
Elissa Washuta. *White Magic*. Tin House, 2021. 424 pages. ISBN : 9781951142391

<https://tinhouse.com/book/white-magic>

Magical. Mystical. Haunting. These words describe Washuta's non-fiction essay and memoir collection *White Magic*. These words could equally be used to describe New Age clichés and stereotypes about Indigeneity that Washuta astutely identifies and critiques. The careful attention to the multiple meanings and contexts that live in every word, turn of phrase, and cultural reference makes Washuta's work a spellbinding (pun-intended) read which addresses the interconnected legacies of land, family, gender, and sexual violence.

Washuta positions what it means to be a Cowlitz woman navigating myriad layers of cultural expectations, violence, and stereotypes while considering historical and on-going questions about agency and survival. Magic, and whether it is cosmic, an illusion, or something that one can cultivate, frames the range of cultural references throughout the book and allows Washuta to produce a work of non-fiction that, as she describes, makes insights over plot. More specifically, Washuta tells the reader early on that the goal of the non-fiction writer is to "shape the recollected by how the remembering changes us. The mind wants to understand what's done but not settled" (25). Settling and unsettling as concepts appear in various contexts in this collection: the unsettling experiences of daily life that create anxiety or reckoning with the violent history of U.S expansion and how to unsettle this legacy of settler colonialism today.

The essays in this volume meditate on cultural artefacts associated in some way with magic: whether it's the witchy aesthetic of Stevie Nicks, or the supernatural narrative of *Twin Peaks*, or the uncanny ability of computerized settlers in the game *Oregon Trail* to continually resurrect themselves in their pursuit of westward expansion and displacement of Native peoples. The cultural touchstones – from music, film, and popular culture – function as a lens through which to see the magic and power of such works as narratives that weave their own kind of spell on audiences, but also provide a way to create a new narrative forged out of intertextuality that recenters the interconnectedness of time, place, and space. Intertextuality allows for an exploration of the limits of familiarity and relatability and raises questions about the intended audience for the narratives that permeate the dominant cultural imagination. The textual interrogation that comes with this intertextuality also highlights when new narratives are necessary to overturn harmful cycles of repetition.

White Magic is a work of non-fiction that arranges its chapters into three acts, each defined by titles that come from Tarot cards. By opening each act with a three-card Tarot spread to establish the direction, themes, and experiences explored in the essays, the author blends form with subject matter and exemplifies a common thread throughout that “[a]ny narrative is a magic trick” (400). The organization of the book also emphasizes the dramatic features of the text; like acts in a play, Washuta teases that her narrative has a rising and falling action, but these narrative trappings are ultimately ones she invites us to question and reconsider as she suggests time and again that the human experience cannot be neatly folded into narrative conventions or even be viewed linearly. Washuta plays with form and style, revisiting experiences, scenes, and places from different perspectives and in a different chronology. In the book’s third and last act, Washuta experiments with form the most in a series of diary-like entries that resist chronology, with some entries summarizing scenes and plot points from *Twin Peak* and *The Prestige* that function as interpretative commentaries on her own lived experiences.

Another notable topic in the book is Washuta’s discussion of digital games *Oregon Trail* and *Red Dead Redemption*, which immerse the player in a narrative world to replay historical narratives (and traumas) from the nation’s past. It is in the discussions of these games that the implication of the title “white magic” feels most prominent, as Washuta describes the cognitive dissonance of being a Native woman immersed in the disorientating experience of playing the role of the white settler in an act of settler sleight of hand. Simulated realities versus historical realities versus living realities blur in these moments of gameplay and serve as reminders of how the past and the narratives and myth of the American west (the white magic ur-text of national mythology that excuses settler colonialism) haunts the present.

Washuta’s *White Magic* is a rich volume full of metatextual and intertextual playfulness that addresses topical and significant issues in U.S. American and Indigenous cultures today. It’s a book that ultimately explores the things that hold power over us and how we can hold power via narrative. Washuta may write about traumas, but she always resists narratives of victimry and terminal creeds. Feminist scholarship and theory has long considered how the figure of the witch can be a symbol of cultural and patriarchal resistance, whether in the work of Barbara Creed’s *The Monstrous Feminine* (1993) or the more recently translated work of Swiss theorist Mona Chollet’s *Sorcières* (2018) (English title: *In Defense of Witches*). Yet, these explorations often privilege Eurocentric and Western notions of magic and witchery. Washuta’s essays acknowledge the

pervasiveness of Western and pop culture witches and magic but don't let these tropes and approaches dominate. Washuta's essays, instead, provide an alternative way of viewing witchcraft and gender that brings a much-needed Indigenous perspective. These essays will stay with you long after you've read them.

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Works Cited:

Chollet, Mona. *Sorcières*. ZONES, 2018.

Creed, Barbara. *The Monstrous Feminine*. Routledge, 1993.