
Joni Adamson. *American Indian Literature, Environmental Justice, and Ecocriticism: The Middle Place*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2001. 213p.

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As the field of ecocriticism has continued to grow in the past decade, a split has emerged among its practitioners over the question of how to respond to much of contemporary literary theory. Some ecocritics continue to argue that protecting endangered species and preserving wilderness areas are agendas “outside” the questions raised by post-structuralist thinkers. But others have engaged the theoretical insights of the past thirty years or so and risen to the challenge of placing environmental concerns into the context of social justice issues. Joni Adamson’s work in the field of ecocriticism has been crucial in this regard, particularly for her intervention into the way “environmentalism” and “environmental literature” often privilege the solitary, white, male sojourn into the wilderness. Adamson’s recent book, *American Indian Literature, Environmental Justice, and Ecocriticism: The Middle Place*, brings the ethical imperative of paying attention to race, class, gender, and community into dialogue with mainstream environmentalism, even as it raises questions about viable methodologies for the future of ecocriticism.

Adamson’s method is to practice what ecocritic Scott Slovic has called “narrative scholarship,” a kind of criticism that incorporates the critic’s personal experience into discussions of literary texts. While her book is about American Indian literature, for example, Adamson narrates her own role as teacher at the University of Arizona in Tucson and describes her visits to the nearby Tohono O’odham Nation. Stories from her classrooms intersect with larger narratives about retention rates of American Indian students at the university and college prep programs to improve the success of Indian students coming from reservations. Adamson weaves these stories together as she discusses a range of American Indian authors, including Ofelia Zepeda, Simon Ortiz, Louise Erdrich, Joy Harjo, and Leslie Marmon Silko. But her primary objective with each writer is to judge whether they offer models for sustainable communities and formulas for resisting hegemonic powers. This approach leads her to such conclusions as, “characters in the literature of environmental justice must be persons of action” (xx); and, these characters must be “capable of representing themselves and their people from their own perspective” (130). The question for me, though, is whether such an approach sets up a litmus test for judging literary works, rather than offering a more theoretically rigorous framework that might be useful for discourse analysis.

Questions about such “theorizing” are certainly more appropriate for academic audiences, and it is true that Adamson generally calls for an ecocriticism that would be useful to a broader readership. She argues that American Indian authors should be considered theorists themselves and that advocating such ideas as a “garden ethic” (borrowed from journalist and author Michael Pollan) is a way of calling for “literary and cultural critics to bring their theoretical work down to earth” (97). But Adamson is also explicit in her call for a “more satisfying, theoretically coherent ecocriticism” (50), and thus her conclusions seem to warrant careful consideration by both ecocritics and postmodernist thinkers in general. Her central concept of a “middle place” (the sub-title of her book) illustrates what readers interested in theory will find frustrating. The search for a “middle place” is an attempt to find space between various binary oppositions, such as nature and culture. As Adamson tries to bring us all back down to the environment “out there,” she suggests that it doesn’t make sense to think of nature and culture as opposite poles. Her concept of being in the “middle place” between those two poles, though, necessarily reifies the poles themselves. Adamson calls for a “middle place” dozens of times in her book, but the concept constantly slides between such supposed oppositions as “scholarship and experience” (xviii); “universalism and particularity” (69); “the local and the universal” (95); “the oral tradition and contemporary literature” (103); the “official” and the “vernacular” landscape (111); and “traditional cultures” and “contemporary cultures” (127). The underlying suggestion of the “middle place” is that American Indian culture can offer solutions to our social and environmental crises. Whether it can or not, though, seems to be a rather different question than whether the idea of a “middle place” makes sense theoretically.

But Adamson’s intended audience is not simply academic critics, and her purpose is not merely to raise questions within literary criticism. She is also deeply committed to the cause of environmental justice, and her book makes great strides toward educating readers about the profound injustices that historically link the exploitation of the environment with the exploitation of minority groups. Throughout her book she explores specific ways of resisting dominant discourses, including the most basic proposition that “the environment” must be defined as lived space, as the places where communities of people work and live and interact with the non-human world around them. Adamson’s contrast of Ofelia Zepeda and Terry Tempest Williams, for example, illustrates how American Indian literature frequently emphasizes the communal over the individual when it comes to experiencing “nature.” When communities of color are threatened by environmental destruction, the work of a writer like Simon Ortiz can help document such cases

as Peabody Western Coal's contamination of both a place, Black Mesa, Arizona, and the people living there, in this case the Diné and the Hopi. Adamson's discussion of Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* offers the most explicit call for resistance to such practices through such means as organized protests, international coalitions, and even armed uprisings. Adamson is at her best when she chronicles the cultural history of indigenous resistance movements, such as the Mayan Zapatistas who took control of several towns in the Mexican state of Chiapas in 1994. Placing Silko's novel, or more accurately her almanac, as Adamson points out, into this cultural context suggests the fruitful ways that literature can predict, influence, and respond to the exigencies of environmental justice.

Adamson's calls for linking environmental and social issues and paying more attention to multicultural literature are certainly crucial agendas, and her voice represents a welcome critical trend among ecocritics. *American Indian Literature, Environmental Justice, and Ecocriticism: The Middle Place*, though, at least in my view, is more of a contribution to environmentalism in general than to ecocriticism; it is more useful for discussions about sustainable models for communities than theoretical frameworks for literary and cultural studies scholars. But the desire to bring these motivations together continues to offer the most promising agenda for ecocritics in the academy today. ✨