

Appalachian Elegy: Poetry and Place. By bell hooks. Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2012. 79 pp.

The introduction to *Appalachian Elegy* begins with these words: “Sublime silence surrounds me.” It is an appropriate beginning for a collection of poetry in which silence is present, moving from ephemeral moments within which one senses the changes of the seasons or the arrival of dawn to the more perpetual yearning of the dead to not be forgotten or the struggles of the living to make visible the “ecohistories of black folk” (p. 5). The sixty-six untitled poems in this collection are a dirge, a poetic lamentation for a personal and historical past that are both intricately interwoven with the natural world, the Kentucky hills, where as a child hooks learned to create home out of isolated places and to invent and reinvent herself in the same way that the land does in response to its own cycles and interactions with human beings.

From the first page, hooks reminds us that the cycle of life is one that includes the dead and the living, death and resurrection, despair and hope. In poem 1, she performs a multilayered libation, imploring the reader to listen to the ancestors and calling them to guide the living, so “... that we may learn/all the ways/to hold tender to this land...” (p. 11). This “libation” ends with a final supplication to the ancestors for teachings that will cause the “... charred earth” to green with “native flowers/pushing the fragrance of hope” (p. 11) into the world. The promise of the relationship between the ancestors and the living is not only that “the old ways” will be recovered, but also that the earth will be healed as the living rediscover how to exist in harmony with the land, a harmony that can lead to a reconciliation with history.

The subsequent poems tell the story of hooks’s Appalachia, the diverse and once hidden histories of Black people who shared the land with Native Americans and Whites. These are the

stories of the people who left, forgot the land, and never returned and of people who, like hooks, cannot get the dirt and mountains out of their pores or souls. However, they are also the stories of the horses and trees, more native than the humans, whose lives have been changed by human history and "... manmade steel" that "ravishe[s] this earth" (p. 35).

Attempts by a reader to divide the collection into identifiable sections, such as earth, animals, humans, past, or present, will be thwarted by its theme: the memories of Black people are linked to this ever-changing land so deeply that "sometimes falling rain/carries memories of betrayal" (p. 32). These stories, therefore, resist linearity and division. When reading the poems, it is not possible to remember Native Americans without connecting their histories to "all nature/slaughtered in/the colonizing wake" (p. 39). It is impossible to climb to mountain tops without seeing the graves of soldiers and it is inconceivable that one would walk this Appalachian earth and not think of Black farmers who could "grow food / sew clothing / build shelter" (p. 65), hoeing sustenance for a family out of dirt, creating fecundity and history with their hands.

She finds solace in returning to Kentucky. However, to return home, to smell "the fragrance of hope," and to learn to plant again requires one to dig up dead seeds: places where "slaves worked" (p. 47) or where there are "memories of / renegade red men running / fleeing daniel boone" (p. 39). In other words, it requires one to mourn deeply and whenever memory interjects itself into/onto a landscape that hides histories with its evolutionary growth and reveals them through fallen trees and unmarked graves. Like memory, these poems remind us that the past and present are not so easily separated.

In the penultimate paragraph of the introduction, hooks writes that her poetry often emerges from a deep place that is mysterious and abstract, a place, she writes, "... where the

mood and energy is evocative of submerged emotional intelligence and experience” (p. 7). The poems’ structure reflects this mood. For example, the lack of punctuation might indicate that these will be “wild” poems, but a close read reveals that they are anything but that. This is the power of *Appalachian Elegy*, once you step away from it. The lack of punctuation forces the reader to reread lines, to rethink the beginning or ending of a thought—it forces the reader to contemplate how difficult it is to make meaning or sense of what she or he is seeing or experiencing, how easy it is to be overcome by memory and history.

When the reader does step away and return to the poems, she or he will understand that the staccato lines that evoke the imagery one expects to find in haiku have been mindfully created: these poems are only the beginning of hooks’s lamentation and love for her Kentucky hills and people. They are “...organic monuments...” (p. 49), a promise to the reader that one day we may be able to hold both memory and history in our hearts and heads without contention. When this happens, it will be possible to fully and publicly grieve the losses we have suffered and to make space for “... healing water / clear sweet / a sacred spring / where the thirsty / may drink / animals all” (p. 15).

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