

Book Reviews

Book Review of *Utopian Genderscapes: Rhetorics of Women's Work in the Early Industrial Age*

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Abstract: This review outlines Michelle C. Smith's *Utopian Genderscapes*, highlighting her bi-fold contributions to the field of feminist rhetorics. Firstly, her research purpose, which is to shed light on the rhetoric surrounding the communities, welcomes novel future research about intentional communities' rhetoric. Secondly, her methodological scaffolding, which is the utilization of material rhetoric to explore historical ecologies of gender, provides a methodological blueprint for feminist rhetors to utilize.

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Utopian communities, which are often inspired by particular religious or social beliefs, are intentionally designed communities built outside of mainstream culture. These communities were common during the nineteenth century in the United States before developing a dangerous, cult-like reputation. Because of this developed reputation, society typically dismisses discourse or in-depth analyses about these communities. Michelle C. Smith, in *Utopian Genderscapes: Rhetorics of Women's Work in the Early Industrial Age*, reframes our view on these utopian communities, which she calls intentional communities. Smith implores us to investigate the communities' societal contributions via the study of the rhetoric within and about them—regardless of the characteristics, actions, and perceived success of the communities¹⁸.

18 The following review comes from an awestruck novice with great respect and admiration for Smith's work. Indeed, this book was my first experience with a book-length rhetorical analysis. Additionally, because my background is in professional writing, it was my introduction to the concept of material rhetoric and the term "ecology" being used outside of biology; my fascination and consequent hyper-fixation on these concepts should be disclosed.

Smith conducts a case study of three intentional communities (Brook Farm in West Roxbury, Massachusetts, active 1841–1847; the Harmony Society in Economy, Pennsylvania, active 1804–1905; and the Oneida Community in upstate New York, active 1848–1881) to investigate industrialization’s far-reaching implications for gender, class, and race that permeate all aspects of society but are best gleaned in perceptions of labor. The book, comprised of five chapters, three of which are analyses on the specific communities, does a wonderful job of analyzing how the communities’ rhetoric reflected and contributed to America’s gendered view on labor in the nineteenth century and how these views evolve over time and across spaces.

To inform this case study, Smith draws from archived letters, books, and documents from the three communities. Smith utilizes material rhetoric to articulate ecologies of gender stemming from the communities. Put differently, Smith traces the web of gender implications (spanning time and space) caused by industrialization, using a case study and a material rhetorical lens to do so. Because she views the construct of gender as complex—woven into spaces, bodies, tasks, and objects—Smith traces the ecological presence of gender in both linguistic texts and material objects. Smith explains that “an ecological approach to gender is its view of the production of gender as dispersed and contingent,” which Smith believes is an approach that articulates “the productive convergence of and tension between material and feminist rhetorics” (7). Drawing from scholars like K.J. Rawson, Jenny Rice, and Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, Smith explores how lived experiences are impacted and shaped by material developments, like the wealth of machinery developed during industrialization that altered the labor industry (Smith 7, 166).

Smith’s contribution to the field of feminist rhetorical studies is thus bifold. Firstly, her research purpose (to shed light on the communities’ rhetoric) welcomes research about stigmatized historical individuals/communities that society dismisses. Smith challenges us to look beyond the tainted reputation of historical individuals/communities to recognize their rhetorical power. Secondly, her methodological scaffolding, which is the utilization of feminist and material rhetoric to explore ecologies of gender, provides a blueprint for feminist rhetors to utilize. Feminist rhetors who investigate rhetoric of the everyday and/or historical rhetorical movements (as scholars like Sarah Hallenbeck have modeled), will find Smith’s blueprint of exploring ecologies of gender across time, space, bodies, and objects extremely informative.

After outlining her methods and contributions in the first chapter, Smith moves into her body chapters, which entail three separate studies of mid-nineteenth-century intentional communities in America. In chapter two, Smith discusses teleological rhetoric within Brook Farm, focusing on the domestic lives of women and the teleological rhetoric of “housework” present at Brook Farm. Smith argues that Brook Farm proved that America’s understanding of “housework” solidifies woman’s purpose. Smith explains this by analyzing Brook Farm’s constitution, which states that women would be able to choose what work they did at Brook Farm, in comparison to the letters written by members and visitors, which state that women were only performing “house-

work.” The juxtaposition between the intention and the reality of the community shows that Brook Farm fell short of its goal to let women choose whatever jobs they wanted. Women, stuck performing “housework” at Brook Farm, which was perceived as “drudgery,” thus developed business-like rhetoric to elevate “housework” to the then-desired status of industrial work, creating work schedules, using business style and diction in their writing, and designing power-hierarchies.

In chapter three, Smith discusses rhetoric of exceptionalism used to describe Gertrude Rapp, the granddaughter of the leader of Harmony society, and the effect that rhetoric had on Harmony women. Rapp ran the silk operation at Harmony and was well regarded within the silk and business fields—a triumph for a woman at the time. This prompted society to write exceptional rhetoric about her, which created a new, unrealistic expectation for women. While the outside discourse about Rapp seemed like it would benefit Harmony women, giving them the chance to follow Rapp’s forged path, the internal rhetoric at Harmony shows otherwise. Women, in fact, were still relegated to “housework” despite this woman leader achieving success. In addition to the rhetoric of exceptionalism, Smith also discusses Rapp’s utilization of scientific and professional rhetoric to pass as a man in order to be taken seriously in her field.

In chapter four, Smith discusses rhetoric of choice—or, more astutely, the illusion of choice—within Oneida, focusing on the reproductive lives of women. While trying to advance reproductive rights, Oneida elided the roles of “mother” and “worker” by elevating motherhood into a job that one could specialize in, complicating the rhetoric of gendered labor and perceived choice. In society outside of Oneida’s community, mothers were looked down upon if they worked; in Oneida, workers were looked down upon if they mothered. This is seen via the rhetoric of John Humphrey Noyes, Oneida’s leader, who believed that women should be “female men” who work as much as men and don’t fall victim to philoprogenitiveness (love for one’s children). Noyes’s rhetoric is presented in contrast to the rhetoric of the Oneida women, who write about their struggle to balance motherhood and work. While the women of Oneida wanted equal opportunity to work, they did not want to lose their opportunity to mother in the process.

These body chapters are interesting, thorough, and informed, making readers wonder if rhetoric can ever elevate “housework” out of the trenches of “drudgery,” and what equity in the home could (or should) look like. Building on a foundation laid by scholars like Jordynn Jack, Jessica Enoch, and Nathan Stormer, Smith explores the ecology of gender stemming from these symbols and materials of housework, priming readers for the conclusion, which briefly explores how this ecology has extended into contemporary symbols and materials of housework. These chapters thus serve as an example of how to bypass historical communities’ stigmatized reputations to uncover their rhetorical power. It makes one wonder: what are we missing by *not* exploring these and similarly stigmatized communities? Additionally, these chapters, which explore concepts like tokenism and reproductive rhetoric, are an example of how future researchers can implement Smith’s lens (i.e. paying attention to the ecology of rhetoric’s effects on gender through time,

space, bodies, symbols, and objects) when interrogating society's relationship with gendered phenomena.

Smith's fifth and final chapter addresses future researchers, leaving them with three main pieces of advice. First, Smith compels rhetoricians to use the term "interactionality" instead of "intersectionality" to better explain how different identities work in conjunction with each other rather than simply overlapping. Readers familiar with Karma Chavez's *Queer Migration Politics* will recognize this term, which Smith uses to call for work that illustrates how gendered phenomena (like the gendered views of labor explored in this book) "often deepen and cement divides among women of different socioeconomic classes, races, ethnicities, religions, and educational backgrounds" (147). Second, Smith undermines the illusion of choice within rhetoric about gender, inviting scholars to do the same to highlight the injustice as a first step to remedying it. Third, Smith encourages researchers to question the rhetoric of failure surrounding intentional communities, attending to the nuance in order to conceptualize the complexity of gendered norms. *Utopian Genderscapes*, as perfectly encapsulated in the conclusion, calls for rhetoricians to reclaim intentional communities' rhetorical and societal contributions (and, by extension, other stigmatized communities' similar contributions) using the methodological framework Smith provides.

Smith's research opens a floodgate of topics to investigate by calling for research that bypasses retrospectively instilled negative perceptions of historical societies. *Utopian Genderscapes* also informs researchers about how to analyze the evolution of gendered constructions of labor—and other phenomena—across time and space. By studying America's rich history of intentional communities and analyzing ecologies of gender by employing material and feminist critiques, Smith lays a solid foundation for future rhetoricians, showing them how to find rhetorical significance (symbolically and materially; across time, space, bodies, and objects) in previously overlooked communities.

Work Cited

Smith, Michelle C. *Utopian Genderscapes: Rhetorics of Women's Work in the Early Industrial Age*. Southern Illinois University Press, 2021.