

## Wendy Wheeler 1949–2020

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We are very sad to report the loss of a remarkable colleague and a pioneer in the exploration of biosemiotics and culture. From the beginnings of the journal *Biosemiotics*, Wendy Wheeler was a dynamic presence in international conferences and publications, demonstrating the urgent relevance of biological sciences to the humanities, and the ways that language and literary culture are the human articulation of the semiosis that has evolved throughout the living world. No one can forget the warmth, the generosity of mind, the joy, or the eager curiosity of Wendy's presence. Her energy was as amazing as her courage and boldness.

As a person, Wendy Wheeler was always venturing forth into areas few would dare to connect with her original academic training. But that was simply who she was. Born in 1949 in Kent as England was recovering from war, she was raised by grandparents who introduced her to the green world around her and stimulated her love of the countryside as well as her love of books. At 16, she ventured forth to London, became a film and TV actress, and eventually married into a wild realm of rock music and drama. But this period gave way to a life of motherhood with four children and also a return to books. She entered university as a mature student in modest circumstances while simultaneously raising her children mostly on her own. She graduated with First Class Honors in English in 1986 from the Polytechnic of North London (later London Metropolitan University). By 1994 she had earned both an M.A. in Critical Theory and a Ph.D. in modernism and theory from the University of Sussex. Soon after that she returned to London Metropolitan University to teach English Literature. Her first book (Wheeler 1999), *A new modernity: Change in science, literature and politics* was published in 1999, exploring changes taking place in a number of disciplines towards a post-Cartesian, more holistic understanding of human selves and the world. She was poised to discover biosemiotics.

Already working in the area of complexity studies, she was introduced to biosemiotics by her colleague, Paul Cobley in 2004, and through symposia he

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organized in the Spring of 2005 at London Metropolitan University, came to know leading developers of the new field such as Jesper Hoffmeyer, Frederik Stjernfelt, Søren Brier, and Kalevi Kull. Her involvement in biosemiotic thought opened the door to solving theoretical problems she had encountered in her previous work and led to an ever-widening examination of how biosemiotics illuminates the profound origins and constant reliance of language and literary aesthetics upon the co-evolved semiotic activities humans share with every other organism. Her two books setting forth these examinations, *The whole creature: Complexity, Biosemiotics and the evolution of culture* (Wheeler 2006) and *Expecting the Earth: Life/culture/Biosemiotics* (Wheeler 2016), show how literary culture is intimately related to the sciences of life, with a rigorous and challenging context in cultural theory, intellectual history, and new discoveries in biology and physics that have moved beyond mechanistic reductionism. As one critic wrote about *Expecting the Earth*, she “proposes an inspiring and far-reaching panorama of semiotic relations in which nature and culture intimately connect and biology and literary-cultural analysis cross-pollinate one another”.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to her three monographs, Wendy Wheeler edited an open-access e-book, *Biosemiotics* in 2011 (Wheeler (ed.) 2011), a reader introducing Peircean semiotics and process philosophy to an Anglophone audience, as well as many journal articles and book chapters on aesthetic abductions and metaphor, biosemiotics and the evolution of literature, the effects of Gnosticism and nominalism in the semiotic scaffolding of modern science, and the ecological evolution of cultural creativity. She guest edited (with Hugh Dunkerley) a special issue of *New Formations* called *Earthographies: Ecocriticism and Culture* (Wheeler & Dunkerley (eds.) 2008) and co-edited (with Linda Williams) *The Animals Turn*, another special issue of *New Formations* (Wheeler & Williams (eds.) 2012). In all these publications and editorial efforts, Wendy worked to introduce biosemiotics to audiences of literary and cultural studies in Anglophone countries, France, and Germany as she also participated in ecocritical and biosemiotic conferences in many countries. She began attending the Gatherings in Biosemiotics in 2008 at the Eighth International Gatherings in Biosemiotics held at the University of the Aegean on the island of Syros, Greece. She attended the International Association for Semiotic Studies in Helsinki and Imatra in 2007 and a number of biennial meetings of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment, UK and Ireland, as well as ASLE conferences in the United States. Wendy maintained strong relations with the Tartu bio/ecosemiotic group, attending meetings in Tartu in 2008, 2011, and 2014. In May, 2013, she co-organized (with Louise Westling) a conference on Biosemiotics and culture at the University of Oregon, where keynote speakers were Jesper Hoffmeyer, Kalevi Kull, Søren Brier, Donald Favareau, John Deely, and Terrence Deacon. The presentations of this conference were published in a special issue of *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism*, the journal of ASLE UK and Ireland (Wheeler & Westling (eds.) 2015).

Wendy was a Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities at the University of Edinburgh (2010), and a Visiting Professor in Environmental Studies in the English Department at the University of Oregon

<sup>1</sup> Paul Hamann, University of Hamburg. The review is available at: <https://www.bsls.ac.uk/reviews/general-and-theory/wendy-wheeler-expecting-the-earth-life-culture-biosemiotics/>

(2012–2013). She was a Visiting Professor in the Department of Sociology at Goldsmiths, The University of London, and in the School of Art in the College of Design and Social Context, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia. She served on the Editorial Boards of *Biosemiotics* and *Green Letters* and on the Advisory Board for *New Formations*.

Her last years included serious medical challenges which Wendy met with characteristic cheerfulness and determination, continuing to move forward in her work right up until near the end. She was filled with hope, joy, and curiosity even in her final weeks with her daughters Bea and Tilly by her side.

Timo Maran has said that when someone close to us passes away, a whole Umwelt ceases to exist, filled with subjective richness of sign patterns, memories, and stories. Yet in Wendy's case, much of that world has been left for us in her writings and in our individual memories of being with her, hearing her personal stories, hearing her laugh, remembering her keen wit and incisive comments in debates about biosemiotics. One of those stories will always speak to me of how her sense of the semiotic richness of the natural world was intertwined with her own embodied life. She awoke one night in her bedroom, feeling that someone was looking in the door from her garden just outside. Turning, she saw the inquiring face of a badger who had been enjoying a snack from a bag of birdseed just beside the door. A delightful surprise.

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