Session 809: Poetry, Gender, Ecocriticism

MLA Convention Special Session Panel, Jan. 10, 2016, 1:45-3:00 p.m., in Austin, Texas


The members of Session 809 are honored to be included in the Convention’s Presidential Theme, Literature and Its Publics: https://apps.mla.org/program_browse_pres

Session Leader:

T. Mera Moore Lafferty, Ph.D. meramoore@berkeley.edu
Lecturer in College Writing
University of California, Berkeley
Session title: Poetry, Gender, Ecocriticism

Session Participants:

Enrique Álvarez, Ph.D. ealvarez@fsu.edu
Associate Professor of Spanish
Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics at Florida State University
Queer Ecology: The Post-Human Aesthetic in the Poetry of Olvido García Valdés

Collin Campbell, M.A. crc480@mun.ca
Doctoral Student
Department of English
Memorial University of Newfoundland
“Collected stones in the museum of spectacles”: Sublime Cityscapes in Dionne Brand’s Ossuaries

Sarah Dimick, M.A. sdimick@wisc.edu
Doctoral Student
Department of English and the Center for Culture, History, and Environment
University of Wisconsin-Madison
Jorie Graham’s Sea Change: An Anti-Catalogue for the Anthropocene

Elizabeth Neely, Ph.D. enczest@yahoo.com
Adjunct Instructor of English
Texas Wesleyan University and University of Texas-Arlington
Elizabeth Bishop’s “The Riverman”: A Shaman, a Healing Plant, and a Call to Amazonian Environmental Awareness
Queer Ecology:  
The Post-Human Aesthetic in the Poetry of Olvido García Valdés

Abstract:

The poetry of Olvido García Valdés (Spain 1950) was critically acclaimed for its avant-gardism, which won her the Spanish National Poetry Award in 2007. This poetry has been read as “residual” writing against the dominant trend that marked the “poetry of experience” in the Spanish literary scene of the late twentieth century (Canteli 2014: 14). According to this argument, the poetry of García Valdés establishes a spatial openness “to another place” that questions the normalizing legitimacy of language defended by the (predominantly male) poets of experience (Canteli 2014: 18-19).

In this paper I examine this territorialization of poetic language as a formal effect of the affective component of García Valdés’s writing. The powerful emotional and affective apparatus of García Valdés’s poetry characterizes her avant-gardism, which manifests itself in the formal and semantic dislocations of her writing. From this perspective, this language in transit “to another place” determines the deterritorialization of the self into its constitutive others (animals, plants, places, experiences) dissolving in the process the (female) gendered grammar of the poem as a locus of enunciation.

Bibliography:

Session 809: Poetry, Gender, Ecocriticism

MLA Convention Special Session Panel, Jan. 10, 2016, 1:45-3:00 p.m., in Austin, Texas


The members of Session 809 are honored to be included in the Convention’s Presidential Theme, Literature and Its Publics: https://apps.mla.org/program_browse_pres

Collin Campbell, M.A.  crc480@mun.ca
Doctoral Student
Department of English
Memorial University of Newfoundland

“Collected stones in the museum of spectacles”:
Sublime Cityscapes in Dionne Brand’s Ossuaries

Abstract:

Dionne Brand’s long poem Ossuaries (2010) demonstrates the profound damage that global oppressions, like colonialism, do to the activist politics of the black female subject, in this case the protagonist Yasmine. In this reading, the city is the locus of colonial and capitalist power. However, my reading of the long poem indicates that this divide between a necessarily toxic city and its consequent destruction of the natural world does not account for the imaginative effects that the city has on Yasmine’s mind.

Brand’s scholarship has come to understand the idea of the city as complex and dialogic: usually as a site of simultaneous violence and creative potential for diasporic communities. This paper uses theories of urban ecology to show that Ossuaries breaks down the binary between nature and the city; more profoundly, it traces the ways in which the city constrains and constitutes Yasmine’s consciousness, that is to say, her imaginative potentials. Her potential for understanding the value of the city lies in the gap between the sublime and the spectacle. This paper asks, how does Yasmine think in and through the city? Does the city itself, in spite of Yasmine, think? Does the city provide a grammar of consciousness for our interconnected and violent world?
Jorie Graham’s *Sea Change*: An Anti-Catalogue for the Anthropocene

Abstract:

Jorie Graham’s *Sea Change* (2008) is an elegy for “what / normal was—thousands of times / you want to say this—normal” (56). Set as global warming begins to register phenomenologically, Graham’s poems catalogue a climate many have begun to refer to as “the new normal”: a local plum tree blossoms in autumn instead of spring, the wind becomes “stronger than anyone expected,” and a migratory bird lingers to disturb the poem’s speaker with unseasonal songs. However, if *Sea Change* is situated in the present, the affective energy of its elegy gathers its force through comparisons with the environmental and literary past. Graham’s collection is heavily allusive, invoking poems ranging from Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself” to W.B. Yeats’ “Wild Swans at Coole.” Unlike Yeats’ speaker, who counts the swans each year for reassurance of continuity within a changing world, Graham’s catalogues suggest environmental discontinuity. Similarly, while Whitman employs the poetic catalogue to celebrate the vitality of the world and his presence within it, Graham’s poems generate what we might consider an anti-catalogue for the Anthropocene. In this sense, I argue that Graham’s collection allows us to think about the ways in which climate change disrupts literary devices. If the list or poetic catalogue has traditionally functioned as a type of Adamic naming—a means of environmental celebration or authorial world-making—then Graham’s iterations of disrupted environments acknowledge the sublime human ability to shape the planet. They mourn the human ability to call new forms of order into being.
Elizabeth Neely, Ph.D.  enczest@yahoo.com
Adjunct Instructor of English
Texas Wesleyan University

Elizabeth Bishop’s “The Riverman”:
A Shaman, a Healing Plant, and a Call to Amazonian Environmental Awareness

Abstract:

Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979), spent nearly twenty years in Brazil in the 1950s-1970s. Flora and fauna of the country permeate her early poems from this period; her keenly observational eye notes “every square inch filling in with foliage,” “too many waterfalls,” and “blood-black / bromelias, lichens, / owls.” Yet Bishop has never been known as an environmental poet. In “The Riverman,” a later poem she published in 1960, she plunges into the imaginative journey of a riverman training to become a sacacá or shaman, already a dying presence in the Amazon. She not only convincingly depicts the shaman’s training and intersection with the natural world, but also illustrates his physical and spiritual transition into an element of that world (a healing plant, a Portuguese secondary meaning of sacacá), thus transforming the poem into a call for ecological balance and awareness. Bishop’s riverman values properties of the Amazon that become ecologically fashionable after Bishop’s time; he meditates on how the river “draws from the very heart / of the earth the remedy / for each of the diseases . . . .” As he transforms into the healing plant he reveres the “magic mud” of the river beneath the “giant pirarucús [fish] / the turtles and crocodiles, tree trunks . . . .” Through her treatment of the sacacá—his double existence as healer and the plant that heals—Bishop weaves together the wisdom of a dying Amazonian tradition with future ecological concerns.