

TELLING STORIES ABOUT PLACES

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The woman is almost seventy now. She has lived in Hamilton—"the Steel City"—for most of her life. These days, weather permitting, she walks down to the bayfront to look around. From the shore of the new Bayfront Park—or "Land-fill Park"—she can see across the bay to the apparently wild shoreline below the cemetery where her mother and grandmother are buried. A little to the east, the masts of moored sailboats can be seen off Lasalle Park, the place where the famous explorer was said to have landed in 1669, and where she and other Hamiltonians used to picnic on Sunday afternoons. That was in the days when they could still catch a ferry—the Lady Hamilton, and later, the Macassa—at the foot of James Street North; they would take it to the canal, get off for a swim, and then take it over to Lasalle Park to eat. To the east, she can also see the dark and dramatic smokestacks of Stelco where, during the 1970s, her son worked to put himself through university. In the far distance to the east, she can just make out the arch of the Skyway bridge which carries the Queen Elizabeth Highway over the deep canal and narrow beach strip that separate Hamilton Harbour from Lake Ontario.

The woman has lived on the beach strip three times during her life. During the 1980s, she lived in a cottage on Burlington Beach. For that reason, she was designated a "stake-holder" and got to go to environmental meetings where there was much official talk of tearing down the cottages in order to turn the strip into a nature preserve. Earlier, during the 1950s, she lived on the Hamilton side of the beach strip under the Skyway Bridge just as it was being built. It was said at the time that the Skyway would be the most important transportation corridor in Canada, that it would make Southern Ontario powerful and prosperous. Even earlier, during the 1940s, she lived—for a while—in a tent on Van Wagners Beach, but the family had to move when the waves washed them out. That

was during the hard days of the war. The sweeter days of her childhood occurred during the 1930s to the west of Bayfront Park on the headland where Dundurn Castle has stood for well over a hundred years. From where she now stands, she can see that headland and the high-level bridge over the old Desjardins canal—beyond which lies the misty, marshy bay known as Cootes Paradise. She can recall the very path, below the high-level bridge, which she and the other kids would follow down to their secret swimming place. The water was deep and dangerous in the places where the old canal had been dug, but she felt safe in the company of Big Junie, the St. Bernard. Nowadays, it is said, that only toxic carp thrive in the waters of Cootes Paradise and the Bay.¹

The woman's personal history is written on the Bay Area landscape. The nature of the place is ever changing. As she leaves Bayfront Park, on a September day in 1996, the woman remembers a time when the very land on which she now walks was all water. In the past, this was the end of Strachan Street and, during the early 1960s, her cousin's house was at the bottom of the hill with its back door opening onto the bay. The woman knows and cares for the Bay Area and its peoples. Such a knowledge is, of course, personal and interested. The quality and beauty of this particular environment is directly linked to the well-being of her children, her grand-children, and her great-granddaughter. In a different kind of society, she might be an elder: her stories might be told as a matter of course and her knowledge respected. In our society, the stories of ordinary peoples' relationships to ordinary places remain largely a hidden and untapped resource for understanding the complicated, shifting connections between human behaviour and environmental conditions.

The Bay Area is more fortunate than most other ordinary places in that its ecosystem is presently the subject of an ongoing research project, known as the Ecowise Project. The project has been undertaken, in large part, by local researchers who work at McMaster University—which is situated just above the shoreline of Cootes Paradise. The Ecowise Project, from its outset, aimed to be interdisciplinary and participatory in its methodology: it includes researchers from the humanities as well as from the natural and

social sciences, and it actively seeks the involvement of the Hamilton community. Yet, as a recent essay by Ingrid Leman Stefanovic demonstrates, the Ecowise Project has had difficulty in meeting its own admirable objectives. Although the explicit intention of the researchers is to study the *relation* between the human/cultural environment and the natural environment, in fact, "priority is given *implicitly* to traditional natural science perspectives on rehabilitation of an ecosystem."²

Stefanovic's findings are important because they show that, *even at its best*, environmental research is still struggling to find an appropriate process for articulating the deep *connections* between natural environments and human culture. As part of the interview process, Stefanovic asked the Ecowise researchers to speak freely about "their vision of the sense of place of the Hamilton Harbour ecosystem."³ In the process, the researchers became, for a time, story-tellers in their own right. Although the stories are not included in Stefanovic's published account, in her summary, a distinctive pattern emerges: the researcher's stories expressed a considerable degree of detachment from—and even disdain for—Hamilton as a place to live and work:

... several researchers simply disliked the city and avoided taking visitors to the urban areas. Other responses indicated that if the visitors were to be taken to the downtown at all, it was by car, and one would drive through, rather than linger in any area of significance.⁴

The stories just told are too sketchy to represent the lived reality of either an environmental expert or of an ordinary citizen. Yet, they illustrate two distinctive sorts of narratives about the same place; they express contrasting structures of feeling and knowledge: the researcher's academic detachment and the woman's life-long connectedness to the human settlement of the Bay Area. Both sorts of narratives express valuable ways of knowing and caring for the environment of the Bay Area. Many other such place-based stories could be told. To understand the environmental behaviour of individuals, groups and communities, I

would argue, researchers need to know much more about the various structures of feeling and knowledge—including their own—that motivate people in their daily and life-long habits in *relationship* to their local environments. People's stories encode these structures of feeling and knowledge.

During the early seventeenth century, when the first Europeans visited the Bay Area, a people known as the Neutrals lived here, and the land and water were teeming with life, with fish, fowl, wolf, deer, moose, beaver, wild cat, black squirrel, duck, flocks of wild turkey and crane, corn, beans, squash, and pumpkins, chestnuts and apples.⁵ What has happened since then? Telling our stories about the past, as well as about the present, will help us to articulate our own region's historical ecology, "the ongoing dialectical relations between human acts and acts of nature, made manifest in the landscape."⁶ It is important for researchers to collect both historical and contemporary narratives in order to document personal and communal memories of people's activities, habits and feelings relating to the Bay Area environment. The study of historical and contemporary stories would make it possible to trace the informal patterns of use of the Bay, and the social pressures and customs that have shaped usage. Oral testimonies can be used, at the very least, to supplement the official record, which often mutes the voices of ordinary women, children and men. From these materials, we would be able to develop an historical map of the various structures of feeling and knowledge that have informed people's relationships with the Bay; and to trace the historical changes in individual and communal uses of the Bay through the stories of the people who experienced, and continue to experience, those changes.

To understand the linkages between people's lives and the condition of the environment, we need to develop a multilayered sense of place as co-created by generations of diverse peoples that have inhabited, and still inhabit, the Bay Area. To illustrate the rich diversity of stories inscribed on the Bay Area landscape, I recall one historical moment two hundred years ago, in June 1796, when two Devonshire natives, John Graves Simcoe, the Lieutenant-Governor of Upper Canada, and his wife Elizabeth Simcoe walked

on the headland overlooking the Bay (to the east) and, the frog marsh known as Cootes Paradise (to the west). With the same shrewd approach that had improved their Devonshire properties, the Simcoes were planning the future clearing, management, and prosperity of the Bay area. Meanwhile, out on the water, a group of Mohawks were fishing from canoes and catching salmon. At that moment, in June 1796, the Bay Area was a “contact zone” for two competing discourses of wise land use.⁷ Despite displacement from their original homeland to the south, the Mohawk group continued to follow distinctive ecological practices, including minimal interference with the flora and fauna of Cootes Paradise and the Bay. As Elizabeth Simcoe notes in her journal, they did not “trouble themselves” to kill wolves, clear cut forests, or drain swamps.⁸ The Mohawks, it seems, put no stock in industry and development. Their way was to fit in with the place and to live as it required. In *Teachings from the Longhouse*, Chief Jacob Thomas describes the ecological practice of the Mohawk culture as a complex system of communal restraint:

When native people hunted animals, they did so in a way that helped keep a balance. Many people believe that natives lived on venison alone, but that is not true. They changed their diet with each season. In the fall they would go hunting, because there were no more green vegetables; the winter was the time to eat meat and to allow nature to rejuvenate. In June, July, and August, the animal kingdom was restored and native people refrained from hunting.⁹

In the late eighteenth century, both the English and Mohawks were new to the Bay area; they brought with them two very different systems of economy and ecology, two distinct notions of what constitutes “paradise.” The broad narrative strokes of these two systems are well known, but the details, the individual and nuanced stories of how those two systems got played out on the local landscape, are yet to be revealed.

Storytelling as Knowledge-Making

Story-telling remains an important cultural practice by which we, as individuals, transmit our knowledge of nature-as-lived-experience to our children and neighbours. A good story is a nuanced and unique mode of expression, rich in sensual detail, individual gesture, and specific context. As an ancient strategy of survival, story-telling connects a society to its own history and its own place. All of us have unique stories to tell that would particularize our "relationship with nature": significant encounters with wild animals; memories concerning the sacred landscape of childhood; and little undertakings of daily life by which we try to make a difference in the ecological well-being of our households and neighbourhoods. Many individuals—although lacking interest in extremist ideology or talk of a Green revolution—desire to—and indeed are deliberately struggling to—change their own attitudes and habits. As Luc Ferry remarks in *The New Ecological Order*, "The love of nature strikes me as being composed of *democratic passions shared by the immense majority of individuals who wish to avoid a degradation in their quality of life ...*"¹⁰

In intellectual circles, the very words "nature" and "ecology" are understood as contested, historically situated, and highly politicized terms.¹¹ In our communities, we need to negotiate a shared, if shifting, understanding of what we mean by "nature"—in the sense of a mediating structure by which we live together with non-human nature. As Neil Evernden writes, debates about nature are really about "*what constitutes a good life.*"¹² As neighbours, we need to articulate a shared repertoire of stories about local plants, animals, and people, in this case, of the Bay Area. As environmental experts and researchers, we need to start implementing a participatory methodology that would respect people not only as sources but as co-producers of bioregional knowledge.

It must be admitted, however, that stories are not readily translatable into good policy. Nor do they directly serve the interests of decision-makers, self-appointed or otherwise. And it is also the case that, in general, people have lost the habit and art of communal story-telling. Sometimes, during public meetings, people fall into irresponsible complaining and narrative digressions. Even

the most sacred of our indigenous ideas is ever in danger of appropriation and commodification by the global (so-called) village. It is so easy for our words to reproduce, or to get co-opted into—the multinational project of management and mastery. Our stories often unwittingly personalize and animate prefab narrative patterns—such patterns as, the nostalgic longing for a past harmonic estate; the Disneyfication¹³ of our encounters with wild animals; or the utopian designing of the Green city. The stories we create are rarely as free and as good as we might want them to be.

In such a world, how do we, as citizens, learn to tell good stories that exemplify our expertise and responsibilities as inhabitants of the local environment? By what method, by what process, can public servants and researchers learn to listen and to interpret these stories justly without imposing their own metanarratives? How might the positive—and often intangible—values found in local stories (such as affection for one's home place) get translated into community-directed and community-implemented environmental policy? By what criteria do we—as citizens—even begin to sort out what constitutes a “positive,” as opposed to a suspect, value? And, ultimately, *how* do we, as local and powerless communities, translate our stories, which often reflect diverse and conflicting desires, activities, interests and philosophies, into a coherent approach to environmental caretaking? The answers to these questions, obviously, will not be determined by one essay writer. The collective process by which a multiplicity of local narratives will eventually get transformed into good practices remains to be negotiated, in myriad ways, at the level of the bioregion.

Practising Green Civility

The book *Winning Back the Words*, by Mary Richardson, Joan Sherman and Michael Gismondi, tells an instructive story of a group of citizens in northern Alberta who challenged the expert environmental claims made on behalf of the proposed Alberta-Pacific (Alpac) bleached kraft pulp mill. In order to criticize Alpac's plans, during public hearings, the group used a number of interesting rhetorical tools: “song, poetry, humour, story-telling,

life-history, and outrageous or arresting metaphor.”¹⁴ Nevertheless, the outcome was discouraging: even after the public hearings were held, local stories were told, and the appointed environmental review committee finally advised against the project, the contested project went ahead anyway. Local environmental knowledge was no match for officialdom, once it had made its plans. Moreover, the hearing process itself divided and disrupted the community; it intensified local confrontations over the environment “rather than facilitating a search for common ground.”¹⁵ Given the flaws in the process, the writers of *Winning Back the Words* make two recommendations relevant to the concerns of this paper: 1) that we, as citizens, use innovative literary tools to critique suspect projects and to invent alternative solutions to local problems; and 2) that we develop “sustained political activity” beyond the hearing process to allow for “greater involvement of non-scientists in environmental decision-making.”¹⁶ Many of us in other communities have come to similar conclusions. Thus, we are seeking new modes of gathering to negotiate our collective relationships with nature. We are seeking to create effective “rhetorical spaces”—to borrow Lorraine Code’s phrase¹⁷—that legitimate, rather than discredit, the good stories of ordinary people as co-producers of environmentally sound knowledge and behaviour.

The greening of communities requires the conscious invention and deployment of appropriate cultural—as well as material and social—technologies.¹⁸ Story-telling is a cultural technology of connectivity and groundedness; stories are told in the flesh, on the ground, by a body in a specific place. In “Scattered Notes on the Relation Between Language and the Land,” David Abram claims that oral cultures are conversant with nature; they are, he says, in themselves, to some extent, “participant with the voices of wolves, wind, and waves—participant, that is, with the encompassing discourse of an animate earth.”¹⁹ Oral stories are less distanced, less abstracted from their wild origins, than written texts. Even within highly literate cultures, the very telling of stories always occurs in a specific place and thus reenacts “the earthly rootedness of human language.”²⁰ To listen and to honour the stories of our

neighbours is to respect and to nurture indigenous knowledges and initiatives. As inhabitants of the Bay Area, we have a shared interest in knowing the historical ecology of our homeplace. It matters to me and my neighbours that we develop ways of life, as well as scientific projects, to ensure the return of the salmon and the frog to banish the carp from Cootes Paradise.

The word "story" is perhaps too general a term to designate the democratic form of narrative I am advocating. I also want to bring into play the term "testimony"—or "testimonial narrative." The testimony is a public, yet personal, narrative form which uses life experience strategically as evidence of the truth of the speaker's words. In a recent essay, John Beverley discusses the emergence of the *testimonio* in Latin American societies as a democratic form of narrative that lets people speak for themselves, to bear witness, as it were, to the urgent issues in their lives.²¹ Even when the testimonies are written down, the narrative form attempts to approximate the original orality of its production as a living testimonial to the urgency of the problems and struggles for survival related by the story-teller as witness. It is my contention that, if testimonial stories regarding the speaker's relationship with the environment were told in legitimating public spaces, this very process itself would indicate to the speaker that the telling is to be mindful and responsible. Such stories are not merely subjective; they become inter-subjective because they presuppose that tellers and listeners are engaged respectfully in a dialogic process.²²

These days, there are many hopeful signs in the Bay Area. The year 1996 is a special year here because the city of Hamilton is celebrating its one-hundred-and-fiftieth birthday. Every day, stories illustrating affection and concern for the natural and built environment of the Bay Area appear, for example, on CHCH TV and in the *Hamilton Spectator*. During the past year or so, there has been a marked improvement in local cultural literacy. I conclude by mentioning just two of these initiatives: first, the recent publication of *On the Edge: Artistic Visions of a Shrinking Landscape*, edited by Catherine Gibbon, a book in which some of the finest local artists explore and celebrate the deep connections between the identity of the people and the eco-system of the Bay

Area.²³ And second, there has emerged a unique group called “Our Shared Home: An Ecomusée Initiative,”—which is inventing “a museum without walls,” featuring as its main attractions the natural and human treasures of the Bay Area. The Ecomusée aims to nurture “a shared attitude of respect, appreciation, and responsibility for our home place.”²⁴ Its activities include scheduled events in various places around the Bay Area, guided by knowledgeable inhabitants. Anyone interested is encouraged to lead an Ecomusée event and to tell a story about a particular place in our watershed which he or she knows and loves.

The Ecomusée is an important, and potentially transformative, initiative for two reasons: first, it structures its activities around the place-based knowledge and story-telling of ordinary citizens; and second, it creates appropriate rhetorical spaces in which to tell our own stories: a gathering in Rock Chapel to watch a lunar eclipse, a neighbourhood stroll through Hess Village, a story-telling circle on the Battlefield of Stoney Creek. As yet, the Ecomusée is a small group, made up mainly of local historians, outdoor enthusiasts, students and teachers. Over time, if the group stays true to its principles, a multiplicity of people’s diverse environmental narratives will emerge. In its own modest way, the Ecomusée is struggling to put into practice a new sort of civility—a green civility—based on bioregional values and knowledges. Such local initiatives are neither naive nor inconsequential. On the contrary, to tell and to listen to our own Bay Area stories is to bear witness to the possibility of co-inventing a good future together on common ground with all our human and non-human neighbours.

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References

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²Ingrid Leman Stefanovic, "Interdisciplinarity and Wholeness: Lessons From Eco-Research on the Hamilton Harbour Ecosystem." *Environments*. Vol. 23 #3 (1996), p. 88.

³*Ibid.*, p. 86.

⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 87-8.

⁵Frank Ridley, *Archaeology of the Neutral Indian* (Port Credit, Ontario: Etobicoke Historical Society, Ontario, 1961), pp. 1-5. Also see William G. Dean, "The Ontario Landscape, circa A.D. 1600," in *Aboriginal Ontario: Historical Perspectives on the First Nations*, ed. Edward S. Rogers and Donald B. Smith (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1994.), pp. 3-20.

⁶Carole L. Crumley, "Historical Ecology: A Multidimensional Ecological Orientation," *Historical Ecology: Cultural Knowledge and Changing Landscapes*, ed. Carole L. Crumley (Santa Fe, New Mexico: School of American Research Press, 1994), p. 9.

⁷Marie Louise Pratt defines "contact zones" as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple, with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today." In "Arts of the Contact Zone," *Profession 91*, (New York: Modern Language Association, 1991), p. 34.

⁸Lady Elizabeth Simcoe, *The Diary of Mrs. John Graves Simcoe*, ed. J. Ross Robertson (Toronto: W. Briggs, 1911), pp. 319-324.

⁹Chief Jacob Thomas, with Terry Boyle, *Teachings from the Longhouse* (Toronto: Stoddard, 1994), p. 130.

¹⁰Luc Ferry, *The New Ecological Order*, Trans. Carol Volk (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995), p. 143; his italics.

¹¹For further reading, see *Languages of Nature: Critical Essays on Science and Literature*, ed. L. J. Jordanova (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1986), and Neil Evernden, *The Social Creation of Nature*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

¹²Evernden, *The Social Creation of Nature*, p. 5.

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¹³Alexander Wilson, *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1991), pp. 176-190.

¹⁴Mary Richardson, Joan Sherman, and Michael Gismondi, *Winning Back the Words: Confronting Experts in an Environmental Public Hearing* (Toronto: Garamond Press, 1993), p. 16.

¹⁵*Idem.*

¹⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 175-176.

¹⁷Lorraine Code, *Rhetorical Spaces: Essays on Gendered Locations* (New York: Routledge, 1995), ix-x.

¹⁸"Greening" refers to the ongoing process of effecting a *voluntary* transformation of the behaviour and sensibilities of the peoples of industrialized societies in light of emerging ecological knowledges. See Sylvia Bowerbank, "Towards the Greening of Literary Studies," *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée*, 22: 3-4 (September/December 1995), p. 443.

¹⁹David Abram, "Scattered Notes on the Relation Between Language and the Land," in *Place of the Wild: A Wildlands Anthology*, ed. David Clarke Burks (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1994), p. 122.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 127.

²¹John Beverley, "The Margin at the Centre: On *Testimonio* (Testimonial Narrative)," *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*, eds. Sidonie Smith & Julia Watson, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1992), pp. 93-94.

²²Code, *Rhetorical Spaces*, pp. 60-67.

²³*On the Edge: Artistic Visions of a Shrinking Landscape*. Ed. Catherine Gibbon, (Erin, Ontario, The Boston Mills Press, 1995).

²⁴Information about "Our Shared Home: An Ecomusée Initiative" can be obtained by contacting Ecomusée, c/o Wayne Terryberry or Cheryl Lousley, Department of Athletics & Recreation, Room IWC 201B, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario L8S 4K1. Telephone: (905) 525-9140, ext. 23879; FAX: (905) 526-1573; e-mail: terryber@mcmail.cis.mcmaster.ca