Literatures, Cultures, and the Environment
Ursula K. Heise, Stanford University

*Literatures, Cultures, and the Environment* focuses on new research in the Environmental Humanities, particularly work with a rhetorical or literary dimension. Books in this series seek to explore how ideas of nature and environmental concerns are expressed in different cultural contexts and at different historical moments. They investigate how cultural assumptions and practices as well as social structures and institutions shape conceptions of nature, the natural, species boundaries, uses of plants, animals and natural resources, the human body in its environmental dimensions, environmental health and illness, and relations between nature and technology. In turn, the series aims to make visible how concepts of nature and forms of environmentalist thought and representation arise from the confluence of a community’s ecological and social conditions with its cultural assumptions, perceptions, and institutions. Such assumptions and institutions help to make some environmental crises visible and conceal others, confer social and cultural significance on certain ecological changes and risk scenarios, and shape possible responses to them.

Across a wide range of historical moments and cultural communities, the verbal, visual, and performing arts have helped to give expression to such concerns, but cultural assumptions also underlie legal, medical, religious, technological, and media-based engagements with environmental issues. Books in this series will analyze how literatures and cultures of nature form and dissolve; how cultures map nature, literally and metaphorically; how cultures of nature rooted in particular places develop dimensions beyond that place (e.g., in the virtual realm); and what practical differences such literatures and cultures make for human uses of the environment and for historical reshapings of nature. The core of the series lies in literary and cultural studies, but it also embraces work that reaches out from that core to establish connections to related research in art history, anthropology, communication, history, philosophy, environmental psychology, media studies, and cultural geography.

A great deal of work in the Environmental Humanities to date has focused on the United States and Britain and on the last two centuries. *Literatures, Cultures, and the Environment* seeks to build on new research in these areas but also and in particular aims to make visible projects that address the relationship between culture and environmentalism from a comparative perspective, or that engage with regions, cultures, or historical moments beyond the modern period in Britain and the United States. The series also includes work that, reaching beyond national and majority cultures, focuses on emergent cultures, subcultures, and minority cultures in their engagements with environmental issues. In some cases, such work was originally written in a language other than English and subsequently translated for publication in
the series, so as to encourage multiple perspectives and intercultural dialogue on environmental issues and their representation.

_Ecocriticism and Shakespeare:
Reading Ecophobia_
by Simon C. Estok

_Ecofeminist Approaches to Early Modernity_
edited by Jennifer Munroe and Rebecca Laroche
Ecofeminist Approaches to Early Modernity

Edited by
Jennifer Munroe and Rebecca Laroche

Palgrave Macmillan
To Sylvia Bowerbank (1947–2005), in memoriam.
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The love in this collective labor has been enhanced in so many ways by the people taking part in it. The editors must, then, begin by thanking the other contributors, the 13 authors who thoroughly considered the vision we put forward, submitted their work promptly, revised when we asked, read each other’s work, and, as a result, have made editing a truly fulfilling experience. Many of the relationships at the heart of this collection started at the Shakespeare Association of America (SAA) seminar in Dallas, Texas (2008), on plants in early modern culture, so we are much indebted to those at the SAA, especially Lena Orlin, for their sponsorship of our seminar that made coming together possible. We would also like to thank Phyllis Rackin and Carole Levin for their help at a crucial juncture in gaining the volume a binding contract, and the editors at Palgrave for bringing the volume to a speedy delivery. Finally, we bow to Cy Knoblauch, who, upon meeting Rebecca more than seven years ago, suggested that she must get to know his new colleague at UNCC. The rest is history.
The book that follows is a collection that explores different ways we may see early modernity through ecofeminist lenses. As a result of this focus, however, its chapters refer repeatedly to one scholar who from the 1970s approached early modern texts with ecofeminist eyes: Sylvia Bowerbank. So we have been asked to begin this collection with a brief consideration of her life and work in order to acknowledge the legacy of her oeuvre as an affirmation of our commitment to future ecocritical inquiry.

There is a pun buried in Sylvia Bowerbank’s 2004 book, *Speaking for Nature*. Somewhere in the text, her first and last names appear without capitals in a sentence that is and is not about her. The words sylvan, bower, and bank recombine to form a significant point about women, nature, and place. That her first name is Latin for woods and her last name refers to an arbor or leafy nook by a river may have helped to determine the direction of Sylvia’s life work. Or perhaps her name became transformed into a fortuitous signature once she had discovered what was most important for her to say. Either way, Sylvia’s sense of self and the objectives of her writing were integrally tied to her relation to the land, to people, and to place.

Sylvia saw herself as a public intellectual whose role was to work on the one hand at the local level, building institutions in her university and supporting the rural farming community of Lynden, Ontario, and on the other hand at the international level, through her own scholarship and her generous support of other scholars. In her community of Lynden, she worked hard to bring to public attention the greening issues that were of vital importance to neighbors and local farmers. Reading the Acknowledgments in *Speaking for Nature*, we can see how she understood herself to be part of a living, working academic community. Always the intellectual, she never abandoned
her critical point of view. Yet even as a poststructuralist she could use, without irony, words like dazzling, gracious, or blessings. Although she was at the core a very private person, she understood the importance of connecting with others and of acknowledging the contributions of those she understood to have influenced her.

Sylvia was born July 10, 1947, in Hamilton, Ontario. She spent her early years at Baptiste Lake, near Bancroft, Ontario, where she lived in a log cabin amid a Métis community whose cultural traditions influenced her throughout her life. She was just as much at home in the North End of Hamilton, a working-class area of the city that borders on the harbor and is close to large factories and steel mills. Her essay in Alternatives on “Telling Stories” gets at the heart of her practice as a scholar and a citizen. The telling of stories about the places where we live is a political act, not just a pastime. Through these histories and the process of our narrating them—that is, the human connections we make through this telling—we not only approach a layered understanding of our place in the world, but we begin to build a communal and dialogical base and a method for moving forward.

This practice of working within a community of neighbors or scholars was a key element in the theorizing Sylvia achieved in her studies of culture, ecology, and politics. The sense of interacting within a group to promote specific goals was also evident in the institutional building she did within McMaster University and in her chosen scholarly fields. Cross-appointed to the Department of English and Cultural Studies and to the Arts and Science Program, she constantly devised new cross-disciplinary projects for these programs. As one of the founders of the Women’s Studies Program and of the Indigenous Studies Program, she developed curricula for each program and served as Co-Chair of the President’s Committee on Indigenous Issues.

Sylvia taught courses at both the undergraduate and the graduate level on “What is Place?” and that topic pervades her scholarship. Her graduate course on ecocriticism and bioregionalism included readings from Raymond Williams, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Martin Heidegger, Giorgio Agamben, Italo Calvino, Vandana Shiva, and Leslie Marmon Silko, yet in their own individual projects, students focused on particular locations that were important to them rather than a generalized concept of place. Sylvia was equally at home supervising a Lacanian reading of Donne and guiding participatory research in local urban planning. Examples of undergraduate theses in the Arts and Science Program that she supervised reveal the wide range of her interests: “Embodying Ecofeminism: Design Principles for Communities (1993); “Hamilton’s

Within the wide spectrum of her interests, Sylvia cast a searchlight on a handful of subjects that were of deep interest to her throughout her life. She was one of the earliest modern scholars to “discover” Margaret Cavendish—that is, to treat Cavendish as an original and creative thinker who had much to say to us about the paradoxes and dilemmas of our modern world. Sylvia’s work on Margaret Cavendish began with her doctoral thesis at McMaster University. Her first published article—“The Spider’s Delight: Margaret Cavendish and the ‘Female’ Imagination”—has become a classic. During the 1970s, just a few miles away, one of us (Sara Mendelson) was engaged in parallel work on Cavendish and her milieu from a social historical perspective. Two decades later, this serendipitous common interest in Cavendish materialized as the edited collection Paper Bodies: A Margaret Cavendish Reader (2000). Meanwhile, Sylvia actively promoted Cavendish studies among colleagues and students, serving as Canadian Representative of the Margaret Cavendish Society until a few months before her death. Her many contributions to Cavendish scholarship are now honored through the Sylvia Bowerbank Award, a cash prize given by the Margaret Cavendish Society for the best paper presented by a junior scholar at the Society’s biennial international conference.

Sylvia died of non-small-cell lung cancer, also referred to as “non-smokers’ lung cancer.” In late June 2004 she was given six months, perhaps a year to live. She moved into what she called her “sacred space of crisis,” “as I sort out my place/nonplace in the universe.” She lived on her own with her nine-year old dog, with visiting care from family and friends, in a peg-and-timber-frame house she had designed and built in the farmscape of southern Ontario. There is a valley behind the house, a hill that goes down to a small stream called “Spring Creek,” and then mounts up to a farm field on the other side of the hill. Originally that field was a forest, but the farmer who owned the field clearcut the acreage. Sylvia mourned that forest. Many times she had not only walked the land but also slept out in the open air, both summer and winter. She had planted and nurtured many trees on her own property and beyond: hawthorn, pine, spruce,
and apple. Her intent was not only to foster beauty in the landscape but also to ensure that wild birds and small animals who shared the land would find abundant food there in autumn and winter.

The title of Sylvia’s Afterword to Speaking for Nature is “A View from Cootes Paradise, Canada.” As was typical of her, she began this chapter with an epigraph from Donna Haraway, making connections between contemporary thinking and her early modern subject. But this “view” of Cootes Paradise is also a “return to [her] own neighbourhood,” to situate her thinking in the context of her own home-place. As Haraway asks us to do, we (re)turn to the topos and topic of nature “to compose our memory.”

In her Afterword Sylvia describes the eighteenth-century encounter between Lady Simcoe, Lord Simcoe, and the Mohawks, an interaction that took place while the Europeans looked over the marshy lake called Cootes Paradise that feeds into Lake Ontario. The scene embodies a symbolic as well as a material meeting of different ways of understanding our relation to nature and the land. There is, on the one hand, a Eurocentric symbiotic coupling of picturesque sentimentiality and the colonizing marshalling of technology to transform the land into arable and usable forms; and on the other hand, the indigenous Mohawk way of living with, and in respect for, the land. This eighteenth-century scene is then coupled with our modern moment, figured as Sylvia’s own home—a space of modern industry and pollution, of beautiful trees and water, and of the contemporary Indigenous presence in the Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address.

We are left with an exhortation to struggle to discover a way of being in our place and on our land that acknowledges both the history that is layered there and the respect that is needed for the land and for all its inhabitants. In Sylvia’s words, the Thanksgiving Address “is not about nostalgic return to paradise or true nature; it is about the ongoing cultural work of living appropriately together in ‘good mind’ in solidarity with each other on our patch of earth.” And an important part of that cultural work is telling our stories, as she argues in “Towards a Greening of Literary Studies”: “We need to reclaim this art [of story telling] so that we tell tales that are sacred to the health and well-being of our local human and non-human communities.”

In the last year of Sylvia’s life, we were each allotted a separate day of the week for visiting Sylvia at her home in Lynden. On Tuesdays Sara, ever the Jewish mother, brought Sylvia homecooked food and an endless supply of detective stories. On Saturdays Mary offered sushi, poetry, and dog-walking. We learned her land by walking it and by telling stories of our adventures with her dog Thunder. Today, we
have just returned from a walk along the shore of Hamilton Harbour and Cootes Paradise. It’s a sunny Sunday, early in April and 15 degrees Celsius. The water, even in the Harbour, is mirror calm. This is the city, so there are many walkers, cyclists, roller bladers, children, and dogs. The same dichotomies that Sylvia described are still present: the interlocked worlds of nature and the industrial are in the swan’s neck, symmetrically mirrored in the water; the new yellow glow of the willows coming to life again; the roar of the trains shunting back and forth in the adjacent yard; and the plumes from steel-mill smoke stacks across the water. Sylvia’s 14-year-old dog accompanies us—he’s spry and would gladly explore untethered, though the Canada geese would hiss and bare their red tongues if he got too close. We are grateful for the sun, the dog, the water, and for having learned from Sylvia.

Notes


