The genre of literary naturalism spans a vast amount of time, and thus, the external forces that the characters fight against change with the progression of the genre. Some of the earliest naturalist stories originated with the Puritans who came to America. Steven Frye, in "Naturalism and the Literature of the American West" explains that for the Puritans, the New World "was 'wilderness' in the deepest and most profound sense. It was a dark place where Satan's legions at first held sway, where they would be challenged and made new in a crucible that might purify them and make them prepared to set an example" (3). For the Puritans, the external force they were struggling against was the land itself, and "in fine proto-naturalist fashion it would be a harsh place of seeming indifference and suffering" (Frye 3). As the colonization of America expanded, American literature depicted The West as "a space of imagination that has been associated with progress and linked to hope and a sense that with time and intrepid effort the human species can transcend the material contingencies of scarcity and want" (Frye 1). The external forces characters fought against became not only battles with nature, but also battles with industrialism and other cultures.

While at first glance it doesn't seem that "Swimming Upstream" and "Piñons" fit this genre, as the characters are not struggling to survive against nature or machinery, the central conflict of each story is their struggle to survive against external forces. In the case of the narrator in "Piñons," he is up against the machismo beliefs of both his father and his Mexican American community. In "Swimming Upstream," Anna May is struggling against the stereotypes white society has placed on her while fighting her own internal struggle against alcoholism and grief. In these two stories, the external forces found within literary naturalism evolve into man vs. society conflicts. Gregory Phipps explains that

> Naturalism has always dealt with issues pertaining to race, class gender, and sexuality, but these categories—and their interactions—continue to acquire diverse meanings which are, in many cases, contrary to the meanings they carried in late nineteenth-century mainstream American society. (viii)

As the genre of naturalism has evolved, it has expanded to embrace stories about the lives of people like the unnamed narrator in "Piñons" and Anna May, characters who are often considered "other" by entrenched groups. By aligning themselves with nature and seeing their pain reflected in nature, these characters begin to heal despite the differences that mark them as other.

These concerns about naturalism are at the heart of Beth Brant's "Swimming Upstream" and Tomás Vallejos' "Piñons." The judgments and decisions of the white man's society are stacked against Anna May not only because she is Native American, but because of her past issues with alcoholism

and her current lesbian lifestyle. Her failure seems, at the beginning, inevitable. How could anyone survive when so much is against them? Karen Lee Osborne's "'Swimming Upstream': Recovering the Lesbian in Native American Literature" argues that "it is a measure of Anna May's determination that she has managed to stay sober and to resist a victim identity" (200). While the narrator of "Piñons" arguably does not have as many layers of obstacles in his way as Anna May does, he is still fighting against the large force of machismo belief that has been ingrained in his Mexican American culture. To make it worse, he is not only at odds with his community but with his own family. In both these situations, the characters find themselves isolated from society and loved ones by their "otherness." This burden of "otherness" is the driving force that eventually leads each character to separate themselves from their communities. Richard Lehan, in "Literary Naturalism and Its Transformation," states that in literary naturalism, "the human burden involves adapting to the force rather than being destroyed by it" (229). If this is true, Anna May and the unnamed narrator in "Piñons" must decide to adapt to and accept their otherness or be destroyed by it.

From an early age, the narrator of "Piñons" finds himself the brunt of cruel jokes. His own brother mocks the way he walks. The narrator recalls, "I can still see all the kids laughing as he sashayed down the sidewalk, holding his arms tight against his sides, flipping his hands back and forth and wiggling his butt from side to side" (Vallejos 51). He finds no comfort from his parents when faced with this mockery, instead being told he's too sensitive. As a result, he comes to realize that he is different from everyone else around him without fully understanding why. Steven Frye mentions the idea of "associationism" which is "a notion of identity formation in which human beings are conditioned and defined by the environment in which they live and are nurtured" (4). Frye goes on to provide examples of various regions in the United States and the personality traits associated with those regions. For example, he states, "Those on the mercantile coasts are energetic as well as highly industrious and full of vivacity" (4). In the case of our unnamed narrator, he receives no nurturing in the environment in which he lives. He repeatedly refers to his community as "brutes" and says that the men act "like a bunch of pigs" (Vallejos 52). What seems to anger him the most is how the adult men attempt to condition the younger boys to act like the "brutes" mentioned by the narrator by encouraging them to fight each other in a boxing match. In a moment of bitter reflection, the narrator states, "and to top it all off, they made bets on who would win, as if Eddie and Abe were dogs or fighting cocks" (52). In this moment, the comparison of his siblings to animals used for human entertainment draws parallels between the treatment of children and the treatment of the natural world. In both cases, there is an unnatural treatment of the innocent as well as man's attempt to dominate and conquer his surroundings—both common themes seen in literary naturalism. The narrator is called names for not participating in these boxing matches, but rather than succumb to this pressure, and in turn lose his true identity, he separates himself from their actions and ventures into nature.

Anna May, in Beth Brant's "Swimming Upstream," is also at odds with her surroundings. In Karen Lee Osborne's article, she explains that by the time the story begins, "Anna May's self-esteem

has already been damaged. She has felt the sting of racism for being an Indian and further disapprobation because of being a mixed breed, a recovering alcoholic, and a lesbian, not necessarily in that order" (200). She is doubly marginalized as "other" in her society not only because of her actions but because of her cultural background. She is not truly white, like the white Western society wants her to be, nor is she fully Native American in the eyes of her indigenous culture. As a result, she is displaced in both of her potential communities amid her grief. These cultural forces with which she is at odds are not a foreign subject in literary naturalism. Steven Frye, in his article, explains that "the idea that other cultures contemporaneously occupied the West was foreign to a nineteenth-century mind," and as a result, the conquering hordes felt that "the Native Americans were a people to be conquered, civilized, Christianized, and brought into a divinely ordained understanding of the ideal society" (4). This nineteenth-century belief about Native Americans is still evident in "Swimming Upstream." Despite her best efforts, Anna May is seen by the courts of white patriarchal society as "unfit" to have custody of her child "because she lived with a woman, because a woman, Catherine, slept beside her, because she had a history of alcoholism" (Brant 23). An argument could be made that she was denied custody because she was a lesbian; however, the prejudice against her seems to be more deeply rooted in her cultural background. Beth Brant does not make Anna May's lesbianism the central focus of the story. It is stated as fact, as one aspect of her person. Instead, the focus becomes her battle to remain sober in the face of her overwhelming grief.

In Karen Lee Osborne's article, she discusses the belief that "postmodern approaches to Native American literature are still based on Western models and/or assumptions about vaguely understood, overgeneralized 'Indian' modes" (192). As a result, literature often depicts Native Americans in stereotypical ways. For example, Native American characters are romanticized as the "all good, all natural, all spiritual" victims of white society, destined to become suicidal alcoholics (192). She goes on to say that this romantic view of Native Americans as constant victims "can be as dangerous as racism" (192). At the beginning of "Swimming Upstream," it seems that Anna May is destined to fall into the trap of this stereotypical Native American depiction. Even though she has been sober since before her son was born, the judge denies custody because of her history with alcohol, which seems to support the general stereotype that Native Americans are, and always will be, alcoholics. As Osborne explains, "If the Indian were not drunk, what then would he or she do?" (197). In the judge's eyes, because she is Native American, she is destined to fall prey to alcoholism again. When she loses her son a second time to death, Anna May's grief consumes her and becomes the ultimate barrier between her and the rest of her community. Now, not only is she excluded because she is a lesbian, Native American, and recovering alcoholic, but because no one else can understand how it feels for a mother to lose a child. It is this loss that isolates her from the last person to whom she is connected, her partner Catherine, because "Catherine didn't know what it was to feel the baby inside her, to feel him pushing his way out of her, to feel his mouth on her breast, to feel the sharp pain in her womb every time his name was mentioned" (Brant 27). Thus, her feelings of "otherness" are heightened because of her grief. This grief becomes so great that she buys a bottle of wine and drives out to Sauble

Falls. At several moments, descriptions foreshadow how close she is to suicide. For one thing, she blames herself for her son's death, thinking to herself, "she should have placated Tony, she should have lived alone, she should have pretended to be straight, she should have never become an alcoholic, she should have never loved, she should have never been born" (27). As Karen Lee Osborne so beautifully puts it, "these are the messages she has received from the world, and in her grief, they begin to insinuate themselves into her psyche [...] she has forgotten her own strength and value" (201). The final message, that she should never have been born, alludes to her desire to end her life and how close she is to succumbing to the victim stereotype. Once she arrives at the falls, her instability is further alluded to through the sign cautioning explorers, "WATCH YOUR STEP—ROCKS ARE SLIPPERY" (Brant 28). The falls are described as "narrow, spilling out on various layers of rock" (28). As she describes the dead fish on the rocks below laying "eyes glazed, sides open and bleeding" (28), readers can imagine her body sprawled out in the same way should she decide to jump.

What makes Anna May's story so beautiful, however, is how Beth Brant prevents her from falling into the stereotype of the suicidal, alcoholic Native American. Osborne explains that "Beth Brant, a Bay of Quinte Mohawk, is one of the few writers who has not only imagined the sociopolitical factors of Indian alcoholism, but also has focused on Indian political agency and what Indians do when they do *not* drink" (197). By not succumbing to the temptation to drink the bottle of wine, Anna May breaks free from this stereotypical depiction of Native Americans, showcasing the beautiful power of reconnecting to nature. Gregory Phipps explains that "if naturalistic literature can be 'pessimistic' and 'deterministic' in its focus, it can also be dialectical, showcasing how adherence to a single axis of thinking breeds contradictions that illuminate such axes in unexpected ways" (ix). In both stories, the main characters contradict the "single axis of thinking" that they are up against. In "Piñons," the unnamed narrator contradicts the belief that all men must be aggressive, coarse, brutes and instead proves to be thoughtful and sensitive. In "Swimming Upstream," Anna May proves that not all Native Americans are destined to be victims to white patriarchal society, nor victims of their own internal demons.

These epiphanies, however, only come to each character once they are removed from society and amid nature, even though they both have one person of comfort rooting for them. For the narrator in "Piñons," his safe person is Don Mateo, and the only character, besides the narrator, to allude to the powerful connection between humans and nature. Don Mateo tells him that piñons "'are the soul of the people who live here on these mountain slopes. They are rough and enduring, but sweet and delicate at the same time'" (Vallejos 52). It's not difficult to see the connection Mateo is making to the narrator at this moment. Like the piñons, the narrator has a sweet and delicate temperament, and it is this gentle behavior that causes him to be ridiculed by his community. Mateo powerfully reminds him, however, that he is also strong and can endure their ridicule. He symbolically emphasizes how special the narrator is through his description of the piñons, saying, "'they are rare. Always remember, son, those things that are most unusual in this world are miracles. They are special gifts to use. We shouldn't abuse them'" (52). In this moment, Mateo encourages the narrator to see how rare and miraculous his own differences make him because, if he can accept his differences, he

will find strength in embracing his identity. In "Swimming Upstream," Anna May's safe person is her partner, Catherine. Through Catherine's character, it is made clear that Anna May needs to forgive. Amid Anna May's grief, Catherine begs her to forgive Tony for the death of her son. She pleads with her, "'It could have happened when he was with us... Forgive him, then you can forgive yourself'" (Brant 27). In this moment, Catherine tries to remind her that death, and fatal accidents, are part of existence. Along with not blaming Tony for the accident, she begs Anna May to stop blaming herself for not being the person society wanted her to be. Anna May cannot fully accept these things, however, until she watches the salmon attempting to swim upstream. When she sees the dead salmon on the rocks, it is a reminder that unexpected death is everywhere. The salmon, whom Anna May names Torn Fin, continues to swim upstream despite his injuries and becomes her symbolic spirit animal. Like him, she has been battered and bruised by the current of society telling her to swim the other way, to go with the flow of social expectations and to conform to the direction she is supposed to take in life. When Torn Fin successfully makes it over the dam to safety, Anna May is reminded of her own strength of identity. Through this symbolic connection, Brant "suggests that those oppressed by racism and homophobia must fight to preserve their identities" (Osborne 201). In this moment, Anna May finally finds comfort in knowing that she, too, can continue to battle social prejudice and her own grief and come out alive, though forever injured, on the other side.

In both "Piñons" and "Swimming Upstream," the main characters identify with an element of nature. This sense of connection between humans and nature is an aspect of literary naturalism that began to develop in the twentieth century. Rather than the theme of man's dominance over nature, a new type of story emerged in which "each earthly place would be a home, or community, to be shared with other living and nonliving things'" (qtd. in Nye 8). Vallejos and Brant, in their respective stories, draw attention to the powerful oneness humans could choose to have with nature. In both cases, the main characters find a home-like comfort and the sense of community they longed for once they are out in nature. David Nye refers to this type of story as a "recovery narrative" and explains, "essentially about remaking despoiled landscapes, this recovery narrative begins not with empty space waiting to be improved by new settlers, but with a place corrupted and degraded by human misuse" (20). While "Piñons" and "Swimming Upstream" don't specifically focus on natural places that have been misused by humans, the theme of misuse is present. In "Piñons," the narrator reflects on how aggressively his family treated the piñon trees during harvest season, recalling, "the grownups and my brothers and sisters shook the trees so hard it's a wonder they didn't destroy them all" (Vallejo 51). This abuse his family perpetrates on the trees is reminiscent of the abuse he faces. Just as they "force the piñons out" and "[twist] them out of shape" (51), they try to force out his effeminate qualities and twist his understanding of himself. Like the trees, it is a wonder he has not been destroyed by their abuse as he is consistently silenced by their comments and left questioning himself. Anna May in "Swimming Upstream" doesn't suffer such direct verbal abuse, but she too is emotionally abused. The patriarchal court system shames her for past mistakes and leads her to feel there is something innately wrong about her because she loves a woman. She is deemed unfit as a

mother simply for being who she is: a Native American and a lesbian. It is this emotional abuse that leads to her inability to forgive herself for her son's death. In the case of both characters, the abuse they receive from society is what leads them to seek solace in nature.

Steven Frye, while discussing the era of Wild West stories, explains that the myth of the Wild West "has a basis in reality, but alongside it was the same experiences of hardship and daily toil that had driven people from regions east to a territory that was harsh and unforgiving, more naturalistic and bound to the conventional struggle for survival" (7). While neither character exists in a Wild West story, they both find themselves driven out of the harsh and unforgiving societies in which they live. The exile of otherness that they internally feel leads them to observe the struggle for survival in the harsh and unforgiving natural world. In "Piñons," the narrator observes the piñon trees growing against the steep canyon walls. He describes that "the trees there are windswept, as if they've been beaten low through more lifetimes than you can imagine," and he adds that "they are frozen in that awkward position, like an animal fighting for its life, locked forever in a struggle against some brute force" (Vallejos 53). Through his observations, the narrator realizes that these trees are not beautiful, and they are not perfect. Like him, they are awkward and constantly battered by "brute force." And yet, he believes "there is something brave about them" (53). It is their bravery amidst their harsh and unforgiving environment that eventually leads him to find his own internal strength.

In "Swimming Upstream," the narrator observes similar bravery in nature through Torn Fin's struggle to swim upstream. Torn Fin is described as large, with a dark body, and a torn dorsal fin. As Anna May watches him jump into the air, she sees his "underbelly, pale yellow and bleeding from the battering against the rocks, the water" (Brant 28). This description of his injuries is reminiscent of the emotional injuries Anna May feels because of her son's death. As a mother who has lost a child, she feels as though a part of her has been torn away, leaving her battered and bleeding in grief. In her current state, she can't imagine being able to survive her pain, and yet she still finds herself going through the motions of life. David Nye states that "most if not all Native Americans tell stories that express a sense of primeval oneness with the places they inhabit" (9). However, at the start of Anna May's story, she is so far removed from nature that during her "drive through farmland, bright autumn leaves, the glimpse of blue lake. She saw none of these, only the gray highway stretching out before her" (Brant 22). This description implies that she is living on autopilot, moving forward only by a natural instinct. She has lost her oneness with nature, and, as a result, has lost her sense of self. By the end of the story, however, as she watches Torn Fin continue to battle his way upstream, she closes her eyes, "almost ashamed to be a spectator at this act of faith, this primal movement to get to the place of all beginning—only knowing he had to get there. He had to push his bleeding body forward, believing in his magic to get him there" (29). Through his natural determination to persevere upstream, Anna May is reminded of her oneness with nature and her own ability to persevere.

The innate relationship humans have with the natural world is incredibly fascinating and has even lent itself to be explored as a branch of feminism called Ecofeminism. This branch of feminism draws on the concept of gender to analyze the relationship between humans and nature. Linda Forbes

and Laura Sells, in "Reorganizing the Woman/Nature Connection" explain that "for ecofeminists, the oppression of women and the oppression of nature are intimately connected, and likewise, so is their liberation" (Forbes and Sells 20). They go on to explain the similarities between brutality of women and brutality of nature and give examples of how "animal battery accompanies many cases of domestic violence." They add that "women's menstrual patterns shift with the cattle industry's use of hormones to increase production, and women's daily use of cosmetics evokes the historical link between the beauty industry and animal testing" (20). While "Piñons" and "Swimming Upstream" have female and male protagonists, it is interesting to note that the primary reason the narrator of "Piñons" is abused by his community and family is because of his feminine qualities. He is sympathetic and maternal in his views towards nature. He is sensitive, delicate, and kind-hearted which are qualities all commonly associated with women. He doesn't fit his society's expectations for men, and therefore, this seems to make the men in his life feel they have a right to abuse him. In "Swimming Upstream," Beth Brant also "explores the tensions between the master narrative of patriarchy and the feminine" (Osborne 198). On top of being Native American and gay, Anna May is even more susceptible to the oppression of male society because she is a woman. In the eyes of the male-dominated legal system, she is a woman who fails to adhere to "the norms of the legal system, defined in the patriarchal language of the oppressor" (Osborne 198), and, therefore, she must be put in her place.

Thankfully, in the case of both characters, they can find the strength to fight against this oppression and "create a new language, a subversive action necessary to healing and survival" (Osborne 198) through reconnecting with nature. Richard Lehan explains that "primitive forces in both the Western and literary naturalism work in similar ways: as an agency of transformations. The primitive works in each form to transform the physically weak character into a physically strong and self-sufficient individual" (232). In the case of these two stories, rather than transforming from physically weak to physically strong, the characters transform from emotionally weak to emotionally strong. In "Piñons," prior to the narrator reconnecting with nature, he describes himself using the negative language of others. He refers to himself as "people like me" and says he is treated "like a misfit" (Vallejos 51). He goes on to say that he feels as though people look at him "like [he is] beneath contempt" (51). Later, while referring to his father, he says, "I'm supposed to feel like some kind of freak because he says I'm too delicate. He calls me a weakling" (53). What is interesting to note here is that these descriptions do not use the narrator's own words. In each case he describes how other people *want* him to feel about himself. This is similar to what is seen in "Swimming Upstream" when Anna May blames herself for her failed relationship with Tony and the loss of her son. When she thinks, "she should have pretended to be straight, she should have never become alcoholic" (Brant 27), Anna May allows the judgements of society to form her opinion of herself. Despite society's best attempts at silencing these characters for their otherness and lack of conformity, by the end of each story Anna May and the unnamed narrator find their own voice and strength of identity. The narrator in "Piñons" says the piñon trees remind him of "some fierce bird, like a hawk, with knotted talons clenching tightly in the soil" (Vallejos 53). With the obvious symbolic connection made between

the narrator and the trees throughout the story, this is a pivotal moment in which the narrator begins to identify his own internal strength. He is not weak and delicate as his father claims him to be, but instead, he is a "fierce bird." Through his reconnection to nature, he too has "talons clenched tightly in the soil." In his case, he is clutching on to his own identity and believing that not all men must be aggressive, abrasive brutes. In the final sentences of the story, he finally shares his own opinions stating, "just because people don't appreciate something doesn't mean it has no place in the world" (53). He is refusing to allow himself to be silenced by social expectations, proving that he has finally found his own voice while reconnecting with nature. He no longer will allow the opinions of others to dictate how he sees himself. Instead, he says, "let them think what they want. I'm going out tomorrow to pick piñons the way Don Mateo told me to. Nice and gentle. The only way I know how" (53). In this moment, he fully embraces who he is through describing the way he will pick piñons, nice and gentle. He only knows how to be himself. His observations of the gnarled piñons trees' continual strength as they cling to the canyon walls remind him that all of God's creatures are imperfect and miraculous gifts, and he is one of them.

For Anna May, her sense of strength is slower to come because of how dangerously depressed and lost she feels. For her, Torn Fin's journey of survival becomes her own journey through grief. Karen Lee Osborne explains that "in several Native American tribal stories, salmon figure prominently, and in many stories, it is also common for humans and animals to exchange shapes" (203). Earlier in the story, she is described as looking twenty years older than her age. It is stated that her eyes "were a faded and washed-out blue. Her mouth was wrinkled, the lips parched and chapped" (Brant 24). She seems to figuratively be a fish out of water, unable to breathe due to her grief. As she thinks about drinking the bottle of wine, the description emphasizes just how disconnected she is from nature. Humans, like fish, need water to survive, and yet she thinks a bottle of wine—a man-made creation—will save her from her pain and "kill the deadness" (24). When she finally removes herself from society and observes the salmon in nature, her mind can quiet enough to realize her life journey is like that of the salmon swimming upstream. Many would argue that Torn Fin represents her son Simon, and while this might be true, Karen Lee Osborne argues that he also "becomes her own symbolic journey of death and renewal" (203). Simon, quite literally, died in the water just as the salmon died who were unable to leap to safety. Torn Fin, however, survives, just as Anna May will survive despite all the odds stacked against her. Like Torn Fin, she is scarred by the social abuse she receives for being a mixed blood Native American, a lesbian, and an alcoholic. For her "to carry all of these labels is to be scarred many times by forces that impede a life's journey" (Osborne 203). Anna May has been led to believe that she is no longer worthy of life. She even convinced herself that Simon was the only reason she had stopped drinking. Without him, what reason does she have to keep trying? However, as she watches Torn Fin's "tremendous push for life, this sacrifice of the torn and bleeding body of the fish, cannot be interpreted as an excuse for complicity in her own death" (Osborne 204). Through this primal instinct in the natural world to survive, she is reminded that giving up is not an option. She does not have to fall prey to being a victim of patriarchal society or

of her own demons. As Anna May watches Torn Fin leap to safety, she sees an image of her son reflected in the water. Osborne explains that "the transformation Anna May imagines of the fish into her son is her own transformation, a transformation that involves a renegotiation of her own identity through shifting subject positions" (Osborne 205). At this moment, she stops playing the victim. She no longer views herself as an unworthy mother at blame for her son's death. She no longer believes that without him, there is no other path for her but alcoholism and suicide. With the image of her son in front of her, she is reminded that "her relationship with Simon continues even after his death and that Tony and she are connected through both the shared creation of life and their shared grief" (Osborne 205). Like Torn Fin whose torn dorsal fin makes it difficult to swim, she too is emotionally wounded in a way that will make her progress to keep living difficult. However, these wounds that they share are not fatal, and through Torn Fin's successful ability to leap to safety, she is reminded that emotional and physical wounds are part of life's journey. In the moment in which she calls out her son's name, Anna May has once again found her voice and the strength to reimagine her identity without him. She breaks free of the stereotype of the alcoholic, victimized Native American when she leaves the wine bottle untouched. The final sentence of the story, in which "she could still hear the water in her ears" (Brant 30) as she drives away, implies that she is no longer a fish out of water. She is now the scarred salmon who has leapt to safety. While the death of her son will leave her with scars that will never fully heal and will at times make it difficult for her to move forward, she now knows she *can* move forward and live with this grief.

It is clear upon reflection of each of these stories that where society seeks to silence and stifle differences, nature seeks to celebrate them. Tomás Vallejos' unnamed narrator of "Piñons" and Beth Brant's Anna May of "Swimming Upstream" could have suffered the terrible outcome of suicide had they listened to the negative opinions society placed on them. However, thankfully, by reconnecting to nature, they were instead reminded that "otherness" is in fact a miraculous gift that should be cherished and nurtured.

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