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Book Review

Review of *Reinhabiting Reality: Towards a Recovery of Culture* by Freya Mathews, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2005, 228 pp., hardcover US$86.50; paper US$26.95.

Review by Serpil Oppermann

In *Reinhabiting Reality: Towards a Recovery of Culture* Australian ecophilosopher Freya Mathews argues that unless we step out of the materialist premises of modern western culture, we cannot find a long-term remedy for the global ecological crisis. She argues that based on the dualism between mind and matter, modernity, as the defining characteristic of western civilization, has produced an increasingly consumerist culture and an environmentally harmful form of liberal capitalism which perceives the natural environment only in terms of its exploitative resources. As opposed to the values of progress, commodification, efficiency, development, profit, and property, which are definitive of modernity's materialist world view, Mathews advocates a radical conceptual change in the social and cultural foundations of western societies. Mathews supports the view that the natural world should be allowed to function without human intervention, in which case the biosphere, according to her, will fare better and heal itself. This perspective, however, is not without problems, because as she herself admits, there will be casualties at the level of individuals when things are left to unfold in their own ways. Her answer to this human conflict is to "evolve modalities of self-preservation consistent with a general attitude of letting be."[1]

Mathews' philosophy is undoubtedly inspired by the deep ecology movement and builds upon its main contention of the intrinsic value of the non-human world. She makes a strong point about conceiving nature in terms of processes rather than things with utilitarian values. Although Mathews promotes a holistic view, she cannot escape creating binary oppositions in her argument when she sets the natural self, for example, against the civilized self. This distinction inevitably brings

what she calls the controlled rational ego in conflict with instincts, intuitions, and senses, which she equates with the natural self. Nevertheless, Mathews tries to justify her viewpoint by drawing attention to the needs of matter itself beyond the limitations of technological conception of progress that western cultures exclusively privilege. Although this argument is not new, Mathews' book offers unique perspectives from her personal experiences. The novelty of this book lies in the fact that we encounter a philosopher who is able to offer an example of how one can walk the talk. The use of her diaries, for example, provides a poignant view of how recollection of incidents from her early years assisted her in formulating her philosophical outlook. In this respect, intricate abstract thought is illustrated by intimate life stories and thus becomes more accessible for the general reader.

Reinhabiting Reality fuses poetic style with abstract premises of panpsychism that Mathews offers as a legitimate solution to what she calls collective human solipsism. Essentially, the main contention is based on the idea of replacing the consumerist-materialist attitude of western culture to the physical world with a panpsychist one. Mathews argues that when the entire system of dualist and materialist culture is abandoned, humanity can at large arrive at self-awareness and learn to engage with the world, create a much desired fusion of inner and outer realities, and integrate mind with matter. Via the personal narratives and storytelling in the second and the third sections of the book, Mathews encourages us to relate to matter, which, as the artificial, inorganic and artifactual component of our reality, must be acknowledged along with the natural and the organic. The core of her argument, then, lies in an understanding of reality which involves not only rocks, forests, animals, plants, water, and soil, but also includes apartment blocks, factories, and machines: in short, every conceivable industrial product. She suggests that we must stop redesigning our environments and let the world recover itself on its own.

Reinhabiting Reality: Towards a Recovery of Culture is composed of three parts with three chapters devoted to each part. Part I is entitled "Culture: The love of Ground" where she sets off with the premise of the pervasive ecological crisis being a "symptom of a deeper metaphysical crisis in human consciousness and an accompanying crisis of culture,"[2] and then outlines the dualistic basis of materialist western civilization. In the first chapter she explains its core ideal as liberal capitalism and progress, which, she argues, constitutes the core of western culture. She defines modernity as a commitment to progress that is sustained by what she calls the emerging power of new ideas, insights, new conceptual, or philosophical horizons.[3] This desire for

change, or in her words, "the perpetual quest to improve the world," and to shape it according to the latest designs, produces a condition of discontinuity with the past and dissociation from tradition[4]. Mathews claims that the profit-driven economics of materialist modern culture creates no objective points of reference for meaning, and therefore leads to a "collective human solipsism."[5] What follows is that matter loses its importance in the materialistic view and gets "epistemically constructed in countless ways."[6] When matter drops out of the picture, she states, human discourse fills the stage. In this condition the real gets replaced by the discursive. Inevitably, reliance on discursivity entails epistemological pluralism. Mathews' point is that the mind/matter dualism has paved the way for this modern episteme and created a split between subject and object in which case self-realization became almost impossible to achieve in the sense of being part of a greater whole. The solution she offers to this dilemma is to integrate mind and matter. Mind must be restored to matter, she says, and "matter must be accommodated as active presence."[7] This nondualist view is "panpsychism."

The aim of the book, as she underlines it in this section, is praxis of panpsychism. She explains it as treating the world not as mindless matter, or as raw resource, but as energy, fluidity, and process She likens the modern individuals who treat the world only as a commodity, to blocks which are made of solid stuff without inner fluidity or feeling.[8] Blocks are marked by unresponsive attitudes to the living world and are characterized by desensitization towards everything in it. This is the condition of modernity, where everything is registered as discursive ciphers,[9] because moderns, she argues, can only perceive one another discursively and cannot register one another's "embodied particularity."[10] Obviously, such an existence is based on rationally organized life according to costs and profits and becomes devoid of meaning. Such a world empties itself of significance and purpose. The grim picture Mathews draws for modernity is devoid of love of the world and is conditioned by utilitarian mentality. She offers panpsychism as the only alternative to the materialist cultures. The fundamental modality of panpsychism is "grace,"[11] she writes, since panpsychist culture cultivates gratitude for existence and appreciation for being part of a greater whole. While modern culture is based on self- righteousness, panpsychist culture cherishes self-realization. In this context, Mathews' argument runs parallel to the deep ecological acknowledgement of a holistic way of living in the world.

The second chapter of the first part highlights the premises of panpsychism, arguing for the importance of a communicative relation with the world. The features of panpsychism include respect and

acknowledgement of the intrinsic rightness of things as they are. Evidently, panpsychism embodies the basic principles of deep ecology in its affirmative, relational attitude. Mathews herself underlines this affinity between panpsychism and the philosophy of deep ecology. Indeed the platform principles of deep ecology and those of panpsychism converge in many ways. First of all, both call for respect for the non-human world, and both emphasize its intrinsic value. Secondly, both radically deconstruct anthropocentric ethics of modernity and give importance to the law of the unfolding process in nature. Third, they both adopt a cosmological logic toward life as opposed to the logo-centric one which relies on dichotomization. Finally, perhaps the most obvious similarity they share is their metaphysical outlook, in that both draw upon non-western and pagan traditions. Therefore, the definition of life from a panpsychist perspective echoes the deep ecological one in Mathews' lucid argument. Life, she states, is intrinsic to reality, and according to panpsychism

> the universe is a unity imbued with its own conatus, its own will to maintain and increase itself. Individual things, whether animate or inanimate, are modes of this higher unity, and are consequently enfolded in the process of its self-realization. [. . .] Left to themselves then, things unfold in ways that by and large assure their own actualization and the further unfolding of the greater systems in which they are enmeshed.[12]

Generally, Mathews supports the view that the world should be allowed to function on its own, which she names as the attitude of "letting be."[13] In this respect,

> the unfolding of the biosphere—which is to say, the course of life on earth—involves a pattern of gradual but continuous change—a pattern of aging and decomposition followed by spontaneous reconstitution into new forms. This is what happens to things when we let then be.[14]

She claims that we should let all things return to nature. Then we can transform from being nature's indifferent exploiters to its custodians, because when we no longer manipulate things, they take a natural course. As she suggests: "Existing ecosystems should, like cities and selves, be allowed to unfold in their own way, free from undue human disturbance."[15] Such a panpsychist world view, according to her, includes human made environments which escaped the attention of deep ecologists. It is in this regard that Mathews' views begin to diverge from those of deep ecology, as she claims that environmentalism, "even in its deep-ecological forms, is not only missing the larger metaphysical picture in its approach to modernity, it is also itself deeply entangled or imbued with the modernist ethos in its

understanding of its own mission."[16] Such an accusation against deep ecology, however, in my opinion, is not properly justified. How does deep ecology, one might ask, get enmeshed in modernist ethos when its main argument lies entirely on opposition to modernity's essentialist, dualist conceptual tradition? Mathews' answer, which she provides in the last chapter of the first part of the book, that radical ecophilosophies (such as deep ecology and bioregionalism) "offered us a posture of opposition to the contemporary world, but no true praxis for it, no way of living harmoniously in it,"[17] does not really pay enough homage to deep ecology's concern for living in a non-detrimental way. Therefore, her argument that ecophilosophy is incomplete[18] is weak.

When she concedes the importance of "emplaced self,"[19] in the third chapter, and offers a practical model of living in terms of not replacing our things with the new ones, and populating our houses with "contented companion animals,"[20] her contention begins to slide into a kind of idealism that sounds more utopic than practical as she wishes to provide as exemplary holistic life. Commitment to particular place, to the things that surround us, as she continues to give as an exemplary practical solution, stands out as an alternative solution to consumerism and production, but this may not really produce the desired end-results. The question is, would becoming native to particular places in Mathews' terms really produce a sense of belonging with the world in the bioregionalist sense? Or, would what Mathews suggests make the homeplace a clustered junk yard? It is important to note that although Mathews intends to create respect for place by allowing other entities to share our dwellings, and by asking us to keep all our things and allow them to disintegrate naturally, from a practical standpoint her project does involve risks. Therefore, while panpsychism is philosophically defensible, it can in praxis become equally problematic. Yet this question never comes to the foreground in the following sections of the book. Instead Mathews tries to demonstrate her metaphysical views via the storytelling process.

Part II is entitled "Ground Studies" and the three chapters as the case studies of panpsychism are written in order to provide the real life experiences of the author in support of her panpsychist world view. It is in these chapters that Mathews' writing adopts a more poetic and personal style, and she explains how her own identity is shaped by the specificity of place. These chapters, but more particularly the chapters that make up Part III of the book, entitled "Views from the Ground," are actually fine examples of creative nature writing which fuse literary and non-fictional prose. Grounded in nature, the personal narratives are intended as the praxis of panpsychism. Here Mathews ventures beyond the abstractions of the theory of panpsychism and bridges the gap

between philosophical arguments and personal experiences. Indeed her writing becomes evocative, and in many parts quite lyrical concerning the embodied self, place, and life itself. In her account of living in the world, Mathews erases the line between the natural and the human made environments. In the first chapter of Part II, "Julia's Farm: Fertility," Mathews narrates her journey to her friend's farm in Western Australia. Julia's creation of a farm "built from the discarded, the despised, the rejected,"[21] is narrated to exemplify the praxis of panpsychism. On this farm everything, "animate and inanimate alike, are set on course again, given a new lease of life and a part to play in creating a uniquely sanctuarial domain, a domain of forgiveness, of cherishing all matter."[22] Her point is to show that once we displace the divide between the natural and the artificial we can better re-align with the world. But primarily, Mathews focuses on the philosophical implications of fertility and forgiveness in this chapter with references to different cultures' myths of sacrifice and rebirth; she states that fertility is the "principle that expresses the poetic integrity of existence and hence the psychic dimension of reality."[23] The next chapter, "Hamilton Downs: Philosophy in the Field . . . of Being," is an account of her journey to Hamilton Downs in Central Australia to attend an interdisciplinary conference on "sense of place." The participants were asked to develop "stories of place woven out of their own personal stories and dreams and perceptions of the place in which we found ourselves."[24] This experience is narrated as a demonstration of a dialogical engagement with the world. The last chapter, "The White Heron: Grace and the Native Self," is a panpsychist eco-analysis of Sarah Orne Jewer's famous story, "The White Heron." Mathews posits that this story "offers a key to a deeper psychology of inhabitation."[25] Using psychoanalytical theories of identity formation, erotic relations, and child psychology, Mathews discusses native selfhood from the perspective of "synergistic relations of intersubjectivity."[26]

Mathews' ground stories continue in Part III entitled "Views from the Ground." The first chapter, "The Merri Creek: To the Source of the Given," relates her pilgrimage to Merri Creek, and her recollection of her childhood experiences of the region before industrial development took over. She sees her pilgrimage to the source of Merri Creek as "an exercise in the politics of repossession and reinhabitation" (136). Then she relates her walk to indigenous peoples' journeys that establish a bond with the land. The next chapter, "Barramunga: Return to the Doorsteps of Night," consists of her diaries that detail visits to a rustic retreat in the Otway Ranges. Mathews here provides excellent stories of the rhythms of rural life quite in keeping with the form of nature writing that moves from sentimentalism to philosophical reflection. This

chapter is a prime example of what Holmes Rolston III calls "storied residence" and Mathews refers to it as "living in the richly storied landscape."[27] As another environmental thinker, Jim Cheney, reminds us, narrative grounded in geography is the key to reconnect the human self to the land, and this is precisely what Mathews does in her narratives of reinhabiting reality.

Reinhabiting Reality: Towards a Recovery of Culture concludes with an Afterword, "Singing the Ground," which brings her celebration of "the ground beneath our feet"[28] to an excellent finale, "affirming the world as it is given to us . . . its self-presence and a certain integrity of its own."[29] She gives Melbourne's Center for Education and Research in Environmental Studies (CERES) as an example of "integrated praxis-and-poetics of reinhabitation in an urban context"[30] that the entire book advocates as the panpsyschist form of engaging with and respect for the land. In such centres she writes, people come together "to experiment collectively, both practically and poetically, with new, locally specific ways of being at-home in the world."[31]

It must be stated that *Reinhabiting Reality: Towards a Recovery of Culture* is both an poetically inspiring and philosophically intriguing reading experience. Through her storied landscapes we feel the meaning of reconnecting with the ground beneath our feet and re-think our basic attitude to reality. Even though her philosophical inquiry carries notes of utopic idealism, she does make us aware of the importance of emplaced self within a local ground. Therefore, her message deserves to be heard and acknowledged in deep ecology circles.

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Notes

[1] Freya Mathews, *Reinhabiting Reality: Towards a Recovery of Culture* (Albany SUNY Press, 2005) p. 30.
[2] Ibid., p. 8.
[3] Ibid., p. 11.
[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid., p. 12.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid., p. 14.
[8] Ibid., p. 15.
[9] Ibid., p. 17.
[10] Ibid., p. 16.
[11] Ibid., p. 21.
[12] Ibid., p. 28.
[13] Ibid., p. 30.
[14] Ibid., p. 32.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid., p. 37.
[17] Ibid., p. 73.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid., p. 53.
[20] Ibid., p. 51.
[21] Ibid., p. 89.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid., p. 95.
[24] Ibid., pp. 109–110.
[25] Ibid., p. 117.
[26] Ibid., p. 120.
[27] Ibid., p. 178.
[28] Ibid., p. 199.
[29] Ibid., p. 200.
[30] Ibid..
[31] Ibid., p. 203.