
BOOK REVIEW

Elizabeth Engelhardt: *The Tangled Roots of Feminism, Environmentalism, and Appalachian Literature*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2003

In *The Tangled Roots of Feminism, Environmentalism, and Appalachian Literature*, Elizabeth Engelhardt casts historical light across women's political initiatives in grass-roots organizing, the Progressive Movement, and as these efforts were expressed through novels and poetry. So much insight and energy spent, yet so little change:

The Appalachia I know continues to struggle with environmental and social justice issues. Many of us who are Appalachians still know the feeling of being subjected to the voyeur's gaze... Each summer we wait with mixed feelings for the tourists to arrive. Factory workers in West Virginia's Chemical Valley share with Cooke's Cottonville mill workers concerns about air, water, and soil quality but also the economic need that makes activism difficult (p.171).

The book builds on the ecofeminist work of Susan Griffin, Patrick Murphy, Louise Westling, Cheryll Glotfelty and Greta Gaard, pioneers in the genre of "ecocriticism." This interdisciplinary tradition explores the subjective side of activism, and is perhaps not often encountered by political ecologists. But for those interested in the interplay of class, race, gender, and ideas of nature, Sylvia Bowerbank's recent contribution *Speaking for Nature: Women and Ecologies of Early Modern England* (2004), makes a fine companion volume to Engelhardt's study of 'proto' ecofeminist thought in working-class Appalachia.

For a period, from the early 19th century to the turn of the 20th century, Appalachian literature was dominated by the voyeur, who approached local people as a spectacle, a case of "us versus them." The curious tourist was soon followed by the social crusader, well-meaning, usually middle-class women, undertaking "mountain work" in education and health training. They, too, distanced themselves from the impoverished Appalachian object of their "good works," by relying on hegemonic metaphors about "closeness to nature." And to show just how intrusive this political will could be, Engelhardt provides photographic plates, with archival comment like "deficient" on those sullen barefoot families.

Even so, visitors from the North were a mixed blessing. The U.S. Progressive Era from 1875 to 1925 saw Jane Addams, Ida Wells-Barnett, Alice Paul and others establish settlement houses, public libraries, anti-child labor campaigns, tree planting initiatives, and actions for clean water, temperance, and suffrage. In *Earthcare* (1995) ecofeminist historian, Carolyn Merchant, identifies the Progressive Era in Appalachia

as a period when feminist environmentalists pushed through legislation for watershed protection, national parks, and endangered species. In fact, Engelhardt's account makes a lie of the Great Men approach to environmental history, the litany of Audubon, Thoreau, Muir, etc. More to the point, women's ecopolitics transcended class and race. In the southern coalfields of West Virginia, for example, the commitment of African-American communities grew eventually into the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. White Appalachian women were holding talks on education programs with the wife of Booker T. Washington. Jewish women's associations were supporting numerous charitable societies. But given the prevalent Anglo masculinist focus of academic scholarship, these transformative efforts, like those of Latina, Indian, Asian, Italian, and Greek women in Appalachia, were written out of history.

Against the backdrop of this social ferment, Engelhardt traces the emergence of an ecological feminist sensibility in the writing of four central Appalachian figures: Murfree, Smith, Miles, and Cooke. Engelhardt claims that their work reveals the "roots of ecological feminism." But it seems to me that ecofeminism is continually being reborn at the grassroots among women around the world, regardless of what has gone before. Her alternative suggestion that the activities of these Appalachian figures "parallel" today's ecological feminism seems more apt. The recurring features of this political perspective are:

- the dualism of "self versus other" thinking is replaced by reciprocity;
- humanity and nature are seen as interlinked, with nature, too, having agency;
- social justice and sustainability are interrelated goals.

For readers confused by the criticism of 'essentialism' in ecofeminist writing, Engelhardt argues to the contrary that it shows a keen sensitivity to 'differences' among women.

Ecological feminisms are not essentialist: women are not necessarily united in sisterhood, nor are they equally oppressed, nor are they the only gender to have a role in enacting justice. . . . Ecological feminism argues that race matters, gender matters, class matters, and that all of us have complicated identities (p.4).

She reinforces her position on the non-essentialist character of ecofeminist thought throughout the book by highlighting unexamined essentialist assumptions in both everyday life and in other political standpoints.

Engelhardt's profile of Mary Noailles Murfree centers on the novel *His Vanished Star* (1894). The book followed the trajectory of a local developer and made a strong statement for sustainability against corporate culture. In terms of ecofeminist thought, Murfree deconstructed the essentialist patriarchal hierarchy wherein women are trapped as "mediators of nature for men." And she sketched an alternative way of

being to the alienated ego of the capitalist entrepreneur. Ecofeminists today call this a relational sensibility.

Another powerful Appalachian voice was African-American scholar Effie Waller Smith (1879–1960), who was born and educated in Kentucky. Her *Collected Works*, including newspaper articles, revealed a strong “mountain identity” and drew public attention to significant environmental sites. Her poems celebrated both women and black folk as capable, self-supporting characters.

Smith’s Tennessee contemporary, Emma Bell Miles, was a reader of Thoreau and a painter with many children. At one point, they were forced to survive in a tent using leaves for plates. This was a time when women and children formed three-quarters of the textile industry workforce and coal miners’ wives took community leadership. Miles’ book *The Spirit of the Mountains* (1905) identified women as the protectors of “place,” and she was a sharp critic of tourism as a temporary ‘extractive’ industry. Her account of the “double shift” faced by factory women is classic feminism. And though Miles tended to see the typical worker as white, she had loud praise for the uniquely honed skills of the Cherokee people. Engelhardt maintains that Miles has been very unfairly criticized for erasing labor struggles in her creative depictions of Appalachian life.

Engelhardt’s final author is Grace MacGowan Cooke, daughter of a newspaper family and an occasional collaborator with Miles. She was preoccupied with river pollution from the Chattanooga cotton mills and the failing health of poor families.

Not only are the houses built too close together, causing noise pollution and disease epidemics, but periodic fires are encouraged to “clean” the town – at the cost of the babies who invariably burn to death... children who are currently locked in poor housing during shifts. (p.161).

Cooke’s novel *The Power and the Glory* (1910) is described as a lively, yet savage expose of local power structures, spelling out the hierarchy of capitalist patriarchal privilege. Mill owners gave the strapping young loom fixers and mechanics a shorter day than the women weavers and child spinners. And Cooke put on record the way men fought to protect those gender inequalities. Moreover, women were forced to yield up their paychecks to husbands, before getting down to their domestic chores. Regular and unwelcome pregnancies – women’s bodily manufacture of the next generation of workers – was a further facet of this predatory system.

Engelhardt clearly loves her Appalachians, and her care is manifest in the painstaking documentation that underpins her research. This is a book to be recommended. – **Ariel Salleh**