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

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Pity the moderate. If you aspire to membership in the cultural elite, the smart path is to position yourself as a purist, eschewing the messy and contentious middle ground. The problem, as Joni Adamson demonstrates, is that it's in the middle where things get done—it's the habitat of *politics* in a more meaningful sense of the world than many politically-oriented literary critics are able to muster. It is a place of negotiation, ambiguity, and a dearth of easy answers. While not exactly a moderate (she is fervently committed to a cleaner, safer, and more just world), Adamson bravely takes on the desire for "purity" among ecologically-minded authors and ecocritics, arguing that resolving environmental problems requires something more than holding a more-immaculate-than-thou stance—and that, although some writers and critics have indulged in an unproductive purist position, the crafting of narrative can also provide an excellent model of the self-conscious negotiation that environmental problems demand.

Adamson's thesis is that "the study of multicultural literatures offers us rich ground in which to root a better, more culturally inclusive, politically effective environmentalism and a more satisfying, theoretically coherent ecocriticism" (50). Specifically, American Indian writers such as Simon Ortiz, Louise Erdrich, Joy Harjo, and Leslie Marmon Silko tend not to imagine a retreat into the wilderness in their fiction, poetry, creative non-fiction, and drama, for the simple reason that such a retreat would be untrue to the lives and contingencies of those who people their narratives. Whereas Edward Abbey envisions for his readers glorious forays into an untouched—and unattainable—world, in Adamson's view such escapism, ultimately cynical, merely enshrines the current environmental degradation as unavoidable, just part of contemporary life. For Abbey's readers, it may be "possible to have the comforts of civilization *and* a pure, pristine wilderness in which to escape the comfort of civilization" (38), but only in the limited context of reading Abbey's books, or possibly while visiting a protected wilderness area. Dealing with environmental waste and toxicity in places where people actually have to live comes to seem beside the point, making a purist and ahistorical perspective like that of Abbey and his readers potentially worse than useless:

Backpackers, rock climbers, and river runners—who carefully follow the "leave no trace" backcountry ethic, packing out every Zip-lock bag and Ramen Noodle

package—often live less carefully when they return to the city, forgetting that their houses were built from wood from the forest and that their electricity is produced by dams or coal-burning generating stations. They feel somehow less responsible for the forest that has already been clear-cut, for the land at the edge of an urban minority neighborhood that is being used to dispose of toxic industrial waste, and for the reservation in the corner of the state where a multinational coal-mining corporation is contaminating an aquifer with toxic levels of arsenic and copper. (44-45)

In contrast, Adamson notes, a writer like Simon Ortiz seems far more willing to imagine the manipulation of nature as something worthwhile, even necessary, though of course not without its pitfalls. In place of the Garden of Eden, Ortiz offers a “garden ethic,” in which careful stewardship of the land—and not the abandonment of it—is possible (67). Repeatedly, through the discussion of literary writers, Adamson makes the point that ecocritics must risk environmental impurity in order to enact *survival*—of both the environment and the marginalized peoples who craft tenuous lives from it. Thus, Adamson advocates positions that may seem compromised to some. For example, a Diné (Navajo) student of Adamson’s plans to graduate from college and go to work for the mine that is damaging (but also economically sustaining) her community, working for change from within rather than simply withdrawing (49-50). By sticking to a safe haven of imagined purity, Adamson suggests, ecocritics leave the stewardship of the environment to the corporations and the pols, whereas a healthier ecological stance, which can be derived from American Indian literature, would locate holistic and sustainable solutions for the environment that people actually live in, and ultimately would do more for the planet’s welfare than purism ever can.

With the exception of two strong chapters on Silko, Adamson is (like many critics) sharper in discussing writers she disagrees with than those she likes. The chapter on Abbey is brilliant. (His fans will complain that she is singling him out unduly for criticism, though she does take time to poke at “toxic consciousness” authors like Don DeLillo, among others.) When discussing writers she admires like Erdrich and Harjo, Adamson lapses too often into gushing summary and quotation, providing somewhat less insight and less of a rationale for reading her book (rather than simply those of the writers she encapsulates). Adamson attempts to balance her literary critic’s voice with more lyrical and personal passages describing her own situatedness as an ecocritic and teacher of minority students, although she doesn’t match the richness of Abbey, Erdrich, and other authors against whose writing hers is juxtaposed. On the other hand, as literary criticism goes, the book’s prose is above average: more pleasant to read than Derrida, if not

Thoreau. And the personal, deeply felt nature of Adamson's argument is effective and appreciated.

While the core of Adamson's argument is clear from the outset, following her chain of reasoning requires some patience. At times, Adamson's application of an environmental theme to American Indians' writings seems tacked on to an extent that borders on the essentialist. And her claim that the language we use is integral to our environmental positions initially appears somewhat airy. Yet, by the end, Adamson has wrapped up most of the loose ends, and in the process has offered up intelligent, sensitive, and pedagogically useful readings of some major literary figures. This book is well worth reading and seems useful, possibly essential, for graduate- and professional-level work on environmental writing and ecocriticism. ✱