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On Sylvia Bowerbank, Green Literary Scholar

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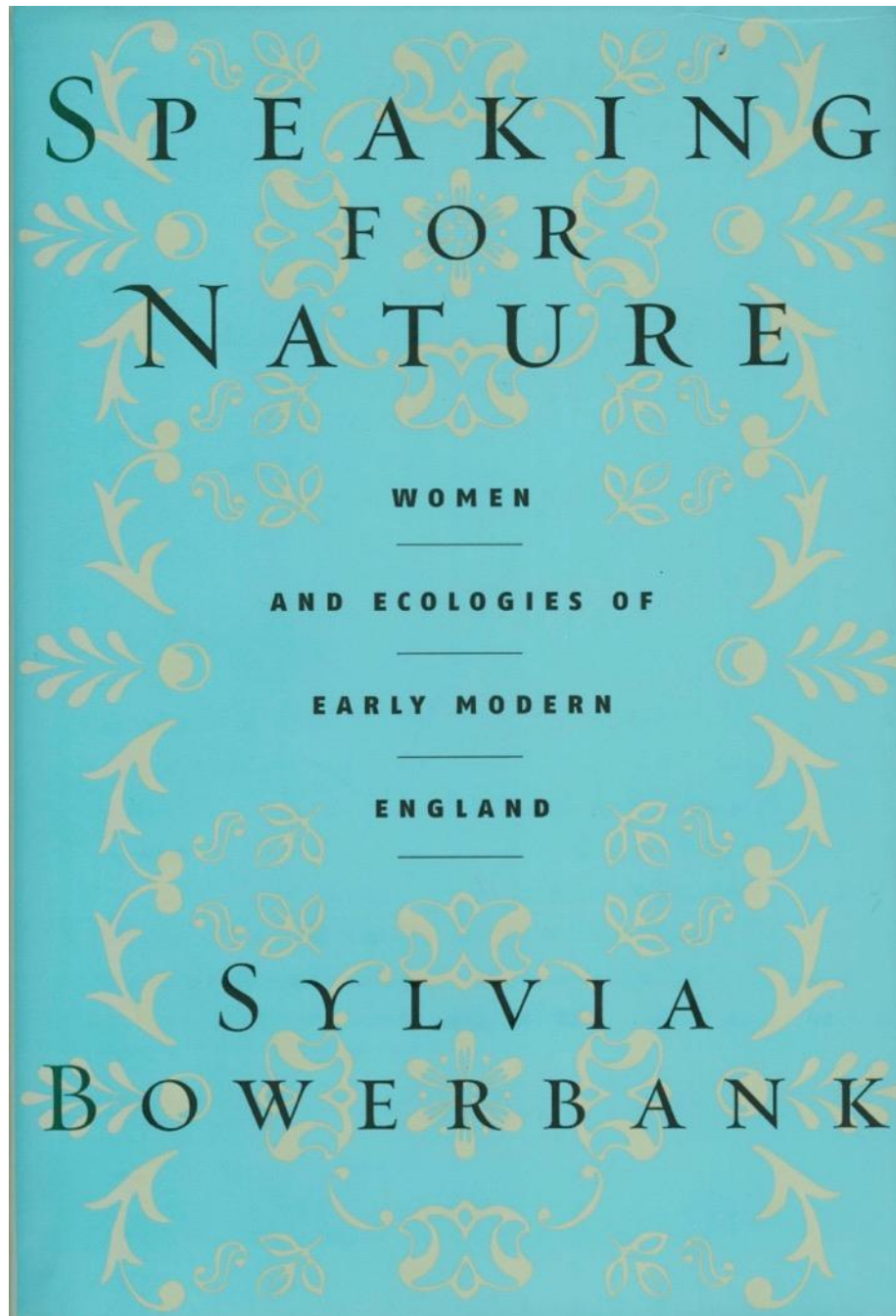
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On Sylvia Bowerbank, Green Literary Scholar

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Cheryl Lousley, Bob Henderson, Mary O'Connor, Susie O'Brien, Catriona Sandilands, Kevin Hutchings, Anne Milne, and Richard Pickard

On Sylvia Bowerbank, Green Literary Scholar



CHERYL LOUSLEY

The Writing Life

To accompany the posthumous publication of Sylvia Bowerbank's personal essay "Sitting in the Bush, Or Deliberate Idleness," I invited a number of scholars to help introduce her ecocritical thought and practice to a new generation of ecocritics by reflecting on the ways Sylvia herself or her writing or teaching influenced them. Their tributes to this trail-blazing ecocritic emphasize her passionate commitment to radical green change within the world, within the university, and within the self. Her meticulous scholarship on Margaret Cavendish and other early modern women writers continues to offer dazzling insights into how nature has been imagined, instrumentalized, known, loved, cultivated, and defended.

I got my first taste of that dazzling scholarship at the 1998 conference of the Environmental Studies Association of Canada (ESAC), when I drove into Ottawa just for the scheduled panel on environmental literature—the topic which I had proposed for my doctoral studies, set to begin that fall. Still to this day I remain awed and inspired by the insights of that powerhouse panel featuring Sylvia Bowerbank, Susie O'Brien, and Anne Milne. Susie introduced me to the writing of Jamaica Kincaid and the nuanced ways in which histories of colonialism shape experiences of nature; Anne showed how shifting designs of beehives in the eighteenth century lay at the intersections of scientific practices, agricultural intensification, modes of power for capturing the labour of bees, and contested ideas about women's work and women's nature. Sylvia's

The tributes to this trail-blazing ecocritic emphasize her passionate commitment to radical green change within the world, within the university, and within the self.

paper, if my memory has not confused the years, was about the mouse. The mouse: an animal easy not to notice, an animal easy to forget, an animal easy to put to death. And thus, Sylvia explained, an animal seemingly well suited to the new experimental methods of seventeenth century chemist Robert Boyle, who adopted the mouse in place of the more

pitiable and more frantic lark and sparrow as the specimen killed to demonstrate his air pump. The aside Sylvia makes in "Sitting in the Bush" that she moves on the land like a mouse is surely to be understood in the context of this history.

My personal history with Sylvia Bowerbank actually began in 1992, when I entered my first year of studies in the interdisciplinary Arts and Science Program at McMaster University and Sylvia taught me writing. I see now that it was an ecocritical course, though it all went over my head then. I recall Sylvia's disappointment when I failed to discover that the origins of the word radical lay in roots, agriculture, and the earth in the Raymond Williams-inspired keywords

assignment she had us do. What I learned from that course was that Sylvia took writing very seriously, and she expected us to choose our words carefully and thoughtfully. I later learned—and learn anew from the reflections gathered below—that this thoughtfulness was also a way of being in the world and a way of crafting an ethical self. In *The Writing Life*, which Sylvia assigned as our reading that year, Annie Dillard writes, “Assume you write for an audience consisting solely of terminal patients . . . What could you say to a dying person that would not enrage by its triviality?” It’s almost a punch in the gut, that question. But it aptly describes the deep attentiveness to world and to language that Sylvia modelled and demanded.

Sylvia Bowerbank so terrified me in my first year of university that I did not expect to study with her again. Bob Henderson, another arts and science professor, was my transformative mentor, the one who showed, in a way never apparent to me before, that in my love for the land where I grew up there was the possibility for a radical rejection of how our world was organized. Working with Bob led me back to Sylvia as I joined their emerging academic-community group later called “ecomusée” and I turned my volunteering with the group into my fourth-year honours thesis. Sylvia writes about it in her widely read essay “Telling Stories About Places.” I spent that year, and the summer and fall following, roaming about Hamilton, Dundas, and the Escarpment with people like naturalist John Hannah and amateur historian Wayne Terryberry, organizing and listening to storytelling walks and gatherings, and making my own way around on my bicycle. I left loving Hamilton and cycling. Still do.

Sylvia became a mentor that year and I still remember our last meeting before I left Hamilton. We met for lunch at the cafeteria in the Commons Building, the home of the Arts and Science Program. And with those plastic cafeteria trays on the table between us, she advised I choose a graduate program based on a place I would like to be. It seemed strange advice then, when I could not even figure out my academic field, so thoroughly interdisciplinary was my training. And I didn’t follow her advice at all. But it came back to me a few years later, when I took the bus from Toronto to Hamilton to convince her to supervise me in a directed reading course in environmental literature since there were no such courses then in the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University where I was enrolled in my PhD. She agreed reluctantly, and only because we had worked together in the past. She did not think it appropriate that she fill York’s gaps. I saw then how her generous way of giving herself fully to her students and to teaching—the passionate, engaged pedagogy Bob Henderson describes below—was crafted and sustained in a bureaucratic context that had few formal, institutionalized ways of giving it value. I had taken for granted that one could be both in the university and in a place one loved, and could be a whole person in any place and in any institution, even though ecomusée had been based on the environmental failures of organized ways of knowing and, more joyfully, on the possibilities that might come from having public conversations about how we live in the places where we are. Reading through the collection of reflections on Sylvia Bowerbank that follow here, what I find most striking is what they reveal of each of us as people as we have become and try to live as green scholars in the sometimes inhospitable institutional contexts that are symptoms of this enduring environmental crisis.

CHERYL LOUSLEY is associate professor of English and interdisciplinary studies at Lakehead University Orillia and series editor of the Environmental Humanities book series with Wilfrid Laurier University Press. Her writing is published in the *Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* and *Greening the Maple: Canadian Ecocriticism in Context*, among other places.

BOB HENDERSON

Sylvia Bowerbank

I can't remember when I first formally met Sylvia Bowerbank. I remember her from the late 1970s. We were both students using quiet upper levels of the library that had big tables for spreading out. We never talked then but I was more than just aware of her. She was serious-almost-scary in long black robes. Research looked like an all-day, intense, somber affair. I marveled at her stick-with-it commitment despite the weather outside and forces around her. Of course, she was happily absorbed in a passion for literature and ideas. I would learn that passion years later and Sylvia would often come to mind then as a role model of passionate scholarship.

In the 1980s, we found ourselves both junior professors at McMaster University, in Hamilton. We met somewhere in that chaos of learning to teach, learning to negotiate hostile colleagues, learning to navigate in a way that would be true to ourselves. For Sylvia was bent on creating a way of being in the university that allowed her to be a co-investigator with students and with ideas—ideas that would change the way we behave both within the university and the world. She knew if there was to be real and very much needed change, it would require a seismic rethinking / practice and acting on it. Looking back now, she knew she had to behave (at least a little bit) and she had to also behave differently. She was courageous.

I knew all that too and we talked about this as our main connection. We talked about creating a new university. What might that look like against a backdrop of ecological crisis and paramount social justice issues? We knew our students and, indeed, that we ourselves had, in the wise words of Michael Derby, “come to experience ‘school life’ and learning as fundamentally prosaic; characterized by fragmentation, emotionlessness and exacerbated by the privileging of epistemic foundations such as anthropocentrism, reductionism, linear causality, and dualism” (25).

Education should not be value-neutral. These are peoples' lives we are engaged with as “teachers.”

Education should not be value-neutral. These are peoples' lives we are engaged with as “teachers.” Sylvia would say, “Tell people what you think, then ask them to do the work—am I right? Let's discuss this, and Yes! I am a bit agitated, aren't you?” In this regard, she taught emotionally and holistically among—*with*—students, not *for* or *to* them. I wonder now if she might have said something like the following to me at some point (a regular comment made in live folk concerts by singer-songwriter Todd Snider): “I'm not trying to change your mind about anything. I'm trying to ease my mind about everything.” I can easily recall thinking so.

Schooling cannot be dull and somber from such a starting point between teacher and student. All is blurred for a heightened meaning. I remember one conversation we had following a visit from a graduate then in Teachers' College. The former student, who had been in both our classes, said that she found Teachers' College boring. We wondered together: How is that possible? What could be more stimulating than considering what to teach and how to do it amidst such a cultural malaise of distorted politics and antiquated notions of progress? We would be astonished and frustrated together and then she was off in those long, flowing black robes.

We aimed to do better by creating engaging classrooms, delving into relevant issues with students—issues raised by students and by our personal interests. Co-investigators! Sylvia did this. Hence I was drawn to her in departmental meetings and an occasional coffee-break chat. We shared an imagination for change and experiential practice within the university. We shared students in the Arts and Science Program who were mostly already inclined to be fully engaged in issues. We were lucky in this regard. We could teach in ways that were emotion-filled and tried to see things whole. Emotional commitment to the ideas and to students as people in the world—not as students in the classroom, not as consumers, but as fellow citizens—demands knowing who you are and making efforts to know your students. You are asking more of them than most. For Sylvia, a paper (or a test result) didn't walk into her office—a person did. Simply put, I think her level of care was palpable to students. I can relate. She sure made me feel important.

Sylvia taught students how to write and think. She taught courses in “green literature” when it would have been deemed radical or trivial. Students and some colleagues knew she was special still in those long black robes.

Sylvia, while teaching literature and writing, was also teaching students to consider where they lived and to value that knowledge. She was helping students advance a critical (thoughtful not negative) perspective so that questions were asked such as “who benefits,” and “what's in it for the grey jays and salamanders?” I can almost hear her saying, “if the path is looking too complicated, it is just messy; find the overarching simple yet complementary principle or pattern.” You can bet that search for patterns would demand an honest grounding in another epistemic foundation: where anthropocentrism turns toward ecological fullness, where linear and dualistic thinking can be expanded to circular, wild, speculative, imaginative inquiring-towards-action.

And then she was gone, quietly retreating to the woodlot she knew and seeking solitude in the face of an ugly, life-taking illness. In the same way that I cannot remember my first formal meeting with her, I cannot remember our last time together. I expect we talked about the joy of a certain student's work, the struggle to advance a full meaningful curriculum, or a new important book. Sylvia was my closest colleague. Man! Do I miss those times together!

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BOB HENDERSON, heritage canoe guide and writer, taught outdoor education at McMaster University from 1981 to 2010, sharing time with Sylvia within the Arts and Science Program from 1991 on.

MARY O'CONNOR

Walking Thunder

In Sylvia's "Sitting in the Bush," Thunder is a puppy, experiencing for the first time the green practice of sleeping outdoors on New Year's Eve. He shivers, he curls up beside Sylvia for warmth, he follows as the two experienced spiritual guides—Sylvia, and Sammie, the older German shepherd-husky cross—lead him down into the bottomlands and up the rise to a space sheltered by leafless trees on this winter night. In Sylvia's eyes, he never quite reached the depth of Sammie's seeing, but she counted him as a companion she wished for into the next life. In a poem, "In one of his couplets, Alexander Pope is amused . . .", Sylvia wrote:

What sort of eternal bliss could be found if, at the pearly gates, my dog—
beloved companion, deer shit lingering in his ruff—should be turned away?

I came to know Thunder when he was eight. He guided me into knowing and loving a patch of Southern Ontario land, and so much more. I did not walk Thunder. He walked me. And in doing so I was possessed by a land that I had not yet called my own even after living in this province for over thirty years. It is true that the Niagara escarpment that surrounds me in Hamilton has been a touchstone of my connection to this homeplace. It contains and nurtures the micro climate that allows magnolias and dogwoods to flourish and full Carolinian forests to hide in its wake. In this micro world, I sense a force and a protection. But I had never fully taken to what always appeared to me the flat land of the countryside, which was pretty enough with its farms and red-brick, gabled homes, but only pretty. Now, when I drive on back roads to Paris or Elora, I am alert to every marsh and gully. Thunder, and of course Sylvia, taught me that practice of attention and respect.

I did not walk Thunder. He walked me. And in doing so I was possessed by a land that I had not yet called my own even after living in this province for over thirty years.

In Sylvia's last, homebound year, I visited her once a week for conversation and to take Thunder for a good walk, something he would have had every day in their normal life. Thunder had this habit of greeting you with a twirling in the air. So excited for his walk, he would leap and spin 360 degrees at least four times, barking all the while. Then he would have to be patient and sit by my feet while Sylvia and I talked for an hour. Those conversations are also part of the story. I had not seen "Sitting in the Bush" before now, but I had heard most of the embedded stories in it—about the sleeping out on New Year's Eve, the skating on the pond, the marsh, the hawthorns, the samovar, and Baptiste Lake. I learned from those conversations, but also from

her many writings on nature and ecology, about Sylvia's way of knowing and living in the world. We had already walked together in Banff, in Colorado, in Cumbria and Yorkshire. As colleagues on campus, we rarely had time to stop and have a good talk. But on research or conference trips, we would talk nonstop, about our work, our lives, our dreams. I remember vividly one time, halfway up a foothill outside of Fort Collins, Colorado, we confided that as soon as we became full professors, we wanted to write something different—she, a detective novel; me, poetry. Then, in the year after we both became professors, back in the hallways of campus, we would have to admit we hadn't done any of it. So this is a story about walking, and talking, and writing. When I started my walks with Thunder, walks that took me into Sylvia's land in the warm October sun or a blizzard in February, the poetry came.

At Thanksgiving, I presented a handmade book of the autumn poems I had written with a simple drawing for each. I was able to offer her three seasons of books, each one made of different materials, colours, and fonts. She delighted in them, as only a friend could. They were gifts but of course inside them were her gifts to me. I brought her land to her in my stories, stories that included snippets of hers. On one occasion, Thunder and I had returned to find Sylvia outside standing in front of a poplar, both ablaze in gold light. She said she had been listening to what the poplar was saying. On another, a female opossum had come to her window at the very moment she was watching a nature program about opossums on the television. She named the streams and creeks for me, I attended to their levels, moods, frozen or liquid states, and the fish or heron I found there. She writes that Sammie paid homage to every new scent. I watched and noted the changes as the seasons progressed, thankful for every new colour, plant, or animal. The poems, though, are also implicitly trying to manage loss, and once winter was about to turn into spring, I resisted every new awakening. I admit I wanted to stay in that winter of silence, of deer and sparrows.

Often, I would lose sight of Thunder. He would take off up into the woods as I followed the border of the marsh and be gone for a good period of our walk. Though not far. Once I tripped in the woods, went down face first, and when I immediately raised my head, Thunder's nose was an inch away. He watched me, he tended me, he walked me. This is a story of love, love for Sylvia, for Thunder, and an awakening love for the land.

Thunder rushes ahead, the stream no deterrent.

He follows it along,

scouting

the width of the running water,

the deceptive ice,

the firmness of the banks on either side,



and look!

Thunder in mid-air as he flies across.

I follow,

gauge the human dimensions and

launch my heavy boots and body

where his 40 pounds

and four short legs have led me.

~~~

I see you walking up the hill

with broom and basket,

music and milk bones,

thermos and

skates.



You descend to the pond

hidden between the third hill and the forest

north of Concession #2.

Sammie, your spiritual guide,

follows you

to slip and slide and

dance

on the ice.

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**MARY O'CONNOR** is professor emeritus in English and cultural studies at McMaster University. Her research has spanned seventeenth-century women's life-writing, African American women writers, women's health, photography, and theories of the archive and of everyday life. Her last book, co-authored with Katherine Tweedie (Concordia), was *Seduced by Modernity: The Photography of Margaret Watkins* (MQUP, 2007). She has also co-curated exhibitions at the McMaster Museum of Art, Hamilton Artists' Inc, and The Ontario Science Centre.

## SUSIE O'BRIEN

### *Sylvia's Self-Technology*

Though I was her colleague at McMaster for eight years, I didn't know Sylvia very well. There are a couple of reasons for this. When I was first hired at McMaster (OK, for at least the first ten years) I was scrambling: to figure out what and how to teach, to work out my research agenda, and to make it all fit together somehow with the raising of the three kids I'd imprudently had in that period. Sylvia was rushing around too, but in what seemed to be a much more purposive way. Overcommitted but seemingly cheerful about it, she stretched her time between English and Cultural Studies, Arts and Science, Women's Studies (a program she founded), and Indigenous Studies. And she did it all stupendously well, receiving awards for teaching and for her work on Indigenous and environmental issues. This brings me to the second, less straightforward reason I didn't get to know her well: I found her quite intimidating.

In addition to her indispensable roles at McMaster, she was a formidable force in ecocriticism. I almost said "Canadian ecocriticism," but that would be wrong: Sylvia was a leading international voice in ecocriticism. Her essay "Towards the Greening of Literary Studies" was published in the *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* in 1995—a year before *The Ecocriticism Reader* (Glotfelty and Fromm), which is routinely cited as the official inauguration of the discipline. I came across Sylvia's essay a couple of years after it was published, when I

*When I read Sylvia's essay, it showed me for the first time what ecocriticism, or what she much more suggestively called "the greening of literary studies," could do.*

was working my way, with irritation, through the largely US American body of ecocriticism, trying to reconcile it with my own postcolonial approach to theory and literature. While early American ecocriticism favoured realism, embodied in what could meanly, but only a bit reductively,

be called the white dudes-in-the-woods school of nature writing, I was attracted to writers like Jamaica Kincaid, who said, "I am not in nature. . . . To me the world is cracked, unwhole, not pure, accidental; and the idea of moments of joy for no reason is very strange" (124). I was stuck at that point—skeptical, ungrounded, and tangled up (not unpleasurably) in postcolonial aesthetics. When I read Sylvia's essay, it showed me for the first time what ecocriticism, or what she much more suggestively called "the greening of literary studies," could do. Weaving together multiple strands of theory (Indigenous, feminist, Foucauldian) and cultural studies, Sylvia's work conveyed a clear understanding of the way materiality and theory, nature and culture, determine each other. It came from a place of deep connectedness and commitment to

nature, inflected by Raymond Williams's sense that culture, too, is a material force. "Towards the Greening of Literary Studies" was a revelation to me.

The essay also made a passing reference to Foucault's concept of the technology of the self, which Sylvia took up in more detail elsewhere ("Nature Writing as Self-Technology"). Reading the essay over again now, that reference resonates for me in a way it didn't at the time, when Sylvia appeared to me to be a force of nature. By this I mean not only that she was deeply attuned to the more-than-human world, but also that she seemed to have an integrity and authenticity in her scholarship and professional life that I lacked. She demanded this integrity from her students, asking them of their projects, however adroitly put together: "Where are *you* in this? What are its stakes for you?" Reading for the first time "Sitting in the Bush, or Deliberate Idleness," the essay that Cheryl sent along with the invitation to contribute to this issue, I am struck anew by Sylvia's immersion in nature—I had no idea that she slept outside to welcome the new year—but also, for the first time, by what I don't think she'd mind my calling the "technology of Sylvia." "Deliberate Idleness," which describes a way of being "present-minded and easygoing in the wild," takes a lot of work. Most difficult of all maybe is what Sylvia describes as "the transition from one mode of life [living outside] to the other [working at the university]" ("Sitting" 2). It was a problem for her not just of practicalities, like sleeping through the alarm on darkening days, but also of ethical and corporeal attunement to the world. Sylvia explains: "I see myself as a kind of amphibian being: I may make my living in a society still addicted to notions of empire over nature, but I seek to cultivate Green habits and attitudes in my daily life (and not just on wilderness vacations)" (2). Her way of being was not natural, if natural means artless and straightforward; rather, it was arduous, conscientious, and sometimes painful. Sylvia's account of sitting in the bush highlights how much what appeared to me to be an instinctive synthesis of commitments—to Indigenous and women's empowerment, to the animals and the environment, to her students, and to scholarship—reflected an abundance of not only love, but also discipline, and, frequently, doubt.

I teach Sylvia's work now ("Greening," along with her essay about the Hamilton/Burlington Bay Area, "Telling Stories About Places") in a second-year class on nature, literature, and culture. I hope that these essays will help to cultivate students' bioregional literacy and appreciation for the city they live in, as well as encourage them to think critically about language, narrative, and culture. I'm glad that they can still get a glimpse of Sylvia through her work, but wish they—and I—could still encounter the person, sporting the all-black "uniform" that was her concession to professional dress codes, offering a few wry or consoling words before rushing off to another commitment or, as she no doubt would have preferred, back to the bush. I wish I had known her better, and longer.

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**SUSIE O'BRIEN** is an associate professor in the Department of English and Cultural Studies at McMaster University, where her research and teaching focus on postcolonial and environmental literary and cultural studies. Her publications include articles and co-edited collections on slow and local food movements, scenario planning, risk and resilience, environmental futurity, and the temporality of globalization. She also co-authored, with Imre Szeman, *Popular Culture: A User's Guide* (4th edition, Nelson, 2017). She is currently working on a monograph tentatively titled *Surprise! The Cultural Politics of Resilience*.



## CATRIONA SANDILANDS

### *For Sylvia*

In the summer of 2002, I had the honour of serving as an external reviewer for Sylvia's promotion to full professor at McMaster. To help me evaluate her impressive file, the English Department sent me her publications: *all* of them. They arrived in a very imposing box one sunny afternoon: book chapters, journal articles (some multiply reprinted), reviews, commentaries, biographical entries. Her co-edited collection *Paper Bodies: A Margaret Cavendish Reader* (Broadview, 2000) was on the top of the stack; the final manuscript of her book *Speaking For Nature: Women and Ecologies in Early Modern England* (Johns Hopkins UP, 2004) was right underneath it.

I had, of course, met Sylvia and encountered her work before 2002. I had seen her present papers at several meetings of the Environmental Studies Association of Canada (nearly a decade before ALECC was formed). I thought her essay "Nature Writing as Self-Technology," in Éric Darier's collection *Discourses of the Environment* (Blackwell, 1998), was one of the finest works then written to take up the writings of Michel Foucault and think through their implications for environmental understanding and politics (her critique of the genre of the "eco-confessional" is still both sharp and relevant, and the chapter remains one of only a handful to address the environmental possibilities of his later thinking on self-technologies). I had also read her chapter "Does Woman Speak for Nature?" in Nina Lykke and Rosi Braidotti's collection *Between Monsters, Goddesses and Cyborgs* (Zed, 1996), in which she develops a "genealogy of ecological feminisms" by engaging eighteenth-century women's claims to speak on behalf of different natures, specifically contrasting Hannah More's conservative valorization of gender difference and natural harmony with Mary Wollstonecraft's (regretful) refusal of

*"Does Woman Speak for Nature?" beautifully illustrates a key, gendered paradox in modern environmental thought: when it comes to Nature, we are, at once, thoroughly imperialist and profoundly sentimental.*

this feminine natural sympathy in favour of a pursuit of justice linked with progress, improvement, and mastery. The article is articulate, nuanced, and beautifully illustrates a key, gendered paradox in modern environmental thought: when it comes to Nature, we are, at once, thoroughly imperialist and profoundly sentimental.

To my great delight, both *Paper Bodies* and *Speaking for Nature* returned with even richer detail to histories of women's engagements with the natural world. Both books expand and

complicate earlier ecofeminist narratives about the monolithic “death of nature” at the hands of Enlightenment science; both books also strongly emphasize the heterogeneous voices and *agencies* of English women as they negotiated emerging scientific and economic knowledges of gender and nature in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (including but not limited to Francis Bacon’s notorious promotion of both marriage and rape—maybe just metaphorically, likely not—to move the world toward a scientifically subdued gender/nature order). *Paper Bodies* collects the seventeenth-century writings of Margaret Cavendish (Duchess of Newcastle) who, in the words of Sylvia and her co-editor Sara Mendelson, “fashioned a personal identity, indeed an entire universe, radically different from the world in which she lived” (9), including reappropriating and imaginatively rewriting dominant linkages between women and nature “in order to invest herself with the agency and authority to speak for *true, free nature*” (31, my emphasis), in direct opposition to Bacon’s desires for world acquiescence. (I remember, that summer, sitting in a green plastic lawn chair in my friend’s backyard and marveling at *The Blazing World*, Cavendish’s extraordinary 1666 work of utopian fiction, in which a young woman becomes Empress of a society that includes animal-people as her counselors—bird-person astronomers, bear-person philosophers, spider-person mathematicians—and which reminded me of much more recent speculative forays into multispecies governance.)

Perhaps even more powerfully for contemporary ecofeminist politics, *Speaking For Nature* traces a sophisticated path from Mary Wroth’s *The Countess of Montgomerie’s Urania* (1621) to Elizabeth Simcoe’s colonial Upper Canada *Diaries* (1792-6), in which English women “recognized the symbolic power—and limitations—of speaking as interpreters of nature” (5) as they also worked to claim space to think and write *as women* in relation to the emerging socionatural orders that were the subjects of intense scientific, economic, aesthetic, and imperialist debate during the early modern (and early capitalist) period. From Wroth’s (and Cavendish’s) “commiseration with trees” in the midst of dramatic changes, to the meaning of forests between feudal and capitalist economies, to late eighteenth-century women’s writings about “the study of nature” intended to instruct girls in the arts of an “economy of charity” toward other creatures in the midst of an intensifying commodification of animals, to Anna Seward’s place-based understanding of environmental aesthetics and health in the midst of industrializing urban routinizations of space, *Speaking for Nature* documents and reflects on women’s thinking and activism about changing relations of gender and nature over the course of two-plus, critical centuries of codification, systematization, and resistance. (I realize, reading the book again so that I can write this reflection, how very relevant it is to the current political milieu as well: “at the beginning of the twenty-first century,” she writes, “we find ourselves in the odd position of seeking a ‘system of survival’ in an age in which our suspicion of system is so pervasive that we are turning to a new politics of the particular . . . as the only alternative to rampant global capitalism” [22]).

Sylvia’s promotion file also included several articles about Indigenous women’s literatures (indeed, I had also known her, prior to 2002, in her capacity as co-supervisor for a PhD student in the Faculty of Environmental Studies, Carole Leclair, who is now associate professor in Indigenous studies at Wilfrid Laurier University, Brantford). Sylvia was, at that time, also co-chair of the McMaster President’s Committee on Indigenous Studies. While others can speak

much more knowledgably about her work with Indigenous communities, her commitment to dislodging settler-colonial institutions and practices was very much in evidence across her *cv*. Indeed, *Speaking For Nature*—the last section of which traces Elizabeth Simcoe’s writings about the place that is now Hamilton, Ontario—specifically addresses the need to consider her talent as an observer and lover of nature against her complete inability to understand Indigenous inhabitations and mediations of the place: she is so thoroughly steeped in English nature aesthetics (and colonial interests) that, despite her admiration for specific Indigenous technologies and knowledges (snowshoes, plant remedies), she can only see the landscape as picturesque and Haudenosaunee people (including Molly Brant) as landscape. It is clear from her writing that Sylvia thought deeply about what it means for an ecofeminist scholar to take Indigenous (and especially Indigenous women’s) knowledges and politics seriously; this thinking enriched *all* of her work, not only the parts about Southern Ontario.

My summer immersion in Sylvia’s work had a lasting impact on me. She insisted that I think outside the present-ist ecofeminist box, that I consider (for example) the works of early modern women writers as not only historical examples of resistances to patriarchal science cultures but also complex, lasting imaginations of gender/nature relations that unsettle many *current* assumptions as well (including about what new materialists now term the “agency” of matter). She taught me that “speaking for nature” is a complex and situated practice, one that is not necessarily saturated with essentialist politics even if “woman/nature” connections are actively at play (what she demonstrated was also far more interesting than mere “strategic” essentialism). And she modeled for me an engaged, theoretically rich, place-based feminist ecocritical practice grounded in intellectual and corporeal *humility* toward both Indigenous peoples and the land itself. I dearly wish I had known her better in person, but I carry her with me still.

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## KEVIN HUTCHINGS

### *Remembering Sylvia Bowerbank*

In the mid-1990s, when I entered doctoral studies in English at McMaster University, I had the privilege of taking Sylvia Bowerbank's seminar on the representation of nature and culture in eighteenth-century British literature. Since I had already declared a major in British Romanticism, I took the course as an elective, a chance to get to know some of the literature to which the Romantics responded. Little did I know that the seminar would change the course of my intellectual life and profoundly shape my academic career.

At the start of our first class, Sylvia posed a question that rocked my world and has motivated me ever since. To the best of my memory, it went like this: "Given our present-day environmental crisis, is it business as usual for literary scholarship, or do we need to rethink our assumptions and practices?"

In my experience, such a question was unprecedented, and yet, as a student of English literature who cared deeply about environmental issues, I felt as though I had been waiting years for someone to ask it. At the time, ecocriticism was still in its academic infancy, and none of my previous teachers had ventured

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anywhere near this critical terrain. For me, Sylvia's question, and her seminar as a whole, augured a sea-change in literary scholarship. Not only did Sylvia encourage her students to examine literary texts in relation to environmental histories and philosophies, but she also challenged us to reflect in very personal ways on our individual practices, to be mindful of the marks we made both on paper and in the physical world. When the course was over, I found it impossible to return to old ways of thinking, so the first thing I did was change my dissertation topic. Whereas I had earlier proposed to write a thesis on an aspect of William Blake's theology, I decided to apply the methods I had learned in Sylvia's class to an investigation of Blake's "vision of materiality." Eventually, in revised form, this ecocritical study became my first academic book, and among other things it helped me to find a job at a budding "green" university in western Canada, where I was encouraged to engage in the kinds of research that Sylvia had inspired me and my classmates to pursue.

But Sylvia's influence didn't stop there. It was also in her course that I made my first foray into Indigenous studies, writing a major research paper on the depiction of Dene people and their

territories in Samuel Hearne's late eighteenth-century travelogue *A Journey to the Northern Ocean*, a book (as Sylvia told me) that every Canadian should know. In an era of understandable suspicions concerning mainstream appropriations of marginalized voices, I worried that I had no business, as a member of Canada's settler society, writing about First Nations issues. But that wasn't Sylvia's take on the matter. Not only did she encourage me to do this research, but after the course was over she also offered me advice on how to revise my essay for publication, thereby helping me to secure one of my earliest journal articles. This research put me on the trajectory that I still follow today in my work on British-Indigenous relations in the literary and environmental cultures of transatlantic Upper Canada. Looking back at the many fine teachers I have known, I find none more influential than Sylvia Bowerbank, and I'm proud and grateful still to be following the path she helped to set me on.

In reading Sylvia's essay "Sitting in the Bush" all these years later, I'm deeply moved, for here are some of the stories she quietly told us years ago, stories about her grandfather, her contemplative and deeply attentive rambles on the land, her encounters with wild and feral creatures, and her annual ritual of sleeping outdoors with her dogs on New Year's Eve. Sylvia originally wrote this essay in response to a call for papers soliciting submissions for an edited collection that sought to publish personal narratives about our human attachment to and dependence upon place. I remember this well because, ever the generous mentor, Sylvia shared the call for papers with me and other students, encouraging us to submit our own work to the proposed volume. Although Sylvia's essay was accepted for inclusion, for one reason or another it did not ultimately make it into the published book. Thankfully, it is now available in this issue of *The Goose* for all to read. I suspect that Sylvia would be pleased.

I can't claim to have known Sylvia Bowerbank well; I was simply one of the many students fortunate enough to have benefitted from her generosity and wisdom during the course of a university education. But I remember her fondly as a gentle, humble soul and a powerful intellect. As a teacher, she was a patient listener, a wonderful mentor, and an exemplary role model. I miss her. Happily, her teachings live on in the hearts and minds of former students and interested readers like me, helping us to navigate our way in a "disintegrating society" still "addicted to notions of empire over nature" and showing us alternative ways of thinking about and living in our home places.

**KEVIN HUTCHINGS** is a professor of English at the University of Northern British Columbia. His books include *Romantic Ecologies and Colonial Cultures in the British Atlantic World* (2009) and *Imagining Nature: Blake's Environmental Poetics* (2002). He is also co-author of the B.C. Book Prize-winning *Birds of the Raincoast* (2004) and co-editor of several recent essay collections, including *Transatlantic Literary Ecologies* (forthcoming 2017). His current book project is entitled *Transatlantic Upper Canada: Literature, Ecology, Indigenous Governance*.

**ANNE MILNE**

## ***Notes on Sylvia Bowerbank's Nature and Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Course Reading List circa 1996***

I worked with and learned from Sylvia Bowerbank in the last half of the 1990s during the years I was a graduate student at McMaster University in Hamilton. I was never really geeky enough for Sylvia's liking, but she thought I was funny, and she always gave me a hard time and pushed me to do better work. I liked her and we shared a love of early-modern and eighteenth-century British literature and cultural studies. She introduced me to ecocriticism and coupled with my interests in animal studies and labour studies, she helped me to discover my ideal dissertation topic. I continue to work in the intersections between ecofeminism, labour studies, animal studies, and bioregionalism in the eighteenth century. I often sense that Sylvia is still there in spirit, writing notes full of questions in the margins.

A real turning point for me in my academic development was the course I took with Sylvia during the second year of my PhD program. The course was called *Nature and Culture in the Eighteenth Century*. It was a high-quality, heady experience and some of my classmates like Dennis Desroches, Kevin Hutchings, and Julie Rak have continued on to become "big names" in the Canadian academy. In reflecting on Sylvia's influence, I thought what I would like to highlight are just a few of the books we either used in that course or that Sylvia introduced me to, which I continue to value and return to.

*Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* by Clarence J. Glacken, 1967: This is an old-fashioned book consistently referring to "man and nature" in that annoying old-fashioned way. But it is comprehensive and committed in acknowledging a sense of deeper time, and Glacken contextualizes thinking about nature within the period-specific conflicts between religion, science, and Western culture. This is incredibly helpful. Reading Glacken also led me to read really good primary texts for the first time: by Lucretius, Ray, Burnet, and Buffon, for example. What Glacken lays out in this 700-page book is a central idea that "in Western thought until the end of the eighteenth century, concepts of the relationship of human culture to the natural environment" revolved around three ideas: "the assumption that the planet is designed for man alone," the environmental determinist idea that individual and cultural characteristics correlated with environmental factors, and the notion that "man through his arts and inventions was . . . a partner of God, improving upon and cultivating an earth created for him" (vii-viii).

Another book Sylvia introduced us to in her course was Donald Worster's *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas*, 1977. Worster's irreverent, lively writing helped me not just with ideas of the dynamic push-pull of ethics and instrumentality in environmental thought, but with the task of historically situating those ideas so that "ecology [no longer] seems a present without a past" (Worster xiii). Worster's book introduced me to the term "economy of nature" and I liked the way he insists on the integration of the history of science and cultural history. He focuses on "moments...when ecological thought underwent a significant transformation" (xvi). His succinct "Glossary of Terms" from "Animism" to "Transcendentalism" helped me to stay

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focused. The fact that he started with Gilbert White got me reading the book, and even though he switched continents part way through (to focus on American natural history essayists in the nineteenth century), I kept going. I really like how Worster's sense of activism and his personal engagement with the natural world comes across in his book. Worster's cheekiness in describing the book as a

"biography of ecology" (Worster 24) appealed to me as it underlined the subversive potential for environmental studies and ecocriticism. As a burgeoning ecocritic, I really needed to know that some academics actually cared about the issues they discussed.

The third book I'll highlight here, Barbara Maria Stafford's *Body Criticism: Imaging the Unseen in Enlightenment Art and Medicine* (1991), wasn't a course text, but Sylvia recommended it to me both because she knew I liked books with pictures and because she knew I was working on eighteenth-century how-to manuals on sketching landscapes for a keyword assignment (after Raymond Williams) she'd set for us. Stafford's book was a book I could get geeky about *because* it had pictures, and since then, I've never really stopped looking at those pictures of subcutaneous eighteenth-century worlds. Though Stafford's writing is less inviting and accessible than Worster's, she is a passionate advocate for the visual, and her book is a complex and comprehensive discussion about the project of transforming a physical world into a conceptual one in the eighteenth century and what has been lost and gained in doing so. Sylvia was really excited about Stafford's book, and I was gratified by her sensitivity in sharing it with me. Sylvia had confided in me at one point that she found it difficult to write reference letters for me, not because I wasn't deserving, but because I was an artist. "You can't say that in a reference letter," she told me. "It's interpreted as code for lack of intellectual capacity or rigor." She also often remarked publicly that all of the oddball grad students were attracted to working with her for some reason. Whatever the reason, I'm proud that I was one of those students.

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## RICHARD PICKARD

### *On Learning from Sylvia Bowerbank*

I'm delighted to have this chance to honour Sylvia Bowerbank. To be frank, she has had a larger influence on my career and life than she would likely have anticipated, and I didn't think I'd ever get the chance to thank her.

Like a few other ALECC colleagues, I spent the barely internet-enabled middle 1990s pursuing a doctorate at the University of Alberta. In those dark years before Google and Blogger, even before LiveJournal, it was even easier than it is now for doctoral research to consist largely of self-isolation: falling down your very own research rabbit hole, emerging annually to persuade your supervisor that you should continue to be left alone.

The opposite of Twitter, in other words.

In 1997, though, I heard about an upcoming conference at the University of Nevada, Reno, hosted by Scott Slovic. February 1998 found me at the North American Interdisciplinary Conference on Environment and Community: Rebecca Solnit asked us why “think like a mountain” leaves mountains sounding like old white men, ranchers and artists disagreed about the meaning of bison in the contemporary American west, and Diane Kelsey McColley applied ecofeminist and companion species lenses to *Paradise Lost*.

Suddenly, without my noticing, there had appeared and grown this thing and community called “ecocriticism.” All of us who were independently inventing our own fields of study needed to stop what we were doing and, quite simply, connect.

And yet I didn't do that. Instead, I dove back into the rabbit hole I'd so carefully built for myself. Focusing narrowly on eighteenth-century poetry, rather than opening myself up to the kinds of theoretical and political questions I'd been exposed to at Reno, I frantically but quietly wrapped up my nearly complete dissertation. Without this evasion, revision would have taken another two years, and I just didn't think I was strong enough for that.

This was when I met Sylvia Bowerbank, my external examiner, who until then I had known only through her critical writings. To the surprise of no one who knew her, I'm sure, I found her much like the person I had imagined from my reading, particularly “Towards the Greening of Literary Studies”: energetic, compassionate, and formidable.

Though she didn't say it aloud, she saw right through what I had done. We sparred productively at my defense, and she both asked provoking questions and offered sharp insights into my most obscure texts. By the end, even if I ended up being passed, I felt that she was imagining almost

any number of different dissertations that would have been more sophisticated, and she was helping me imagine them as well.

In our one encounter, Sylvia helped me understand what it would take to become genuinely an ecocritic, to enter the field I think of now as the environmental humanities. Those alternate dissertations haunt me, in all their sophistication, as does the community-mindedness that I'd

deliberately avoided. When I first came back to the academy in 2005 after several years' absence, I thought often of what I'd learned in two hours with Sylvia. That's why I jumped at the chance to play local host for the 2009 ASLE conference and to hold an executive role in ALECC for its inaugural conference in 2010. It's why I supervise graduate students and honours undergraduates; it's why my literature and environment courses are designed the way they are.

Sylvia Bowerbank, in other words, helped me at a pivotal moment to think about the meaning of membership in this field where I've been so privileged to find myself. I've always been grateful to her, and I'm so pleased to have the chance to say so publicly.

*In our one encounter, Sylvia helped me understand what it would take to become genuinely an ecocritic, to enter the field I think of now as the environmental humanities.*

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