

Book Review, RINDA WEST, *Out of the Shadow: Ecopsychology, Story and Encounters with the Land*. University of Virginia Press, 2007. ISBN 9780813926568

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Out of the Shadow is a brave, bright and deep act of imagination because it responds as a *whole* to the crisis facing the peoples of the Earth. It does so in the best ecological tradition rooted in the person, place and history of the author. For example, the author's own physical ecological voluntary work makes an important contribution to the meaning. Through that rootedness, the book describes a psychic restoration that uncovers, discovers and proclaims the re-storying that American literature is working through to re-connect humans to the life of nature. This book, in a limited sense, is about novels, not all American, from the nineteenth century to the present. All of the novels are focused in a profound way on what the encounter with the land makes of human nature.

To begin with, *Out of the Shadow* tells a tragic story of European and white American fear of the Other realised in a horror of nature and those peoples living closest to it. In seminal texts such as *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad and *The Oregon Trail* by Francis Parkman, all that is dark and unconscious in the project of the protagonists in their attempt to conquer unknown lands returns to them in psychological fracturing in the face of the wilderness. Hence the third powerful strand to *Out of the Shadow's* treatment of literature and nature, ecopsychology, the exploration of the psyche as deeply bound up with non-human nature.

Ecopsychology argues that to divorce matters of psyche from the health of the non-human environment is harmful to both. For the western psyche of our inner crisis of mental fragility is actually an aspect of the so-called 'outer' crisis of nature's sickness caused by man. We live in an age where a holistic attitude is demanded. From the reductionism and separation of Newtonian science that did much to get us in this mess, we are called to a new paradigm of holism and complexity in which all life is more than inter-connected, it is interdependent. Indeed, this model is itself one of the ecosystem. Ecopsychology is the realisation

that humans are deeply implicated in the ecosystem. It is not something outside human psyche and culture that we can continually bash and exploit with impunity. Rather industrial society's attack on the ecosystem is also a pollution of the psyche and the ability to live with one another. Social health requires psychic renewal that cannot be divorced from the fate of nature.

So *Out of the Shadow* is something special: a work of the new holistic paradigm of knowledge that takes the reader beyond the literary text into the processes of psychic and social healing that may be our only hope. Writing a novel or reading a book of literary criticism do not appear to be the answers to global warming. Yet *Out of the Shadow* demonstrates that such reductionist attitudes to knowledge and academic disciplines are themselves the problem. A study of nineteenth century attitudes to nature in Conrad and Parkman exposes the extent of the crisis. From here, *Out of the Shadow* looks at creative responses to the depleted psyche and devastated landscape in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, James Welch's *Fools Crow*, Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, Marilyn Robinson's *Housekeeping*, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, N. Scott Momaday's *The Ancient Child*, Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal Dreams* and the Chippewa novels of Louise Erdrich.

In the first place, examining Native American novels enables West to reveal the depth and wisdom of cultures who draw psychic strength from living with nature rather than exploiting it. These works show even more the contingent crassness of modernity's determination to make the non-human the bearer of the shadow, the dark aspect of human nature. Secondly, the focus of *Out of the Shadow* on contemporary works by authors from many cultures, (including white Americans and Canadians) looking for the wilderness within and without shows the start of a powerful postcolonial and multicultural creative continuum in responding to environmental crisis.

For example, Robinson's *Housekeeping*, considers that most mundane and female defined daily activity. Housekeeping is what women do to keep nature and its inevitable changes and decay away from the modern home. Indeed, much of housekeeping with its embrace of toxic chemicals is a metonym for poisoning nature. Does its utter rejection of the inevitability of death also poison the soul? Robinson begins to imagine another kind of housekeeping that is open to nature, wilderness and change. Eventually her characters have to give up houses altogether for a transient life that is not based on keeping out the Other at all costs.

Thirdly, what *Out of the Shadow* does, is make the connection between the evolution of ritual in the face of our environmental crisis and literature itself. What the new novels of psyche, self and nature tell us is that the only response to devastation both inner and outer is restoration. Restoration *is an inner process as well as an outer one*, it requires re-storying, what these novels achieve. The re-

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stories, new imagining of old stories of connection to the land are deeply imbued with rituals. That is to say that they are not so much *about* rituals as also rituals in themselves. In cultures that once had healing ceremonies that bonded human and land, these need re-storying. If story has the potential to be part of culture that *cultivates* the wasteland of modern psyches not at home with nature, then the telling and re-telling of these stories is an extension of the ritual.

Out of the Shadow is ultimately important because it invites the reader in as participants in a ritual re-storying our relationship to our-selves and nature. Ultimately, it offers itself as a contribution to healing. By embracing a holistic attitude to the psyche and nature, a book of literary criticism can also be part of the development of new and old rituals to re-connect with the land. Indeed, *Out of the Shadow* gives us optimism in the sense that we may at last find our selves *in nature*. This book is a proud part of the new holistic paradigm of knowledge. It transcends the discipline of literary studies to embrace psyche and nature. Rinda West has made an invaluable contribution to the greatest debates of our time. Moreover, she offers us perhaps the most potent gift towards it: hope.