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Robin Ganev on Michelle Smith, _Utopian Genderscapes: Rhetorics of Women’s Work in the Early Industrial Age_

Michelle Smith’s *Utopian Genderscapes: Rhetorics of Women’s Work in the Early Industrial Age* is an exploration of American intentional communities in the mid-1800s that weaves theory with archival material and modern-day women's issues to create a compelling picture of how gender and work have shaped and informed each other since the Industrial Age. Smith situates her work in the field of feminist rhetoric, first and foremost, though it is also very much a work of history. The first chapter, which acts as an introduction, places the book in relation to other rhetorical work. Within the field of feminist rhetoric, Smith builds on the work of material rhetorician Carole Blair, who called for shifting our focus away the intentions of rhetors to understanding what rhetoric does. Though she draws on the work of scholars who study women practicing rhetoric, such as Shirley Wilson Logan’s *We Are Coming: The Persuasive Discourse of Nineteenth-Century Black Women* (1999), Smith aligns more closely with Sarah Hallenbeck, Carol Mattingly, and Linda Buchanan, who study how rhetoric complicates gender in general, or the “rhetoric of gendering.”


As a historian of rhetoric, Smith wants to understand how women’s labor was being constructed by intentional communities and how that
relates to nineteenth-century society more broadly. Smith calls her theoretical framework “ecologies of gender,” meaning that gendered work was constructed at every level of society, often unintentionally (p. 4). “Ecologies of gender,” according to Smith, also denotes interactions of human and nonhuman bodies. Here again, greater clarity would be welcome, as she never makes explicit what the nonhuman bodies are. They must be animals, but the study does not mention animals at any point. Smith draws on the “material turn” in rhetorical studies, which has moved away from texts to explore bodies, spaces, and animals. One problem with this is that it assumes “texts” only take the form of writing or print. It also fails to recognize that we study bodies and animals and, usually, spaces through texts that name and describe them. Be that as it may, Smith makes a valuable theoretical contribution by bringing together the work of material and feminist rhetoricians to illuminate women's work in intentional communities.

Smith's argument that utopian communities should not be seen as eccentric aberrations but as belonging to their time and place is one of her key insights. Intentional communities reflected nineteenth-century feminism, as both offered a critique of the nuclear family. While both feminism and utopian communities were perceived as a threat to the family by certain segments of mainstream society, utopian communities were not shunned and hated but rather celebrated, receiving thousands of visitors each year. They were part of the nineteenth-century ethos of innovation and change. Members did not withdraw from the world; they were active participants in their societies. Communities fit within the rhetorics of gender that existed at the time. The downside of this was that it limited what they could achieve.

Also a valuable insight is Smith's contention that utopian communities were a response to the Industrial Revolution. They were Americans' way of trying to come to terms with the economic and social changes of the time. Some of the new values communities reacted to were individualism, hierarchy, and the pursuit of wealth.

The meaning of work and the place it should occupy in a life well lived were a central preoccupation of intentional communities. Founders and participants believed the work ennobled the individual. Work was akin to a religious practice, a view that derived from Puritanism. Founders argued that work was made demeaning by not being equally divided and properly compensated. If men and women shared tasks, and if all tasks were properly compensated, work would live up to its true potential to offer spiritual growth. These expectations were ultimately disappointed.

Rethinking and recreating gender relations were equally important for the utopian communities. To this end, they aimed to reorganize the divisions between men's and women's work. Smith is interested in all forms of women's labor: domestic, professional, and reproductive. Smith argues that separating work space from home, a process accelerated by industrialization (and only partially addressed by utopian communities), was disadvantageous to women, and a feminist study such as hers must understand this process. To understand women's lives fully scholars must consider the work of production and reproduction together.

Smith has chosen three communities as examples of these forces, and one of the criticisms one might make of her book is that she never articulates clearly why she chose precisely these three: Brook Farm, which operated in Massachusetts from 1841 to 1847; the Harmony Society, which settled in Pittsburg in 1825 and lasted until 1905; and Oneida, which operated in upstate New York from 1848 to 1881. Smith offers a chapter on each community, and to these chapters we now turn.

Brook Farm aimed to redistribute work equally between women and men but in the end did not live up to that promise. Women could par-
ticipate in traditionally male work, but there was no reciprocal move by men into women's work. Housework, therefore, remained a female responsibility. The response of Brook Farm women, who were of middle-class background, was to position themselves as "managers" and recruit working-class women to do the most menial tasks. It was a way of professionalizing domestic work, but in the end Brook Farm reproduced the nineteenth-century prejudice against housework as menial and lowly. Though gender relations were reinvented, class tensions were exacerbated.

At Harmony, Gertrude Rapp's management of the silk industry made her a celebrity in her own time, an example of the professional woman. But this did not open doors for other women because Rapp was seen as exceptional. Rapp is an example of how professional women have faced the challenge of proving that they are good professionals as well as proving that they are good women. Each role undermined their ability to perform the other role in the public view. Rapp's rhetorical strategy was to appear as a selfless woman, whose leadership of the silk industry benefited the nation. She was not in it for her own gain. Despite her success, Rapp did not become a champion of other professional women, instead avoiding focus on her gender in her public dealings.

Oneida's founder, John Humphrey Noyes saw marriage and the duties imposed on married women as slavery. Through communal childcare, women at Oneida were liberated from domestic duties. Motherhood would be planned and desired. To ensure this, participants practiced a form of birth control they called "male continence," whereby men avoided ejaculation during intercourse. But, like Brook Farm, Oneida was not able to fully reconstitute women's work. Childcare and housework remained women's work, though they were no longer limited to the biological mother. Instead, this work was performed by groups of women. Also, the idea that motherhood and work were incompatible remained fixed, and women had to choose between the two roles. In part, this happened because Oneida women resisted giving up their maternal roles.

Why did the problems of childcare and housework remain insurmountable for all the communities? One reason is the rise of wage work. Prior to industrialization wage work was seen as demeaning. According to the Enlightenment view, working for wages made a person a dependent, and that was humiliating for men. As numerous men became wage earners in the nineteenth century, separate sphere ideology developed to give men pride in earning a wage (in contrast to their women, who were supposed to look after the home). As wage work came to dominate many industries, housework came to be viewed as more demeaning. Black and then Irish women flooded the profession. A new missionary zeal to improve the morals of domestic servants took hold among the middle class. Thereafter housework continued to be seen as drudgery. Though working-class women were compelled to take on this work, they, too, avoided it as much as they could.

Yet this picture needs to be complicated. The idea that housework was devalued because it was unpaid does not work in the case of Brook Farm, because there housework was paid, but women never found it fulfilling. By contrast, a group of women who produced small goods for sale at the market found this work much more satisfying. Receiving external validation from the market seems to have made a difference.

Some scholars have argued women at the communities ended up doing the housework because that was what they had been trained to do and those were the tasks they felt comfortable with. But Smith points out that Brook Farm women were not given the opportunity to learn traditionally male tasks. They were encouraged to do intellectual work, such as learning Latin, but not skilled craft work.

Chapter 5 is one of my favorite chapters, as it links utopian communities to our own time. One
key conclusion is that choice is an illusion because there are structures in place that undermine our ability to choose freely. Thus interrogating the illusion of choice is an important feminist objective. Instead of “choice,” Smith wants us to think in terms of “rhetorical strategies” that we deploy to negotiate the circumstances we find ourselves in. Urgent issues remain the “Me Too” movement, work-life balance, and the scope and nature of parental leave, and all of these relate to the experience of utopian communities. The separation of home and work for women remains problematic. “Right to work” feminists contend that leaving the home for professional work is fulfilling and freeing for women. But many women of racialized or working-class backgrounds have never had the choice to be full-time housewives; they have always had to work, so they do not recognize their lives in this debate. For these poorer women, employment has been neither fulfilling nor led to economic independence. Furthermore, for professional women, we have seen that increasing women’s paid work does not lessen women’s domestic work. When women take on demanding, full-time paid work, it does not result in their partner doing a greater share of the housework, as studies have shown.

The issue of exceptional women was salient in the early industrial age as it is now. Successful career women like Gertrude Rapp were praised for their exceptional qualities. Women’s success was judged to be dependent on personal merit rather than structural forces. This assumption divided and still divides women, making it hard to form alliances based on gender. Smith’s application of the concept of intersectionality to the study of utopian communities demonstrates that divisions among women are as important as divisions between women and men, and this remains true today.

In conclusion, although a few points regarding methodology could have been clarified and more thoroughly explained, this is a valuable and engaging book. It shows how a historical study can be made to resonate with the present, yet remain sensitive to the distinctive attitudes and values that make the past feel like a different world. Smith’s book is succinct, compelling, and deeply relevant to the current moment.
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