

An Ecofeminist Approach to North America's Female Authors in the Last Decade (2000-2010): Ami McKay's *The Birth House* as an Example

Florence Yap G. H.

English Division, Center for General Education
Chang Gung University
Taiwan

Abstract

Most people would nod at the mention of environmentalism movement that creates an awareness of the interrelationship of the living beings and its habitat (or in Pierre Bourdieu's words, habitué) and acknowledge the popular notion of ecocriticism in literature towards the end of the 20th century. Some would also say that it is in congruence with the movement of deep ecology, initiated by Arne Naess. However, it is neither the exposure to contemporary theories of feminism nor the living in a time where the end of patriarchy is not longer heatedly discussed. It is the self realization of the female author as a woman, a natural biological body having the womb to mother a child or the kind of mothering quality which goes as far back as the time before Christ in the virgin mother. (I'm not suggesting that lesbians and female who has no intention to bare children do not have "natural" biological inclination). The mothering quality is precisely the intrinsic dimension of human consciousness that is not separate from the body. The ethical interactions with the habitué is perseverare in suo esse.

Keywords: ecofeminism, North American's Female Authors, habitué, mothering

Introduction

Before I go into discussion of the ecofeministic traits of novels by North American female authors, using *The Birth House* (2006)¹ as an example, I would like to briefly discuss the tone underlying the whole of this paper. This paper aims to demonstrate the essence of ecofeminism that are unconsciously buried in the female author's mind as she develops the plot and chooses the nature of the significant events that she wants her readers to focus on. The degree of exposure to contemporary theories of radical, cultural, or ecological feminism in the female writers does not matter. The thing that matters is the awareness of the femaleness in the female writer. A biological constant that all female writers, I can say, start off with, be it hormonal, and/or experiential of girlhood, womanhood, motherhood, etc. A good demonstration is in *The Birth House* which has a timeline that readers can follow easily, where it starts at a point where the First World War begins, which leads on the gradual societal changes in Northern America. But, before I go into the text of *The Birth House*, I must briefly explicate the various feministic ideologies that have started the ball rolling.

Ecofeminists have argued that clinging to rationality has been destructive to the human and non-human world. For example, Val Plumwood argues in *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (2002) that western culture's obsession with rationality is not only irrational, but what masquerades as rationality is itself irrational and has led to our current ecological and social crisis. She states that the "ecological crisis is the crisis of a cultural 'mind' that cannot acknowledge and adapt itself properly to its material 'body', the embodied and ecological support base it draws on in the long-denied counter-sphere of 'nature'" (p. 15). The term ecofeminism was first coined in *Le féminisme ou la mort* in 1974 by French feminist philosopher Françoise d'Eaubonne. She argued that a balanced relationship with the environment and the end of patriarchy are closely linked. She critically links population growth and degradation of the environment with patriarchy's view of women as merely reproductive bodies. Rosemary Ruether in her 1975 book *New Women/New Earth* preceded d'Eaubonne's terminology, ideologically arguing that there is no possibility of liberation for women without a "radical reshaping" of our treatment of the environment (204). Other ecofeminists have focused on the social construction of gender and nature that leads to women's and nature's subordination (Merchant, 1980). Like most areas of feminist philosophy, ecofeminism is pluralist in its approaches, though there are ideological connections.

¹Ami McKay, (2006, e2009). *The Birth House* Scarborough, ON.: Harper Collins. Retrieved from Kobo: <http://www.kobobooks.com/ebook/The-Birth-House/book-8FmHFgIlyU2ECaN5KkmKFg/page1.html>

Karen Warren in *Ecofeminist Philosophy*(2000) argues that “[e]cological feminists (ecofeminists)claim that there are important connections between the unjustified dominations of women, people of color, children, and the poor and the unjustified dominationof nature” (p. 1).Warren points to many connections between the domination of women and nature that have been cited by ecofeminists. For example, she points toprevailing dualisms in western philosophy as a source of conceptual and practical domination. Man/woman, culture/nature, mind/body, reason/emotion exist as hierarchical dualisms in western thought with man, culture, mind and reason having higher value than women, nature, body and emotion. This conceptual dualism leads to the practical outcome of the valued half of the dualism having “power over” the devalued half and thus the “twin” domination of women and nature (2000). Val Plum wood, in *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*(2002), argues that western culture’s obsession is not only irrational, but what masquerades as rationality is irrational and has led to our current ecological and social crisis. Ecofeminism has everything to with spirituality in Charlene Spretnak’s, “Towards an ecofeminist spirituality.” In Spretnak’s explication of spirituality, “The life of the spirit, or soul, refers merely to functions of the mind. Hence spirituality is an intrinsic dimension of human consciousness and is not separate from the body.” (p. 127) The understanding of spirituality can be further enhanced by our experience of need of some sort of relationship among people, animals, and the Earth. She argued that women have a stronger physical, emotional and spiritual connection to nature and thus are most suited to ethical interactions with the environment (Spretnak, 1982).This is saying “preserve in his being” (*perseverare in suo esse*) in Naess’ words when he discusses the relation of the self with the environment in the *Ecology of Wisdom* (Drengson et al., 2010).

Ami McKay has a shadow of ecofeminism in her story conceived at the turn of the century. Her story was fabricated at a secluded spot, having a world/sphere of their own (*habitué*), barely affected by the happenings of the real world. The community is essentially a patriarchal one and set in the historical background of the First World War.

Patriarchal Setting of the Ami McKay’s *The Birth House*

The tradition of the community in Scots Bay is clear in the beginning of the book. Dora Rare’s prayers in chapter one reflects and characterizes the Christian tradition of her community and their beliefs.

Most days I wake up and say a prayer. I want, I wish, I wait for something to happen to me. While I thank God for all good things, I don’t say this verse to Him, or to Jesus or even to Mary. (McKay, 2009: chapter 1)

The patriarchal nature of the society (Scots Bay) is also set by the story in the beginning with Mr. Brady

Ketch’s words:

It’s just sometimes a woman needs a man to set her right. Says so in the Bible.(chapter 2)

This trait is echoed again when Dora comments on the kind of attitude of Aunt Fran:

My dear cousin, Precious, though she hangs on every word of a good story, is still Aunt Fran’s child...any news that’s ugly or sad is not allowed in their house: words of sensation and death leave a sinful mark on the walls of good Christian Home. (McKay, 2009: chapter 3)

Judah Rare feels uncomfortable that Dora still sleeps with her brothers:

Father’s right in supposing I’ve lost my innocence, but it wasn’t by having my rose plucked in the middle of a field that hasn’t been hayed. (I can still look forward to a bit of blood on the sheets on my wedding night.) (McKay, 2009: chapter 4)

Spiritual Connections to Nature and the Two Midwives

In *The Birth House*, the plot revolves around Dora, a midwife, who succeeded an old mid-wife (Miss B.) of Scots Bay. The reader is introduced to Miss B. in detail in chapter 3:

At seventeen (the same age I am now), Miss B. was visited by Louis Faire in a dream. He spoke to her, telling her that God had chosen her to take the sacred gifts of the *traiteurs* back to his homeland...No one was quite certain of how she ended up in Scots Bay instead of the fertile valley of her ancestors. All she will says is, “It was for Louis Faire that I came back to his homeland, but only God could make me live in Scots Bay.” (McKay, 2009: chapter 3)

The first experience is Darcy's death, which gives the readers insight to Miss B's ritual or the spiritual aspect of the novel. Darcy was then buried in the garden of the dead (*le jardin des morts*).

Miss B. sang little French prayers to the dead baby boy and wrapped him in one of the lace kerchiefs she's always tating on her lap. We laid him in a butter box, tucked October's last blossoms from the pot marigolds and asters all around him and nailed the tiny coffin shut. (McKay, 2009: chapter 2)

...

She began to make her way around the grove, tracing crosses in the air, circling closer and closer to the Mary tree. ... When Miss B. was finished, she knelt at the base of the tree and began to dig at the moss. Beneath the dirt and stones was a thick handle of braided rope. Together we pulled up a heavy wooden door that was covering a deep hole in the ground. "Our Lady will watch over him now." She took the tiny coffin, tied a length of rope around it and lowered it into the dark grave. "Holy Mother, Star of the Sea, take this little soul with thee." She let go of the rope and took my hands. "You gots to give him a name. Just say it once, so he knows he's been born." (McKay, 2009: chapter 2)

Other supernatural power that Miss B. seems to have is to be very precise about the gender and due dates of the babies.

Miss B.'s never wrong about these things. She can tell a woman that she's with a child before the woman knows it herself. She can tell if it's a boy or a girl, and the week the baby will arrive, most times getting it right down to the day. She can touch a person's forehead, or hold their hand, and tell them what's making them sick. (McKay, 2009: chapter 3)

Miss B knew what is going to happen to Sadie's baby and gave Dora the advice as if she knew what will happen.

Where was Miss B.? She'd been at the wedding. She'd come to me afterwards, held my hands, her bony familiar fingers whispering against my palms. She said she was tired, 'Ain't no place for a blind old granny at a dance... my feet gets in my own way.' I asked Charlie to walk her home, but she said she wanted to walk alone to enjoy the sunset and the warm evening. I kissed her cheeks. She whispered, 'Mind her bones,' and walked away. I thought it was a blessing for my wedding night. I was wrong. (McKay, 2009: chapter 19)

Dora's birth is also unusual, born with a caul on her head: The novel begins with the things related to Dora when she was born and when she was young.

I was born with coal black hair, cinnamon skin and a caul over my face. A foretelling sign. A sign. A gift that supposedly allows me to talk to animals, see people's deaths and hear the whisperings of spirits. A charm for protection against drowning. (McKay, 2009: chapter 1)

When Laird Jessup's Highland heifers gave birth to a three-legged albino calf, Dora was blamed for it for she had been the one who ran to the Jessups' to tell them about the strange thing that had happened. Her classmates chanted "Dora talked to ghosts, Dora ate bat soup, Dora slit the Devil's throat and flew over the chicken coop." These insinuations about Dora's supernatural powers or mystical birth story are directly linked to the stories about Miss B that had been spreading around. "If your cat or your baby goes missing, you'll know where to find the bones," "some say she's a witch, others say she's more of an angel." (McKay, 2009: chapter 1) By describing the "nonhuman" nature of Miss B. and Dora, the author actually strengthens the spiritual connections of the midwives thus making their bondage even stronger. And in Dora's narration, "It is talk like that that's made us such good friends." (McKay, 2009: chapter 1)

Prior to Miss B.'s death, the story reinforces the destiny of Dora as Miss B.'s successor. At the church service of Dora's Aunt Hannah June, her aunt's spirit communicated with Dora to leave the recipe of her brown bread with her sisters.

The Sunday after she died, there in the middle of church, while everyone else was saying, 'To thee all angels cry aloud; The heavens, and all the powers therein; To thee cherubim and seraphim continually do cry.' Auntie Hannah June's ghost settled down beside me and led my pencil across the inside of the back cover of the hymnal. To my dear sister Maude, 1/4 cup molasses, 1/2 cup oats, 2 egg yolks... I passed the book behind me to Aunt Maude. She cried, right there in the pew, trembling and dropping wet tears all over the place. (McKay, 2009: chapter 7)

Dora's second experience of death, or the lost of a life in her hands, is when Iris Rose Ketch died after childbirth. She buried Iris Rose at Miss B.'s *le jardin des morts*. She said the prayers for her:

“Holy Mother, Star of the Sea, take this little soul with thee. *Salve nos, Stella Maris*. Save us, Mary. Save her, Darcy. Come and save her. Come and take your sister home.”

Dora's prayers and ritual were simple and so were the calling of the spirits.

Miss B. died while Dora was given her new role in the community. Miss B. left a letter for Dora and her

Willow Book with five strands of rosary beads. “I knew something was wrong before I even got to the door. A letter sat on the table, next to the Willow Book and five strands of rosary beads, all laid out and waiting.” In Miss B.'s letter, she asked Dora to be the next *traiteur*. “We're all the same, same as the moon, the stars and the sea.” (McKay, 2009: chapter 19)

But the official succession had happened earlier in chapter 7:

“I know most folks think what I do ain't nothin' but a bunch of witchery, but everything gots a reason, I promise you that.”... “It's the things they can't see, the things they're afraid to get an understandin' of that I gots to pass on to you.” She laid the strand of beads in my lap. “It's time I gave this to you.” She put her finger to the pouch and made a sign of the cross. “This holds the veil, the caul that covered your eyes at your birth.” She untied the ribbon that held the pouch shut and gently fished out the contents. It was a homely little thing, unremarkable, looking much like the withered red bits of Irish moss I often find in the twins' coat pockets. Once considered a treasure, now forgotten and left behind. (McKay, 2009: chapter 7)

When Maxine is bedridden, down with the worst of influenza, Dora helped Maxine into good health by abiding by Miss B.'s advice of administering spirin. When Dora heals, the spiritual aspect did not cease to exist even though she is away from Scots Bay. When she sent Charlie to get castor oil, she wanted him to get from the Pastene's:

It's gotta come from a believer. Don't get it no place else. “Tell Mrs. Pastene you need cold-pressed oil, Palma Christi, not the stuff you spoon down the throat. (McKay, 2009: chapter 44)

When Maxine's pneumonia symptoms starts, coughing badly, Dora have even started singing Miss B.'s old songs and prayers.

The confirmation is in chapter 44 and we know that the flu could be the same strain as what she had when she was fifteen, but the author had placed these words of Dora to show her immunity and the ability to be untouched by the disease. Her role as a healer is strengthened in this event. She writes in a letter to Bertine and comments on her immunity to the strain of flu. “I'm somehow immune to this thing.” (McKay, 2009: chapter 44)

Freedom and the Two Midwives

Freedom in the story is presented in two ways: one is Dora's and Miss B.'s independence, and other is in the act of seeking abortion. We know that Scots Bay is too isolated to get daily newspapers, but by reading back dated news, Dora's mother is aware of the changing world.

“I know you don't think I know much about the world, but I hear what's going on. Newspapers get here often enough, and God knows Fran tells me what's fashionable and so on.”... “Things are changing for women. They want a say in things, to be their own persons. Some girls are working at jobs where they make their own way. If we lived in a bigger place, there might be opportunity for you. I've heard that out west and even in some towns down towards Halifax, girls your age are doing men's jobs, working on farms while the men are away...” (McKay, 2009: chapter 8)

Dora's mother also urged her not to live the life she has:

“... You know how it is, a girl lives with her parents until she gets married, and then she spends the rest of her life raising babies, cooking, cleaning, waiting on her husband. Do you really want to go from helping me take care of all these boys to taking care of another man?”... “I know Marie Babineau doesn't have much, but she's got one thing I've never had, and that's quiet. I can only imagine having moments all to myself that no one else knows about.” (McKay, 2009: chapter 8)

Dora's independence is most evident when she helped with the Halifax explosion then helped her friends in Boston to get well from influenza. This event away from Scots Bay not only serves to strengthen her position as a healer but also lays the basis for her to make some changes to the liberty of women, mothers, and daughters in Nova Scotia. Boston was badly affected by the Spanish Influenza and Dora avoided going out but can't help but heard her neighbor, Miss Honey coughing and her whole house of girls sick with influenza.

I told her to tell Mr. Malloy to stop his smoke treatment and let in some fresh air. From the obituaries that have been running in the paper, I can see it's not the influenza that does people in, it's the pneumonia that settles in their lungs after. This afternoon I made a pot of chicken soup and handed it to Miss Honey through our windows. It's the only safe way I can think of to help right now, as I can't risk any sort of exposure. I will continue to give advice and send what I can in hopes that they are all strong enough to pull through. (McKay, 2009: chapter 44)

There is no mention of "abortion" in the story. Miss B. gave Aunt Fran High Tide Tea and put slippery elm up between Fran's legs. Miss B. also told her to light the candle for the next three nights. "Say a prayer to Mary, thank her for her kindness, thank her for the moon, thank her for the tides. You'll be good as new," said Miss B. Miss B. also helped Dora by not getting Grace Hunter pregnant with Archer's child, just for prevention. She gave Grace the Beaver Brew to help prevent ovulation. Miss B.'s thoughts about abortion:

It wasn't until after supper that she broke her silence. "What you gots to know is this..." Her fingers circled one of the strands of beads around her neck. "It don't matter one way or another. Iain't God. No matter how hard you try, it's always gonna be between she and Him, whoever she might be. I'm here to deliver women from their pain. Simple as that." (McKay, 2009: chapter 12)

"Woman's got every right to look after herself. She's got every right to be scared, too. She can feel the rope getting' tight, even if her husband or some other man don't pay no mind. If he forces his self on her, it's simple enough for me to make it right, and I can't believe that it's no accident.'... 'If she's the one who made the mistake...well, she's probably just tired. Tired of looking after herself, too tired to get after her man about it, or thinkin' she'll lose him if she does. Only the woman knows if she's got enough love to make a life. It's love that's gots to make the choice. No matter what anybody says, no matter how much money or fancy this and that you think she has to her name, only the heart knows what it's got to lose, one way or another." (McKay, 2009: chapter 12)

Dora also performed one abortion for Mrs. Ketch. She followed Miss B.'s notes on the Willow Book and gave Mrs. Ketch the same treatment. Dora felt guilty:

I wonder if Wrennie can feel the coldness in me that comes when I think of Mrs. Ketch, the chill that runs right through me, to my fingers and down to my toes. It don't matter one way or another. Iain't God. Only the woman knows if she's got enough love to make a life. No matter how many of Miss B.'s old quilts I wrap around me, I can't seem to keep warm." (McKay, 2009: chapter 38)

Miss B.'s reaction after abortion is however, guilt free.

The Occasional Knitters Society (O.K.S.) was formed by Dora and her friends, Bertine, Sadie, Mabel, Ginny, Precious (she being the youngest member) during the war. Their gathering on every Wednesday was to knit socks for the soldiers at war. The gathering became regular even after the war and the bond of the sisterhood was even stronger when Dora had to leave Scots Bay and also leave Wrennie in the care of Bertine. This group later had a big role in raising the awareness of the women's rights in Scots Bay and the neighboring small towns. The O.K.S. role became important and official with the "initiation rite" of having the same haircut. The bobbed hairstyle that the women of this group made them to appear more sophisticated. At the meeting where all the women had the same haircut, they decided to do something about the threat of Dr. Thomas against Dora once and for all.

Bertine and Sadie delivered letters to local women, asking for their support at a Mother's May Day march in Canning. Precious and Mabel have sewn a large banner for the women to carry, and I have agreed to speak (to anyone who'll listen). If women lose the right to say where and how they birth their children, then they will have lost something that's as dear to life as breathing. I'm tired of being afraid. (McKay, 2009: chapter 47)

Hundreds march through streets of Canning, Nova Scotia. The banner was bearing the words “Women and Children First!” Over two hundred women from communities all along North Mountain came together to raise their voices in support of rural midwives. Dora gave a speech to a crowd in front of the Canning Maternity Home at the end of the march. She spoke of her experiences as a midwife, as well as the dangers rural women face in travelling down the mountain while in the last stages of labour. She called for “co-operation and trust” between doctors, midwives and the women they serve. (McKay, 2009: chapter 47)

Finally, at the last chapter, Dora decided to offer up Spider Hill as a birthing house of the Bay. These are the things that she will ask of the women who go there:

1. No woman or child shall be turned away.
2. No payment shall be required.
3. No idle gossip or cruel words shall cross the threshold.
4. No one may attend a birth unless requested by the mother.
5. Mother and child (or children) shall stay in confinement for at least nine days after the birth, or until the mother’s been churched.
6. Well-wishers may not enter unless the mother approves.
7. The mother’s home must be clean and tidy, her household chores looked after, and supper enough for a week must be waiting for her when she returns home. (McKay, 2009: chapter 47)

Science and the Two Midwives

Dr. Thomas represents the advancing medicine at that time. He commented on the traditional beliefs of the ignorant women at Scots Bay.

“Superstition and wives’ tales may prove true some of the time, but they can’t be trusted. Belief in such practices in today and age does nothing but halt the progress of science. No wonder so many of the women out here won’t come to their senses”...“Science is neither kind nor unkind, Miss Babineau. Science is exact.” (McKay, 2009: chapter 10)

However, Miss B.’s midwifery is different and tends to the emotions and feelings of the mothers:

“Exact? Exact don’t do a woman no good when she’s wailin’ for her mama.” (McKay, 2009: chapter 10)

It serves as the stark contrast between doctors who are cold and insensitive. Dr. Thomas said:

“Since she chose to have the child at home, I’m afraid I’ll have to limit the care I give her... ‘You won’t be back to look in on her again? We already paid. ‘Yes, but the certificate clearly states that the mother’s confinement and care are to be attended to at the Canning Maternity Home.” (McKay, 2009: chapter 19)

In contrast, Dora and her helpers’ give personal touch in traditional childbirth. In this unexpected birth, Dora was the only available to the calling to help.

Dr. Thomas arrived, too late to catch the baby or the afterbirth. He took off his coat and paced around the house, grumbling about women not knowing what’s best for themselves. (McKay, 2009: chapter 19) After she went back to Scots Bay from Boston, she immediately helped Ginny Jessup with her birthing. She [Ginny]’s swollen all over, suffering from crippling headaches and nearly blind each time she tries to stand up....The advanced state of Ginny’s condition worries me. I will do everything I can, but her symptoms should have been attended to weeks ago. (McKay, 2009: chapter 45)

While medicine is represented rigidly by Dr. Thomas, we know for a sure that the Willow Book² contains not only recipe for cures and remedies, but the notes from Miss B. that were recorded of her experience as a midwife. Dora recorded the birthing of Mabel’s baby in the Willow Book.

I recorded the day’s events in the Willow Book, still amazed at the way it felt to be the first person to bring her hands to a child’s life. While it cannot replace the sadness I feel over Darcy, it has changed me, somehow opening my heart again. (McKay, 2009: chapter 6)

²The contents of the Willow Book are after the epilogue in alphabetical order.

And Dora read the following as a reference when she helped Ginny with her first natural birth.

Stranger's Face: I seen it in a woman over Blomidon way. By the time I got to her she was gone out of her mind with convulsions. I had to cut the baby out, losing the mother to save the child. The baby died anyways. Was too early to have enough strength to survive. Miss B.'s sprawling script wanders across the pages of the Willow Book, her amendments and successes turned sideways, rhyming in the margins. (McKay, 2009: chapter 45)

Conclusion

The urge to be a mother is explicitly expressed by Dora when she thought that nothing else would matter if a child is inside me. Though Wrennie is not her biological daughter, her intrinsic mothering quality had made her a better mother than if Iris Rose survived her birthing. The resilience of the women in the story to be always a good mother first before being a good wife is evident. Death is considered as returning to the mother, or mother earth. The *perseverare in suo esse* is the spiritual relationship of the self with the habitué.

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