

Seminar 49. Unearthing

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Seminar Leaders:

Emily Rowe, Queen Mary University, London.

Kristen Abbott Bennett, Framingham State University (*in absentia*)

Abstracts

Mira 'Assaf

Multiracial, Queer Conviviality at Cleopatra's Court

Abstract: Invested in an anti-racist and queer reading that destabilizes the centrality of the Western optic, my analysis of *Antony and Cleopatra* reclaims the historical and dramatic Cleopatra from colonial teleology while resisting the compulsions of heteronormative chronology. Instead of imposing a Romanized racial geography, Cleopatra's position must be reconsidered within the sacred and cultural frameworks that defined her rule and identity. Specifically, I dwell on how her queenship is experienced by people from the land, a perspective that highlights the particular values of a multiracial, queer conviviality. This nuanced work of recovery of a people, their forms of sociality, and their knowledge systems excavates Arab and Muslim cosmogonies as counterparts to Plutarch and situates their perspective as central to the play's critical genealogy. Viewed through the lenses of multiracial conviviality and the improvisational assemblages that enact a form of queer worldmaking, *Antony and Cleopatra*, I argue, presents the diverse social constructions and value systems of the Muslim, Jewish, and Christian South Mediterranean as existing beyond the imposed edicts of European powers. Attending Cleopatra's performance of queenship as a culturally specific mode of governance enables me to trouble colonial formations of history and geography and to move beyond binaries such as Roman masculinity, austerity and rationality versus Egyptian femininity, excess and sensuality. It also allows me to disrupt conventions of European injury versus local resistance, and in so doing, center a more nuanced and dynamic conception of the play's geopolitical and cultural dimensions.

Frederika Bain

The Place of Roots

This paper will discuss Shakespearean and other early modern depictions of digging generally, and root-digging specifically, as a means of marking, even effecting, transition between social states: noble and common, civilized and wild. Digging figures not only as a marker of (lower) status but also, and more crucially, as a means of collapsing distinctions between classes. John Ball's question "When Adam delv'd and Eve span, who was then a gentleman?," which helped to spark the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, had attained the status of a proverb by the sixteenth century; the idea takes physical form in the activities and writings of Gerrard Winstanley and the Diggers, a group of Christian agrarian socialists and guerrilla farmers in the mid-seventeenth century who advocated for the abolition of private property and the planting of food crops—among them roots such as carrots and parsnips—in common lands. Digging and eating roots serve as markers of a deliberate move from a cultivated to a wilderness space: Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*, Caliban in *The Tempest*, Guiderius and Arviragus in *Cymbeline*, and, most markedly, Timon in *Timon of Athens* "eat root" (Timon 1.2.68) as a way of occupying a liminal and even transformative space between court and forest, town and waste. Unlike wild game, a product of the uncultivated waste not shown to "wild" the higher-status characters who hunt and consume it, roots are dug and eaten by characters who accept, even embrace, their own uncultivated nature as a considered alternative to civilization and its constraints and controls.

Shannon Jane Garner, Ph.D.

Re-earthing: Ecofeminist Preservation in the Early Modern Larder

This seminar paper explores the cyclical and seasonal interactions between early modern women and the productive economic and epistemological subterranean space of the early modern root cellar. The larder becomes a site of unearthing and re-earthing as organic goods are harvested and then buried again through various preservation techniques. Through an ecomaterialist and ecofeminist lens, "mother earth" emerges as a domestic space where humans hoard the riches they extract from the feminized body of the fecund ground. Jane Bennett's concept of vibrant materiality is useful in thinking through the larder's inherent liveliness. The collective contents of the cellar are an agentic assemblage that must be constantly mothered and maintained by the early modern housewife.

This paper owes much to Wendy Wall's discussion of seasoning as a temporal act. A successful larder is kept through a strict adherence to seasonal actions. Early modern housewives knew that performing the right kinds of labor at the correct times allowed for the bounties of the garden, orchards, and pastures to exist outside of their season and within ideal timelines of potencies. This paper also questions how early modern women saw their actions reflected in similar acts of nonhuman attention to seasonality and survival—what kind of animal and insect caches, larders, and hibernating spaces influenced and competed with human preservation? Using women's recipe books, contemporary husbandry treatises, and poetic uses of larding, seasoning, and conservation, this project aims to unearth early modern ecomaterial and ecofeminist interactions with the subterranean.

Molly Hand

“To plant thee . . . and make thee full of growing”: Unearthing Skull Moss in Early Modern English Culture

This is an essay about skull moss, or, as it was referred to in herbals and other texts, *usnea*, a moss that appeared to thrive on human skulls and was considered by early moderns to be an efficacious ingredient with unusual occult properties. While considered in broader discussions of *materia medica*, corpse medicine or medical cannibalism, and the mid-seventeenth-century debate around the “weapon salve,” skull moss has received relatively little sustained attention as a distinctive form of lively matter. Here, I want to think about how early moderns thought and felt with and about skull moss, and how this material complicates and animates the skulls of early modern culture. Informed by botanical, medical, and occult discourses, early modern understandings of *usnea* encourage us to revisit how we, modern readers and scholars, view skulls within contemporary cultural productions – beyond *memento mori* or *vanitas* emblems, skulls were substrates for moss with potent healing properties. Drawing disciplinary insights from ecocriticism, posthumanism, and archaeology, and histories of science, medicine, and the occult, this essay unearths a specimen that, like moss more generally, is an easily overlooked but crucial form of entangled life.

Miranda Hannasch

Unburying Bodies: The Figure of the Grave Robber in Early Modern Texts

Scholars like Carolyn Merchant have long examined the tradition of early modern mining critique which compares the extraction of metals to a bodily violation, akin to maiming or rape—as in, for instance, early modern translations of Agricola's *De Re Metallica*, which summarizes classical critiques of Earth as a "kindly mother" whose evil children defy her strictures, and which quotes Ovid on the cruelty of those who penetrate unwelcome into "the entrails of the earth."

Less attention has been paid, however, to another incisive mining metaphor: that of the tomb robber. In Book II of *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser's Mammon condemns the avarice of a miner who would not only wound "the quiet wombe / Of his great Grandmother" but also profanely disturb the peace of her burial ground: "the hid treasures in her sacred tombe, / With Sacriledge to dig." This Oedipal offense thus doubles as a necrophilic one, akin to the imagined invasion of worms in a dead woman's womb-like marble vault in Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress."

What discourses of tomb robbery do these metaphors participate in, and what can they teach us about how to read Spenser's mining critique? My paper seeks to better understand the figure of the tomb robber in the early modern imagination, tracing what came before the (much better-known) association of anatomists with widespread corpse thefts in the 1700s. In the process, I call attention to how tomb robbery became entangled with accusations of witchcraft, Catholicism, and other forms of earthly "sacrilege" by looking at two key moments. First, I examine how the 1590–1591 trials of Agnes Simpson and others influenced the later writing of the 1604 "Act against Conjuratiōn," which equally declared it a felony punishable by death to "take up any dead man, woman, or child, out of his, her, or their grave" or to "declare in what place any Treasure of Golde or Silver should or might be found or had in the earth." Second, I examine popular anti-Catholic critiques of the lucrative relic trade, as found in polemics like Andrew Willet's condemnation of those that would "dismember [saints'] bodies, and [...] rake them out of their graues," and consider how Spenser's Earth can be seen as another one of his 'shadows' of feminine sainthood.

Inhoo Kim

Unearthing Owing: Generational Time and Reconfiguration of Care in *King Lear*

This paper reads Shakespeare's *King Lear* at the intersection of aging studies and ecocriticism, focusing on how shifting conceptions of time reshape the meaning of care, obligation, and land. I distinguish between general time, a linear and contractual temporality that imagines the future as something to be managed through succession and exchange, and generational time, a broader timescale that extends beyond individual lifespan toward interdependence, shared vulnerability, and return.

In the opening "division-of-the-kingdom" scene, Lear operates within general time, treating land as transferable property and expecting filial care as the return on that transfer. When this exchange breaks down, the play displaces Lear from the household into the heath, where the storm exposes the limits of contractual obligation. Lear's address to the elements, "You owe me no subscription," marks a crucial moment in which the language of owing shifts away from filial and political relations and toward the nonhuman. The play pushes this shift further through Lear's encounter with Poor Tom, where "Thou ow'st the worm no silk" reorients owing as ecological indebtedness rather than a demand secured by property. Tracing these scenes, I argue that *King Lear* "unearths" the temporal assumptions that bind land to obligation and makes possible a reconfiguration of care from transactional entitlement toward a more reciprocal model grounded in generational time.

Ian F. MacInnes

"The Fat Earth's Store": Vibrant Early Modern Soil Horizons

A decade ago, the International Union of Soil Scientists called for an International Decade of Soils, calling attention to the plight of the world's soils: polluted, compacted, degraded, and neglected. Last year, in a conversation at the World Congress of Environmental History, Ursula Münster noted the closing of this decade as a period which witnessed "the vibrant and emerging field of what some call 'Soil Humanities.'" The humanities, Münster said, "help us to imagine how sustainable human-soil relationships can look in the future, and to realise that different ... human-soil relationships have been possible at different places and in different times."

One such place and time is early modern England because for the early moderns, the soil was an increasingly overdetermined site in which important contradictions were negotiated. Sixteenth-

and seventeenth-century England was undergoing its own soil crisis, as its animal-centered economy drove an agricultural revolution focused on increasing the fertility of fields and pastures. Agricultural works spent considerable efforts on soil improvement, making substances like muck, marl, and dung into common verbs, and topographical works like Drayton's *Poly-Olbion* distinguished regions by the quality of their soil and by extension the plants that grew upon it. Added to this, increasing attention to natural disasters such as floods, earthquakes, and landslips challenged the very solidity and stability of the earth.

Using a variety of agricultural and literary works, I demonstrate that early modern English topsoil was not a passive, inert, and stable layer but a dynamic and active contact zone, a co-producer of human relations and subjectivities—in literature as in reality. I suggest these qualities make it of particular interest to modern environmental studies because improving human-soil relations today requires going beyond the traditional view of soil as a passive layer, inert and often invisible, and recognizing instead “the dynamic vitality of soil itself.”

Kirsten Schuhmacher

A Golden Worlde in This Our Yron Age: New World Antero-Extractivism and the Making of an English Golden World

George Chapman's under-theorized masque, *The Memorable Masque at Middle Temple and Lincoln's Inn*, presents a troublingly ambiguous image of New World extraction and England's nascent imperial project. Performed following the marriage of Princess Elizabeth Stewart to Frederick V on February 14, 1613, Chapman's masque imagines New World “Virginian” riches and peoples as governed by Pluto; yet as the masque literally opens the subterranean Virginian world to its audience and stages the allegorical figure of Honor who reforms Pluto, the play reforms the anxieties around what I am terming New World *antero-extractivism*, which emphasizes the imagined potential of extraction before it becomes situated in Szeman and Wenzel's formulation of the difference “between extraction as a concrete, physical practice... and extractivism as the cultural and ideological rationale...”

Pairing the masque with Chapman's poem “De Guiana, Carmen Epicum” (1596), the essay shows how Chapman's interest in *translatio imperii* and the Classical Golden Age shapes his understanding of extractivism as essential to creating a reformed English Golden World within the corrupt iron (or stony) age. This essay interrogates Chapman's fixation on Classical precedent, the Golden Age, and imperial futures, asking questions such as:

- What if the underground and its potential riches are made visible?
- How does Chapman imagine the gold of the New World and its use for the English monarchy?
- What are the implications of Honor’s reformation of Pluto?
- How does imperial precedent shape antero-extractive visions of the New World?

Naya Tsentourou

Full Fathom Five: Depth and Extraction in Early Modern Accounts of Pearl Diving

My paper draws on extracts from *Histoire Naturelle des Indes* (1586), José de Acosta’s *Moral and Natural History of the Indies* (1590), and Richard Eden’s translation of Peter Martyr d’Anghiera’s *De Orbo Novo* (*Decades of the New World*, 1555) to discuss how the activities of pearl fisheries in the Caribbean and beyond were disseminated to early modern English readers and how they fed a fascination with the seabed’s hidden treasures—a fascination captured in Ariel’s song from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*.

Close reading these histories and Shakespeare’s play, I aim to show how writing on the extracting economy of pearl fishing relied on a rhetoric of obsessively measuring depth and skilled labour, charting the incessant suffocating movement between “pulling up” and “diving down.” Printed accounts mirrored the industry’s exploitative politics: fishing for pearls and reporting on the practice for European audiences involved reducing the coerced Indigenous and African bodies to instruments. Finally, I examine how the success of this economy relied on the enslaved body’s perceived (naked) intimacy with the seabed, an intimacy figured as inaccessible to those on the surface.

Critical questions include:

- How does *The Tempest* participate in or shape the rhetoric of depth and extraction circulating in natural histories and travel accounts?
- What are the ethical implications of acknowledging the early modern seabed as a site of value, labour, and colonial exploitation?