

2003

# An intimate geology : cyborg writing and history as loss in Charlotte Smith's Beachy head

Sunny L. Bavaro  
*Lehigh University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://preserve.lehigh.edu/etd>

---

## Recommended Citation

Bavaro, Sunny L., "An intimate geology : cyborg writing and history as loss in Charlotte Smith's Beachy head" (2003). *Theses and Dissertations*. Paper 777.

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Lehigh Preserve. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Lehigh Preserve. For more information, please contact [preserve@lehigh.edu](mailto:preserve@lehigh.edu).

Bavaro, Sunny L.

An Intimate  
Geology: Cyborg  
Writing and  
History as Loss in  
Charlotte Smith's  
Beachy Head

May 2003

An Intimate Geology: Cyborg Writing and History as Loss in Charlotte Smith's *Beachy*

*Head*

by

Sunny L. Bavaro

A Thesis

Presented to the Graduate Research Committee

Of Lehigh University

In Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

English

Lehigh University

04/25/03

This thesis is accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the Master of Arts

4/24/03  
Date \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Thesis Advisor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Chair of Department

For Scott P. Gordon,

M-J Haronian,

and

Beth A. Dolan

for

their certainly showing me women's science matters deeply

## Contents

Contents.....	iv
Abstract.....	1
A Cyborgian Primer.....	2
Charlotte’s Loss-Body, As Advertised.....	7
Perceptual Inversion and the Irony of Authority.....	11
Loss-Cyborg and Trickster: An Intimate Geology.....	14
The Loss of Composure – Model Bodies and Giant Histories.....	20
The Unsettling Possibilities of a “Drown Cor’sse:” A (Never)Ending Mo(u)rning.....	24
Works Cited.....	26
Vita.....	27

## Abstract

Using Donna J. Haraway's philosophy of cyborgian-feminist objectivity and the notion that female bodies are made to bare loss within discourses of history, I argue that Charlotte Smith 1807 poem *Beachy Head* engages in a scientific thought experiment: what result would be created if a body marked by loss were to engage in an empiricist project? What would happen to the empirical scene if the status of bodies was, ironically and passionately, one of visible loss? In *Beachy Head*, Smith's blasphemous and ironically faithful stance toward empiricism brings into relief traces of bodies that haunt both historical and empiricist discourses. The poem envisions geographical history as a discourse that can account for loss-bodies, or bodies for which loss is always present.

## A Cyborgian Primer

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant --  
Success in Circuit lies  
Too bright for our infirm Delight  
The Truth's superb surprise  
As Lightning to the Children eased  
With explanation kind  
The Truth must dazzle gradually  
Or every man be blind --

-Emily Dickinson

Far from signaling a walling off of people from other living beings, cyborgs signal disturbingly and pleurably tight coupling .....Cyborg writing is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other.

- Donna J. Haraway in "A Cyborg Manifesto: A Science Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century"

Cyborgs are everywhere when we know how to slant our look – even in Romantic poetry and fiction. In her by now (in)famous essay, "A Cyborg Manifesto: A Science Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" Donna Haraway shows us that we need to take these figures seriously when we meditate on linguistic production. Noting the "tight coupling" of art and science, she says "from the early starring of romanticism in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, many poets and biologists have believed that poetry and organisms are siblings" (200). Frankenstein's monster was a cyborg, a ball of confused boundaries between the organic and the technological, proof that scientific inquiry lacks innocence and giving rise to the suggestion that materiality is

created through the very scientific investigations that claim to merely name. In fact, one of Haraway's descriptions of a cyborg sounds exactly like a feminist description of Frankenstein's monster: "But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential" (151). Ironically, the creature's faithfulness to his Father is also unfaithful to Victor's wish to disown the creation. Thus, having been marked illegitimate has legitimized and empowered the creature in his ability for destruction, rendering Victor's condoning of the creature inessential. Looking through cyborg eyes, such irony and contradictions are keys to a feminist standpoint of power, and such destructive tendencies on the part of such creatures need to be encouraged. We need to look to cyborgs as mappings of just how inessential Fathers really are, look to them for ways to refigure illegitimacy as a code of conduct with positive implications for feminist epistemology. For conventional science, bodies, particularly ones marked as monstrous, are a serious and threatening problem.

The body of the observer has a long history of being disciplined in empiricism. Haraway comments on the status of bodies in the seventeenth-century concept of the "Modest witness," a term she lifts from the book *Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle and the Experimental Life* by Shapin and Schaffer (Haraway 23). As the ideal empiricist, the modest witness "must be invisible, that is, an inhabitant of the potent 'unmarked category,' which is constructed by the extraordinary conventions of self-invisibility" (*Modest* 23). As such, this traditional modest witness was/is a man of the "culture of no culture" (*Modest* 23). He is "self-invisible, transparent, so that [his] reports would not be polluted by the body" (*Modest* 32).

It is clear that there were specific criteria about who was qualified to be a modest witness and who wasn't. Haraway notes, here reading Shapin, that, "as 'covered' persons, subsumed under their husbands or fathers, women could not have the necessary honor at stake [to be a proper modest witness]" adding that "the preexisting dependent status of women simply precluded their epistemological, and for the most part physical, presence in the most important scenes of action in that period of science" (*Modest* 27).

For Haraway, this search for innocence, this "god-trick" of a modest witness seeing everything from nowhere is what makes techno-monsters or as she refers to it, "the cannibal-eye of masculinist extra-terrestrial projects for excremental second birthing" that must be debunked (189). And the debunking of the authority of this "god-trick" becomes the most pressing project for feminists writing epistemology. In a section that is worth quoting at length, she declares that she wants to reclaim an epistemology that is not innocent, one that revels in the polluting brought about by observer's bodies, one that makes use of, for feminism, what conventional science tried to erase but was there all along – the marked body:

I want a feminist writing of the body that metaphorically emphasizes vision again, because we need to reclaim that sense to find our way through all the visualizing tricks and powers of modern sciences and technologies that have transformed the objectivity debates .... So, not so perversely, objectivity turns out to be about particular and specific embodiment ... The moral is simple: only partial perspective promises objective vision. Partial perspective can be held accountable for both its promising and its destructive monsters. ... Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. In this way we might become answerable for what we learn how to see (189-90).

The emphasis on sight exposes that the body is always present in observation. Ironically, objectivity is found where it is least expected -- in particularity and embodied subjectivity. Perversity becomes a virtue and female embodiment matters as knowledge. It imagines: what would be produced if monstrosities – a being marked by blurred boundaries, excessive in its disruption -- were unfaithful to their fathers, were blasphemous in their faith in science? What if we abandoned wholeness and invisibility as an authorized ground from which to look at the world and, rather, took seriously knowledge seen through cyborg eyes, a knowledge marked by partiality, situatedness and play of boundaries? What if we were to shift our vision at those moments where we can't see authorized knowledge?

Just as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* provides us a space to think about what is at stake in our vision, I would like to argue that Charlotte Smith's poem, *Beachy Head*, published within fifteen years of the novel, provides us with a deep meditation on the powers of feminist objectivity and teaches us what is possible when marked observers are blasphemous in their taking up positions that conventional science bars them from. Anne D. Wallace shows us in her recent essay that Smith's meditation on natural science in *Beachy Head*, especially her working with fossils, enacts a crisis in empiricism, a crisis that calls into question both the "authority of science and that of conventional aesthetics" (83). Whereas the failure of empiricism in *Beachy Head* leads Wallace to concentrate on the latter, namely "a near-fatal aesthetic experiment in which the picturesque turns its anti-authoritarian techniques upon itself," (79) I wish to argue that there is an additional

thought experiment going on in the poem involving the discourse of natural history.

Feminist historicist Louise Fradenburg gives us an insightful framework within which we can think of women in relation to history, and here I would include natural history. She says:

For if, and when, woman is constructed as the site of loss – made responsible, in any way, for mortality – her capacity to participate in that form of tribal or cultural knowledge which we call history, will inevitably be in doubt or denied all together (Fradenburg 196).

In this, women are marked in very particular way regarding the historical record. But Haraway encourages us to see such bodies of discursive illegitimacy, or linguistically polluted cyborgs, as having strategic potential for feminist liberation: “[the cyborg] is the self feminists must code” (Cyborg 163). This seems a productive way to think about Smith’s work and life, both of which were marked by maternal and financial losses<sup>1</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> For more on how Smith’s multiple poverties affected her person and creative life, see Judith Stanton’s article “Charlotte Smith’s ‘Literary Business:’ Income, Patronage and Indigence”

## Charlotte's loss-body, as advertised

The "Advertisement" that begins Charlotte Smith's volume *Beachy Head, Fables, and Other Poems*<sup>2</sup> is haunted by the traces of loss. It begins as an apology from the publisher for the delay of the collection. It seems that the author died leaving her collection without a preface. The delay was for two reasons: in part because "there was some reason to suppose [Smith] herself had written" a preface, and "partly from an intention of annexing a short account of her life" (215). In place of the autobiographical preface, a preface is included that marks the loss of Smith's body. The preface evokes Smith's dead body in the language of illness and memorial: the sentence "haven fallen a victim to a long and painful illness, on the 28<sup>th</sup> of October last," marks her body as a site of mortality, marks it as a loss-body<sup>3</sup>.

Quickly, however, the author of the preface appears to indicate anxiety about the closeness between Smith's loss-body and her body of work. Remembering Fradenburg's insistence on about the barring of women from discourses of history, I want to argue that this anxiety is one caused by the closeness of Smith's body to the re-telling of the authoritative history of the birth of the collection. Smith's own loss-body is barred from inclusion in the historical narrative of the very body of work she has created. In order to finally be published, Smith's loss-body must be relegated to the proper place for female bodies – the narrative of biography: after it was decided on the "authority of her own

---

<sup>2</sup> All poems referenced are from *Poems of Charlotte Smith*, edited by Stuart Curran

<sup>3</sup> I will use "loss-body," rather than "lost-body" to retain the sense of continuous and material presence of loss that I believe Fradenburg intends us to take from her discussion of discursive history and women's bodies.

nearest relatives” that the publication of her letters and other biographical pieces were to be part of a separate and “more enlarged plan,” the collection was finally released to the public.

This separation between Smith’s “biographical memoirs” and the “present publication” that *Beachy Head* is included in seems ironic given the poet’s own foregrounding of the close ties between artistic endeavors published in her lifetime and her often tragic position as female social subject. Certainly the “Advertisement” works to dramatize the exact themes of loss that often consumed the prefaces that Smith wrote herself<sup>4</sup>. Although there are countless letters and personal papers available to attest to the profound sense of loss that Smith felt as the wife of a debtor, her imaginative works also testify. Included with her collection of poems written in form very much interested in meditating on and memorializing loss, the seven prefaces to her *Elegiac Sonnets* are increasingly urgent narrations of lost property. “For what expectation could I entertain of resisting such calamities as the detention of their property has brought on my children?” the poet asks her reader in the preface to the second volume, and she continues to detail the loss of her daughter, a topic of importance in much of her poems in the Sonnets. She suggests that the loss of ownership of the money owed to her has caused “irremediable misfortunes” and eventually charged with “feigning sorrow,” she takes on those who would also charge her ““with querulous egotism”” (8, also see page 9). It is clear that she

---

<sup>4</sup> In a graduate seminar that I participated in, several of my peers worked very hard to invalidate Smith’s authority based on this very insistence that when reading her work the reader never forget her debilitating socio-economic position. The sexism and classism of these statements which termed Smith as “whiny,” “chatty,” and “tiresome,” to name just a few, appear to me to be the playing out of Fradenburg’s statement about female bodies as loss. The more she testified in the poetic history of her own work, the less authority she had as romantic poet on the level of Wordsworth, et al.

not only wants us to have her losses in the back of her mind as we read her verse, but she wants it perfectly clear that those in power whom she terms “the censors of literary production” are actively preventing her loss-body from being visible in her poetry.

Similarly, even as the “Advertisement” tries to erase her loss-body by trying to separate her biography as a different matter altogether, it is ironically faithful to Smith’s foregrounding of her loss-body at the very moment of the attempt at erasure. In fact, *Beachy Head* appears to be the most polluted by Smith’s death. We are told “that the increasing debility of its author has been the cause of [the poem] being left in an imperfect state, will it is hoped be sufficient apology” (215). As such, the “Advertisement” makes us aware that the poem is haunted by the traces of Smith’s loss-body, her decaying and diminished faculties brought on by “long and painful illness.” The text may have survived the loss of Smith, but it is a text is marked by her loss-body.

In another moment of irony,<sup>5</sup> the “Advertisement” also tries to gain authority from marking Smith’s body as loss. The assertion that the poems were written during “the few and short intervals of ease which her infirmities permitted her to enjoy; yet [the poems] the bear the most unquestionable evidence of the same undiminished genius, spirit, and imagination, which so imminently distinguished her former productions” implies that her body has always been one of authorized loss. Of course, on one hand this could be read as a plea, one that begs the reader to excuse her of her illness, to valorize Smith to have been able to write such incredible poetry in spite of her illness, but if we prioritize the concerns Smith exposed regarding her poetry, the passage seems to suggest that her state

---

<sup>5</sup> the importance of this irony will become clearer as this essay unfolds.

of mind during the writing of *Beachy Head* was no more diminished than before.

Coupled with Smith's biography and the notion of female bodies as loss-bearers, the

"Advertisement" itself sets up bodies situated as marked by loss as a valid position from which to speak with authority.

## Perceptual Inversion and the Irony of Authority

“Blasphemy is not apostasy. Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true. At the centre of my ironic faith, by blasphemy, is the image of the cyborg”

– Donna J. Haraway

I would like to argue that *Beachy Head*, as a poem prefaced by the loss-body of Charlotte Smith, engages in a scientific thought experiment: what result would be created if a body marked by loss were to engage in an empiricist project? What would happen to the empirical scene if the status of bodies was, ironically and passionately, one of visible loss? I want to argue that Smith’s blasphemous and ironically faithful stance toward empiricism brings into relief the traces of bodies that haunt conventional empiricism. In practicing feminist objectivity, the vision of the world that her loss-body bears is a concern for geological history as a discourse that must account for loss-bodies. Charlotte Smith shows us that natural science is a history of loss. To put it simply: the discourse produced from, or born from, a body made to bear loss will be, of course, marked by loss.

This begins to make sense of Smith’s seemingly disparaging remarks against science at line 390 of the poem. As Wallace claims, “... the phrasing of [theoretical] possibilities as questions and their recognizable relationships to competing geological theories” leads to an indictment of science’s inability to make a “positive claim to knowledge of the relationship between the material world and our experience of it” (83). Within Wallace’s framework, this marks a “dissolution of conventional aesthetics” (83). I would argue that there is another epistemological crisis happening here that necessitates bringing together Haraway’s notions of particularity and Judith Pascoe’s assertion that there exists a “feminized authority, an authority dependent on the particular,

the subjective, and the fanciful ....” (83). Although I agree with Wallace’s assessment that there is no positive authority established at the comparable nexus of aesthetics and geology in *Beachy Head*, I do think there is a feminized authority at the nexus of empiricism and geological history, among other histories in the text. It is an authority brought to bear by feminist objectivity.

Using Haraway to flesh out the ideological stakes involved for a scientific discourse of “the particular, [and] the subjective” that Pascoe sights/cites in Smith’s poetry, it is the emphasis on sight, particularity, and bodies that make meaning in Smith’s discussions of history are evidence of feminist objectivity in practice. Feminist objectivity brings to our vision a more effective empiricism: “the moral is simple: only partial perspective promises objective vision” (“Situated Knowledges” 190).

Thus, Smith’s series of questions about current explanations for the phenomenon of fossils comes right after the insertion of her body into the text marks a moment of objectivity through partial perspective. From the perspective of the modest witness in a footnote – a space that is primarily used throughout the poem to authorize her knowledge of Linnean botany – Smith goes to great lengths to confess her lack of knowledge on the subject of fossils. She fesses up that there are fossils she has encountered, “some whose names [she does] not know,” even going as far as to say that, at the time, “she knew nothing of natural history” (Note to l. 375). As the note continues, however, there is an inversion of the proper place of the observer and the observed necessitated by the modest witness. In an ironic and contradictory epistemological moment, she claims:

Among the crumbling chalk I have often found in shells, some quite in a fossil state and hardly distinguishable from chalk .... It is now a many

years since I made these observations. The appearance of sea-shells so far from the sea excited my *surprise*, though then I knew nothing of natural history. I have never read any of the late theories of the earth, nor was I ever satisfied with the attempts to explain many of the phenomena which call forth conjecture in those books I happened to have had access to on the subject (Note to l. 375)

In the register of the modest witness, an insertion of the body of the observer that, here, draws attention to the fact that the fossils were difficult to distinguish visually from the chalk discredits Smith as a traditional observer. In fact, Smith seems to further discredit her ability to authoritatively know the earth by admitting her “surprise” at the nonsensical location of the sea-shells far from the very thing that appears to define them – the sea. Smith sets herself up as naive about natural history here, admitting that at the time of her surprise she knew nothing of the current theories about fossils.

But Smith also *inverts* the paradigm of the modest witness in her practice of feminist objectivity. Rather than the observer being invisible and the object of study being visible – the situation that marks the empiricism of the modest witness – Smith makes *herself visible* and the *object of study invisible*. In this, she is ironically faithful to the modest witness. Her ironic faith in empiricism, the very discourse that requires the erasure of her body, garners the science of feminist objectivity, authorizing her questioning of the prevailing notions about geological history through partial perspective.

## Loss-Cyborg and Trickster: An Intimate Geology<sup>6</sup>

Feminist objectivity explains Smith's ironic power connected to the insertion of herself into the text that erupts right after the moment where she appears to undercut her authority. Her ironic faith in the modest witness brings about feminist objectivity. Because this is a discourse about history, Smith's partial perspective authorizes geological history as a discourse of loss -- the loss of the object to be investigated, her knowledge at a loss for the proper information, and the prevailing theories at a loss to adequately explain the out-of-place organisms. Now authorized to both question the theories she has told us she knows little about, she proceeds to question the validity of empiricism as a practice. Staying with the same footnote discussed above, I want to spend some time with the significance of the word "surprise" to the project of the modest witness and feminist objectivity. What becomes clear is that, as a feminist objectivist, it is precisely through seeing the earth as surprising that authorizes her power to question the current theories about how fossils arrive in their resting location. Imperative to feminist objectivity is seeing the world as an agent (here, of loss) with the capability to surprise us: "feminist objectivity makes room for surprises and ironies at the heart of all knowledge production; we are not in charge of the world" ("Situated Knowledges" 199).

Smith, then, "revision(s) the world as a coding trickster with whom we must learn to converse" and fashions herself as an observer who does not claim to be in charge of the world, but who pays heed to the surprises and contradictions that the trickster-world offers up for conversation ("Situated Knowledges" 201). And it is the code and language

---

<sup>6</sup> The inspiration for this subtitle comes from Natalie Angier's amazing book, *Woman: An Intimate Geography*

of loss that Smith has intimate knowledge of, making her a prime dialectical candidate to converse within geological history's concerns about the markings of objects lost through time. Thus, the irony of her assertion that she has not read any of the current debates on natural history while at the same time declaring that she hasn't been satisfied with their explanations is, not a moment on un-authority, rather, it is evidence of feminist objectivity in practice.

From the stance of feminist objectivity, it situated knowledge that is partial, ironic and littered with bodies that ultimately leads Smith to, as Wallace says, "the deepening temporal description of the earth's history, and the accompanying possibilities for epistemological uncertainty" (87). I want to argue that much like irony, this uncertainty, if read as partiality, becomes an asset, and it is wholeness, the attempt at wholeness through "vague theories" rendered ineffectual (Wallace 87).

Also, the emphasis on embodied sight and her claim that she only has limited (read: partial) knowledge of the current theories likewise authorizes an emphasis on loss-bodies, or what organisms are lost, "cockles, muscles" for example. This powerful stance focuses on empirical knowledge as something that is *produced through* our "mapping practices," enabling Smith to both claim in the footnote that she is unsatisfied with all the current theories that she has had access to on the subject, and to question, in the next lines of verse, the entire practice that claims invisible bodies ("Situated Knowledges" 201). Here, being at a loss to explain is a source of authority and partiality brings epistemological advantage – a potent questioning of the dominant power structures. As Haraway teaches us, "[Cyborgs and their writing] are wary of holism, but

needy for connection- they seem to have a natural feel for united front politics, but without the vanguard party” (Cyborg 151).

It is partiality in our observations, then, and seeing the natural world as an agent full of surprises that brings Smith to declare, “Ah! Very vain Science’ proudest boast,/and but little light its flame yet lends/ to its most ardent of votaries;....” Smith goes on to say that “fossil forms are seen” through the pale light of science as “food for vague theories, or vain dispute” (ll. 390- 3, 393-5). As the stanza continues, the focus shifts to the sight of peasants who go about their day “unheeding such [scientific] inquiry” (l. 396). Notice that Smith indicated ineffectual empiricism with the sweeping word “Science,” a mode of discourse that, in its attempt at wholeness, only leads to conjecture. It is not embodied, rather, it indicates and omniscient presence that, like the Shapin modest witness, tries to see everything from nowhere, with no bodies in sight.

Smith also calls this brand of science “vain,” foregrounding irony of an entity that boast of ineffectual powers. Smith’s personification of conventional empiricism points to the fact that there are always already bodies in conventional empiricism, a fact that the Shapin modest witness tries to erase by disallowing marked bodies the privilege of scientific observation. This marks Smith’s assertion of authority on two levels. One is that she is such an authority on conventional empiricism that she can expose the lie buried in it -- namely, that it depends on the erasure of an embodied observer even as it, ironically, needs for bodies be mobilized as an epistemological method. The fact that the modest witness is obsessive, maybe even “vain,” about what kinds of bodies (i.e. male and of a certain property owning status) can be adequately ‘erased’ in conventional

empiricism exposes how utterly dependent the method is on bodies. That same vanity about objective sight leads to, not empirical discovery of earth-shattering proportion, but “vain dispute” (l. 394). One of the moves that this double meaning of the word “vain” coupled with the personification of broad and sweeping science does is allow Smith to retain the praise of the traditional authorities that are so important to her. This is her blasphemy – “I’m still an empiricist,” she seems to declare, “but I choose to focus on the thing that you want to pretend isn’t there – seeing bodies.”

In fact, this becomes a moment of cyborg writing: “cyborg writing is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to the world that marked them as other” (Cyborg 175). It is the exact discourse that has barred her from authoritative writing of science that she seizes here, in the next lines she focusing on bodies making meaning through seeing. At the moment that Smith is able to show that empiricism is not pure in its erasure of bodies, that in fact it is marked by bodies that pollute smooth erasure. She is able to authorize a stance of feminist objectivity.

I want to re-emphasize here that, as a historical agent, Smith is marked as the bear of loss. Because knowledge is produced by her situatedness, her mark marks the world that she sees. Thus the knowledge that is produced by a barer of loss is a discourse of history as loss. If “feminist embodiment, feminist hopes for partiality, objectivity and situated knowledge, turn on conversations and codes at the potent node in fields of bodies and meanings” (“Situated Knowledges” 201). Smith is positioned to be conversant in the production of a history of loss. As such, Smith is able to expose the irony that

empiricism is dependent on bodies that are lost. This exposure allows her to exploit that irony and positions her to authorize the position of loss-bearer as a position from which epistemological work is possible.

This exposure of the irony in conventional science hinges on Smith's evocation of the multiple uses of the word "vain" in her charges against the modest witness. Smith displaces the erasure of the modest witness, and focuses on the body that the modest witness claims the loss of. Ideologically, what this exposes is this: female bodies are particularly bad modest witnesses because they cannot be erased. In fact, male bodies are able to claim complete erasure because the marks of loss are displaced onto female bodies. Because women are made to bear loss, they retain the traces of erasure – they mark out the space of loss. Through the emphasis on seeing bodies of feminist objectivity, Smith's mark infects her sight. Thus, when her body becomes visible as a sight/site of loss in the discourse of the modest witness, a matrix is created between it and the proper place of women in discourses of history, namely that of bearer of loss. Much like the word "vain" that indicates both obsessive attention to the body *and* ineffectuality, Smith, as an observer, becomes a body of irony, a body that marks the absence of presence. Through the word "vain," Smith also re-envision science as a feminized practice in its excessive concern about proper (un)appearance, enabling her to use the gendered relegation of her body as the bearer of loss to her authoritative advantage. In other words, her gendering of science allows her to re-situate the very tools that are designed to silence her as discourses of feminist visibility, using the failure of the

modest witness to erase all traces of bodies to authorize her excessively marked loss-body  
as a platform from which to do science.

## **The Loss of Composure – Model Bodies and Giant Histories**

Using as an ideology a self-conscious meditation about the stakes involved in loss-bodies in science, Smith's vision constructs history as loss. Because it is within the register of history that women's bodies are made to bear loss, it makes sense that the practice of feminist objectivity in *Beachy Head* garners a meditation on natural history as a matrix of empiricism and historical discourse. As Haraway tells us, "[object's] boundaries materialize in social interaction. Boundaries are drawn by mapping practices: 'objects' do not pre-exist as such. Objects are boundary projects" ("Situated Knowledges" (200-1). Within Smith's sight of the feminist objectivist, history is a narrative of loss and fossils are traces of loss brought into relief as having significant epistemological import.

Because that presence is one that marks loss, Smith's feminist objectivity sees history as one plagued by loss. Or, in talking about history from the position of feminist objectivity, where the world is viewed "always [as a] potent tie of meaning and bodies," Smith's take on the history is infused with the discourse of loss-bodies. As noted, this is particularly evident when she meditates on fossils, formations that also mark the presence of absence. In the same section of the poem as discussed above, Smith focuses on fossils and the bodies that see them. Conventional science of "vague theories" is displaced by the vision of the peasant who is "unheeding such inquiry." Smith emphasizes the vision of the peasant who "watches his wether flock," conversing with "the earth he cultivates" (l. 398). Ironically, the peasant can not see what is there, unable to "reck ... that deep beneath/ rest the remains of men." Couched in the language of-objects that remain, these

lines assert the peasant can not see because his vision only sees loss. Since there are only clear boundaries in modest witness empiricism, and not partial and situated perspective, from the perspective of the peasant feminist objectivist, “the records of mankind” contain “no traces” of the history of loss. But once the language of the passage switches from objects to be discovered to focus on the partial perspective of traces, the peasant can trace history as loss.

Conventional historical records -- the “records of mankind” -- contain no trace of loss-bodies. As a result, within that discourse, the peasant cannot see the history contained in the hills he toils upon. Smith switches her language from describing what is there to discussion the trace of a partial recognition, which sets up the peasant as an authoritative feminist objectivist. The meditation on the loss indicated by lingering traces again brings the vision of the peasant and the empirical vision of Smith together in a long footnote regarding the fossil remains of elephants.

In the verse paragraph, the peasant is able to imagine the reign of Claudius, not in terms of the gains secured by war, but rather by the mortification of an African elephant body, “useless[ly]” lost in the battle (l. 415). Within the lines of the poem, Smith’s discussion of how the African Elephant arrived on the continent is described in the language of loss: it “sunk” useless into the British soil. Further, in her assertion in a footnote that, “*I think I saw*, in what is now called the National Museum of Paris, the very large bones of an elephant, which were found in North America,” Smith takes on the vision of the peasant, producing the history of the earth of Beachy Head as a surprising

and unmasterable “hookwinking trickster,” littered with loss-bodies marking her own position with respect to loss.

Smith further produces a history as a discourse of loss in her footnote that follows. In detailing the history of the elephant bones, Smith again emphasizes her embodied vision. She draws attention to her body by highlighting its location in the National Museum in Paris -- this is not seeing everything from nowhere, but a particular body in a specific museum. It is a partial memory that she evokes at the end of a note that quite extensively and authoritatively details the history of the found elephant bones. The partial memory of the iteration “I think I saw” produces a discourse of loss and excessive mortality expected from the vision of a bear of loss, and history becomes not a detail of the gains one by wars, but gives way to the loss-bodies that litter the earth as a result of such battle. Just as the peasant disregards the totalizing theories of the modest witness, Smith, too, ironically displaces the authority of such theories. “I have no books to refer to,” she says in regard to the bones found at Burton, referencing the material losses incurred in her life, even as she authorizing her partial memory written from her body.

Both Smith’s loss-body ocularly toiling in the museum and the peasant’s visual toil on the earth focus on embodied vision, and what is produced in this vision is fantastical giants. Focusing on situated knowledge that thrives on conversation rather than a confining rush to categorization, the discourse of loss creates exciting monsters:

The wondering hinds, on those enormous bones

Ga’zd and in giants dwelling on the hills  
believed and marvell’d— (l. 417 - 19)

The emphasis on embodied vision brings into relief that “potent tie between meanings and bodies;” the world is a coding giant-Trickster with whom we must converse in order to gain insight about how bones from an animal who inhabits one continent materialize on another. Trusting in partial vision, the world is surprisingly filled with a fabulous history of loss-giant bodies.

As the poem continues into the next verse paragraph, feminist objectivity takes over, and the world appears absolutely littered with loss-bodies, displacing conventional historical discourse. Hence, the loss-body of the warrior -- a subject who believed his gains would be immortalized through battle, who “sleeps unremembered,” -- is made part of history through Smith’s verse. Cast in the light of loss, war is but “train of horror,” littered with the bodies made to bear loss and mortality through bloody death. The pathless “savage native” suddenly comes into view, only to be forgotten by the very history that promised them gains.

Here, Smith’s *Beachy Head* traces the monstrous loss-bodies that conventional historical record would rather forget, activating “previously passive categories of objects of knowledge” (“Situated Knowledges” 199). Haraway reminds us of the “unsettling possibilities” in “acknowledging the agency of the world” (“Situated Knowledges” 199). Marking her own loss-body and that of the surprisingly enormous elephant in the footnote, Smith unsettles the historical record, making it known that we must account for the loss-bodies that grand theories try to erase. There is hope in learning to converse with the “coding trickster” that is the earth. To do otherwise is to ensure that loss-bodies are lost forever.

## The Unsettling Possibilities of a “Drown Cor’sse:” A Mo(u)rning (Never)Ending

The final two verse paragraphs of *Beachy Head* are the realization of a discourse of history garnered by feminist objectivity. It is here that we are reminded that the history of the earth is inseparable from the loss-bodies lost in delineating epistemological boundaries. The hermit, a stand-in for the feminist objectivist, creates a natural history of *Beachy Head* by memorializing the dead sailors who wash up on the shore. In fact, if we recall the “Advertisement,” this scene works as a surprising foreshadowing of the context within which *Beachy Head* was first read by the public. By time anyone reads the hermit’s writing about fossils, he is dead, a full realization of a body bearing mortality and loss. We learn, posthumously, that the hermit-poet has been creating human fossils, burying the dead and writing loss-histories in the rock of Beachy Head.

Ultimately, the earth is coded as an active agent, a coding trickster whose language we must read as part of a history of loss. The loss-vision of the hermit is literally marked in the earth, blurring the line between observer and observed, bringing into relief the “meaning-generating axis of the apparatus of bodily production” (“Situated Knowledges” 200). In their cyborg writing, Smith and the hermit create a geological history of Beachy Head that is inseparable from the bodies made to bear loss within its boundaries, his “drowned cor’sse,” and her body ravaged by illness, as constant reminders to account for these loss-bodies within discourse. Haraway reminds us that “siting (sighting) boundaries is a risky practice.” In foregrounding how our mapping practices actually work to create the world those practices claim to name -- in Smith’s case, her loss-bearer vision creates a geological history of loss -- we must confront the fact that we

are “permanently mortal, that is, not in final control” (“Situated Knowleges” 201). It is ironic, then, that *Beachy Head* ends on a transcendent note. As both Haraway and Smith have taught us, “Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true” (“A Cyborg Manifesto” 149). Thus, we must always welcome and always encourage surprise: viewing the world, poetic or scientific, as a Trickster, we know “all the while we will be hoodwinked” (“Situated Knowledges” 199).

In retaining these ironies at the end of her poem, Smith disallows my claiming that any sweeping theory could explain the totality of *Beachy Head*. I am reminded that Cyborg writing is, thankfully, not pure; it is polluted and self-consciously implicated in the very structures it takes issue with. As such, ending a poem so consumed with retaining the materiality of loss with a transcendental vision of “from its earthy bondage freed” retains the irony about boundaries so necessary to the poem’s vision. Following Smith’s lead in retaining this contradiction, I will be ironically faithful to my own insistence that the poem is an example of feminist objectivist thought experiment by bringing into my sight the potential failures of my own analysis. As a critic, I am hoodwinked at the end of this poem. At least that’s the way I see it.

## Works Cited

- Haraway, Donna J. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- . *Modest Witness@Second Millennium.FemaleMan Meets OncoMouse.* New York: Routledge,1997.
- "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question In Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Pascoe, Judith. "Female Botanists and the Poetry of Charlotte Smith." *Re-visioning Romanticism : British women writers, 1776-1837*. ed. by Carol Shiner Wilson and Joel Haefner. Philadelphia: University Pennsylvania Press, 1994.
- Smith, Charlotte. *The Poems of Charlotte Smith*. Ed. Stuart Curran. New York: Oxford UP, 1993.
- Wallace, Anne D. "Picturesque Fossils, Sublime Geology? The Crisis Of Authority In Charlotte Smith's *Beachy Head*. *European Romantic Review*. Vol. 13. 77-93. 2002.

**Sunny L. Bavaro**  
**Curriculum Vitae**

Lehigh University  
Drown Hall  
Bethlehem, Pa 18015  
[slb5@lehigh.edu](mailto:slb5@lehigh.edu)

21 E. 4<sup>th</sup> Street  
Bethlehem, Pa 18015  
(610) 865-2594

Education:

B.A. Lehigh University. English. 1999.  
M.A. Lehigh University. English. 2003. Un-official concentration in  
Medieval Literature

Awards:

Spring 1998 -- Williams Prize Award for *Lehigh Review*. Third Place, \$250.  
"Literary Methods in John Donne's *Holy Sonnet #14*"  
Third Place, \$250.  
Spring 1999 -- Williams Prize Award in Composition: 4th Year Student.  
"Why is She Driving So Fast Anyway?: Myth in Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*"  
First Place, \$1000.  
Spring 2000 -- Williams Prize Award for *Lehigh Review*.  
"A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing: The Depiction of Women in Alfred Hitchcock's  
*Psycho*"  
First Place, \$1000.

Graduated with English Departmental Honors and Lehigh University *Magna Cum Laude* (B.A.)

Presidential Fifth Year Scholarship -- Awarded to seniors with 3.5 final GPA (B.A.)

Selected for Teaching Fellowship Position to run concurrently with achievement of Master  
degree

Academic Service:

Spring 1999 -- Served as Student Editor of *Lehigh Review*

Fall 2000 - Summer 2001 -- CRLA accredited Reading and Writing Tutor at Northampton  
Community College

Fall 2001 - Present -- Publicity Coordinator and Graduate Student Program Developer for the  
Humanities Center at Lehigh University

Duties include, but are not limited to: research for and design of 2002/03 theme,  
"Globalization and Globular Identity," creation and design of written publicity  
materials, including the center's newsletter, design and implementation of  
interdisciplinary activities including *winedown*, a Friday afternoon intellectual  
gathering between faculty and students and *spynnyng*, a forum where faculty  
and graduate students from the Humanities present works-in-progress.

Fall 2002 -- Student Mentor for in-coming graduate student. Duties included summer

correspondence regarding the nuts and bolts of the English Graduate Program.

Fall 2002 -Spring 03 -- English Dept. representative to the Graduate Student Council.

Fall 2002 -- Graduate Student Member of English Department Search Committee for tenure track creative writing line.

- Service included reading over 250 vite and creative writing portfolios, full participation in interview process at 2003 MLA, liaison between the undergraduate and graduate student body and the chair of the department regarding feedback on candidates, and campus escort for candidates.

Fall 2002 -- Student Teacher with Professor Patricia Clare Ingham.

- Duties included co-facilitation of class discussion, two independent lectures, creation and grading of Middle English language quizzes.

Publications, Projects and Presentations:

Spring 1998 – “Literary Methods in John Donne’s *Holy Sonnet #14*” Lehigh Review.

Fall 2000 – “La Bananae” A film by Stephen Tompkins. Co-writer, co-cameraperson, co-star.

Spring 2000 – “A Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing: The Depiction of Women in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho*” Lehigh Review.

“The Dance: ‘Making Meaning’ with Gertrude Stein” Lehigh Review.

Fall 01 -- editor in chief of *verb*, the short lived newsletter for the Humanities Center at Lehigh University

Fall 01 -- Bass player with the politico-feminist punk band, the tunics.  
[www.lehigh.edu/~acb8/tunics](http://www.lehigh.edu/~acb8/tunics)

Fall 2002 -- Presentation: “Being a Female Instructor at a Male Dominated College: a Feminist Dialogue,” as part of the English Department orientation for new Teaching Fellows

Spring 2002 – “Talking Book” A performance of spoken word and music by Tom Bierowski. Spoken word, Bass player, chorus.

Spring 2002 -- “The Book of Alma, or the Song of Solomina” in *Origyns*, a publication of feminist writing

Fall 2002 -- Presenter at “Wednesday’s at Drown,” a monthly mini-panel where graduate students present papers and field question. Papers presented: “Doing the White Thing: The Politics of Race and Ethnicity in Feminist Critiques of Heterosexism” and “Through Anxious Laughter Queerly: Women Enjoying the Grizzle in *The Avowing of Arthur*”

Spring 2003 – “.an hystorical moment -- an activist becomes.” in *Origyns*, a publication of feminist writing

Spring 2003 -- Co-cinematographer, camerafeminist, actor in “2003: A Race Odyssey” directed by Stephen Tompkins

Spring 2003 – Lehigh Review “Doing the White Thing: The Politics of Race and Ethnicity in Feminist Critiques of Heterosexism” as part of the Alumni Insert.

**END OF  
TITLE**