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Negotiating a Perilous Empowerment: Appalachian Women's Literacies

Erica Abrams Locklear
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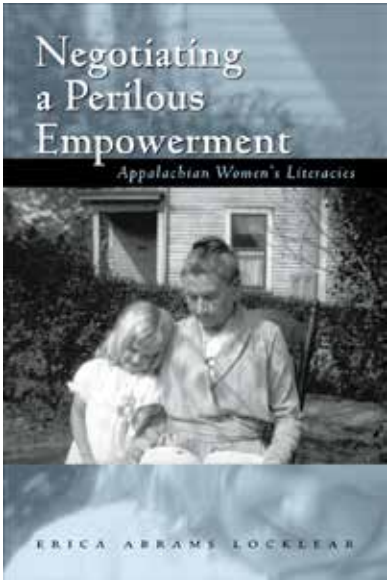

In the years since Jacqueline Jones Royster's seminal work *Traces of A Stream: Literacy And Social Change Among African American Women* (2000), scholars interested in literacy, identity, and social change have continued to pursue ways to include the voices of women who have previously been underrepresented within scholarly work. Indeed, these recovery projects—often considered part of a revisionist enterprise—represent important examples for those interested in the literary and rhetorical practices of women who have been overlooked based on gendered, ethnic, and socioeconomic identities. Illustrating this, scholars have developed a range of archival, rhetorical, and interview projects that uncover women as historical subjects who represent the myriad ways women develop and use rhetorical skills and literacies. For instance, in *Refiguring Rhetorical Education: Women Teaching African American, Native American, and Chicano/a Students, 1865–1911*, Jessica Enoch describes female teachers who contested the normative educational structures that oppressed marginalized groups and, rather, developed pedagogical strategies that encouraged civic participation. In another recovery project, *Beyond the Archives*, Gesa Kirsch describes the role of women who participated in a male-dominated sphere as physicians and civic advocates in the 19th century. In the same book, Wendy Sharer illustrates a new understanding of uncovering voices when she finds scrapbook examples of even her own grandmother's engagement with political literacies. These examples represent just some of the important work that has emerged in order to uncover and reframe the literate and rhetorical legacies of women from multiple subject positions.

Erica Abrams Locklear's book *Negotiating a Perilous Empowerment: Appalachian Women's Literacies* adds a unique contribution to these discussions by focusing on the literacies of women from Appalachia—a region, she argues, too-often characterized by a deficit framework. That is, Locklear challenges the gendered, regional, and classed stereotypes that represent women in Appalachia as "illiterate," "hillbillies," "Other," or

"lesser"; instead, she shows the complexity of literacy acquisition and use for women from this community and confronts simplistic binary thinking that forms from stereotypes. Locklear provides valuable examples of how female writers and female characters negotiate identity through her critical analysis of fiction and nonfiction texts about Appalachia by Harriette Simpson Arnow, Linda Scott DeRosier, Denise Giardina, and Lee Smith, while also providing interview transcripts. In her analysis, Locklear uses these diverse examples of fictional characters and the real women writers who created them in order to explore the range of effects of literacy development, including the rejection of literacy some women chose to maintain their identity, the loss of cultural heritage they sustain, and the existing conflicts and opportunities that occur throughout the process.

Locklear's book is comprised of five main chapters, including the transcriptions of interviews with Linda Scott DeRosier and Lee Smith, and an introduction and epilogue. The introduction in particular contextualizes Appalachian women's literacies in relation to important questions surrounding ethnicity, social status, and geographic location that would be extremely beneficial for scholars who work at the nexus of literacy and identity with other marginalized populations. Chapters 2–5 function as a separate analysis of an Appalachian author and their text, while ultimately combining as a representative account of the social, emotional, and educational effects of literacy use for Appalachian women. While it is important not to conflate these accounts, there are many overlapping struggles that these women faced, most notably the negotiation of self and identity in their literacy development. *Negotiating a Perilous Empowerment* centers on the claim that literacy is neither static nor neutral. Rather, as the title suggests, the goals are to examine its complex—even contradictory—nature as both perilous and empowering, vexing and authorizing, for Appalachian women. In this way, Locklear argues that literacy—both as a term and process of development—is contentious for these women, and "often results in the constant negotiation of self-identity," particularly in ways that cause women to sacrifice a piece of themselves in order to gain literacy (2). Ultimately, Locklear claims that through her book "we can better understand the saturation of illiteracy stereotypes, the effects of those misconceptions on Appalachian people, and the subsequent empowerments and perils mountain women encounter when gaining new literacies" (53). Indeed, Locklear's argument successfully renders the complexities of literacies affected by gender, class, and region and shows how women navigate these positions.

In Chapter 1, Locklear sets up her discussion on how Appalachia is often described through deficit framings. Here, Locklear shows how these negative discourses circulated through mediums such as documentaries (*A Hidden America: Children of the Mountains*), books (*Moonlight Schools for the Emancipation of Adult Illiterates*), newspaper cartoons, and even through regional writers themselves who were "invested in securing the image of Appalachia as a fixed entity, one to be kept in its place as a politically useful repository of social aid" (24). In this chapter, Locklear effectively shows how these historical portrayals relied on Appalachia as "other" and, thus, were dangerous in their framing. However, similar to the revisionist work of the scholars

previously mentioned, Locklear challenges this destructive scaffolding throughout her book, as she examines and uncovers both affordances and limitations of literacy for Appalachian women.

In Chapter 2, Locklear turns her focus to *The Dollmaker*, a 1954 novel written by Harriette Simpson Arnow. Using this text, Locklear develops an expansive discussion of literacies "that exten[d] beyond the technical ability to read and write" (57), in order to include discourses and literacy skills that female characters deploy at home (letter writing, whittling abilities, reciting Bible verses, and mothering techniques) and at school, where more traditional literacy-learning occurs. The Nevels family, created by Arnow, resides in Kentucky but moves to Detroit, where they suddenly realize the different cultural and social values between these spaces. For instance, Locklear notes that only upon moving does the family recognize the varying discourses they use and what literacies are privileged in each place. Although Locklear draws from work by James Paul Gee and Paulo Freire in order to develop a discussion about class-consciousness and the movement between discourses, she argues that Arnow's book suggests something different about literacy attainment where "no manner of compromise between mountain and city-based literacies appears" (58). While this chapter delivers powerful examples of the conflicts that emerge because of variations in discourse and literacy, it relies almost exclusively on close readings of Arnow's text to illustrate this work. This is a valuable textual model, but for those unfamiliar with Arnow's book and its scope as a fictional representation, it might be difficult to respond to and situate this argument in subsequent work.

Chapter 3 provides a particularly enlightening analysis of Linda Scott DeRosier's memoir writing, *Creeker: A Woman's Journey, nonfiction work Songs of Life and Grace*, and her personal experiences as an Appalachian woman and academic. Through the textual analysis and interview, Locklear powerfully illustrates the stakes that women from Appalachia face, most often resulting in some loss of their cultural heritage. For example, we learn DeRosier has incurred losses with her home identity as the "price that [she] pays for entrance into the academic community," especially in the form of "distinctive (and cherished) cultural markers that identify her as Appalachian, particularly her mountain speech patterns" (94, 109). Here, Locklear considers the socialization that occurs as DeRosier blends her Appalachian identity with the texts she creates in order to "overturn inaccurate assumptions that inevitably portray mountain people as ignorant, socially inept, and lesser" (95). This blending of academic and personal identities is simultaneously productive *and* challenging in DeRosier's experiences, as her personal life is infused with Appalachian histories and values that inform her work but also create tension when added to traditional academic inquiries that privilege standard academic patterns of speech and writing.

The focus of chapter 4 revolves around the work and life experiences of West Virginian author Denise Giardina. Here, Locklear argues that Giardina's work provides a representative instance of the challenges women face in combatting negative Appalachian stereotypes while also using her book *The Unquiet Earth* to "encourag[e]… readers to rethink their own notions of mountain illiteracy" (152). In fact, Locklear

explains that the first limitation many people face, including Giardina, is the very absence of Appalachian women's writing in their lives, combined with destructive portrayals of their lives in the media. One character, Jackie, functions as a mouthpiece to show readers how moving into a new geographic location (from West Virginia to Washington D.C.) also forces her into a new discourse community, where she incurs a sense of cultural displacement. The geographic move parallels the sense of emotional loss that Jackie (and Giardina) feel when they move away from their home and realize that coming back to Appalachia will never be the same. Yet, there are benefits from this departure from their home community, as it is only through moving that they discover the agency that allows them to articulate their experiences as Appalachian women to a more public audience. As Locklear argues, Giardina's book "demonstrates how writing fiction allows her to write about both the personal loss she has incurred from gaining new literacies and the destruction and devastation caused by unethical coal mining practices [in West Virginia]" (145). In a sense, this fictional work by Giardina is a testimony of the difficulties of literacy acquisition and the negotiation of discourse communities.

The final chapter draws from Lee Smith's novels, such as *On Agate Hill, Fair and Tender Ladies, and Oral History*, in addition to a personal interview with Locklear. Locklear argues that these texts represent the ways in which Appalachian women use private writing, such as letters, as a form of public authorship. The oscillation between private and public spheres allows Smith's characters to participate in the creation of a counter-narrative—one that problematizes skewed notions of Appalachia as illiterate. Rather, through techniques of epistolary writing and oral history, Smith provides accounts of mountain life through characters who represent the changes women face when they gain new literacy and rhetorical skills. This chapter delves into the celebratory nature of writing for women who want their voice heard but also reinforces what Smith calls a "painful distancing" that often happens when women write about their community (211). While Smith agrees with the need for this work to happen, it also brings Locklear's main argument to the fore: that literacy use and development is, indeed, both perilous *and* empowering.

To be sure, there are many useful points in Locklear's book for those interested in thinking about the intersection of identity and literacy acquisition that strongly revolves around geographic location, gendered roles, and socioeconomic background. This book is groundbreaking in a move to combat the lack of representation (and marginalized portrayals) of Appalachian women's literacies throughout the years. Locklear skillfully crafts her argument about the perils and benefits of literacy attainment, while simultaneously creating a structure that relies on other female Appalachian authors who give voice to Appalachian women and participate in this representation through interviews. Therefore, her methods seem to enact a means of inclusion of multiple voices. Of course, while the focus on five writers is not exhaustive (nor should it be), Locklear gathers these perspectives in order to represent, and illuminate, the richness of Appalachian identity.

The intricate focus of this book is both a strength and challenge when thinking

about its use for other scholars. This book blends discussions of literacy from standpoints that are suited for rhetoric and composition and also geared for a literature audience interested in close readings. It seems unique that Locklear relies intensely on fictional stories, which might prove difficult for expanding this work, if readers are unfamiliar with the texts used. Still, this book represents valuable stories of women who defy how literacy is understood and represented in texts on Appalachia, as well as evinces both the struggles and joys connected with literacy. For those particularly interested in revisionist methodologies, there are key mentions of alternative literacy sites developed in Appalachia, such as the Moonlight Schools and the Hindman Settlement School in Kentucky that Locklear argues have "informed contemporary discussions about literacy depictions in literature" (31). At the start of this review, I mentioned current projects that are shaping the field from a revisionist historiographical standpoint. Although, this is not the only way to read Locklear's book, it dovetails nicely with these discussions in rhetoric and composition and provides another fruitful example of how we can redefine and rethink literacy when we uncover narratives that have previously been located at the margins.