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Review Essay
Native American Literary Theory

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Helen May Dennis, *Native American Literature: Towards a Spatialized Reading* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007, £65.00). Pp. xi + 236. ISBN 978 0 415 39702 5.

Daniel Heath Justice, *Our Fire Survives the Storm: A Cherokee Literary History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006, $20.00). Pp. xvi + 277. ISBN 0 8166 4639 2.

Elvira Pulitano, *Toward a Native American Critical Theory* (Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press, 2003, £55.00). Pp. x + 233. ISBN 0 8032 3737 5.

David Treuer, *Native American Fiction: A User's Manual* (St. Paul, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006, $15.00). Pp. 212. ISBN-10 1 55597 452 X.

Robert Warrior, *The People and the Word: Reading Native Nonfiction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005, $20.00). Pp. xxxi + 244. ISBN 0 8166 4617 1.

Jace Weaver, Craig S. Womack and Robert Warrior, *American Indian Literary Nationalism* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006, $19.95). Pp. xxii + 272. ISBN-10 0 8263 4073 3.

European critics face particular challenges in dealing with Native American literatures. Firstly, there are the well-known problems of identity, authenticity and authority. Can one use a single term, whether "Native," "Indigenous" or "First Nations," to cover such a heterogeneous group of cultures that do not even share a common language? What gives a writer or critic the power to write "as a Native American" or "on behalf of Native Americans"? Further, we have to question our purpose in studying Native literature. Should readings always be biased, as Angela Cavender Wilson claims, in favour of decolonization strategies; if so, do Europeans have anything to contribute?[1] Or do decolonizing readings ignore the purely aesthetic value of the texts, the fact that, to quote Robert Dale Parker, "we like this writing"?[2] Finally, there is the fact that, for the vast majority of us, Native American

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[1] Angela Cavender Wilson, "Reclaiming Our Humanity: Decolonization and the Recovery of Indigenous Knowledge," in Devon Abbott Mihesuah and Angela Cavender Wilson, eds., *Indigenizing the Academy: Transforming Scholarship and Empowering Communities* (Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 2004), 69–87.

[2] Robert Dale Parker, *The Invention of Native American Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 2, 8–15; added/original emphasis.

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presence is almost exclusively textual and removed from immediate experience. Not working directly with Native people or students can make it easy to overlook some facts of Native life, such as the 2007 Amnesty report that one in three Native American women is raped (usually by non-Native men),[3] or the horrendous extent of reservation poverty. For these reasons, the European critic carries a special responsibility to listen, to avoid victimology, to think about what effect pronouns may have in including or excluding Native voices – above all, to be aware of our own marginality in Native discourse.

Currently the deepest division in Native American studies is that between a loose grouping of "nationalist," "separatist" or "tribalcentric" critics, who are concerned with researching the historical foundations of (and furthering) autonomous Native American intellectual traditions, and another group often described as "cosmopolitan," "hybridist" or "postcolonial," who are more concerned with investigating the complex interrelationships between European and Native thought over the 500-year colonial period, often encapsulated in the figure of the mixedblood. Two recent books of theory and four recent works of practical criticism demonstrate this division and suggest new routes for European scholars.

Elvira Pulitano's *Toward a Native American Critical Theory* is an attempt, as the title suggests, to begin the task of unifying Native American literary theory via a comparative appraisal of six of the most influential literary theorists. Applying postcolonial literary theory (most notably the ideas of Trinh T. Minh-ha and Gayatri Spivak) to demonstrate how these writers attempt to subvert European monolithic thought, Pulitano argues that, while each thinker owes a debt to Western models, in diverse ways they have begun to construct a hybrid discourse that challenges Western cultural tradition.

When this book was published in 2003 it met a mixed reaction, with the *American Indian Quarterly* giving space to reviews which ran the gamut from positive to highly critical. Praise centred on its ambition, the excellent readings of, in particular, Owens and Vizenor, and the contextualization of Native critics within global academic discourse. Less positive reviews noted a number of misreadings in the chapters on Paula Gunn Allen, Craig Womack and Robert Warrior, all of whose works Pulitano criticizes as exclusionary and as perpetuating a series of binaries that replicate Euro-Western discourse. It was noted, in my view correctly, that Pulitano makes a large number of value judgements that demonstrate her own essentialist viewpoint, even as she excoriates tribalcentric critics for their essentialism. Pulitano clearly identifies herself with the cosmopolitans (a group which also contains Louis Owens and Arnold Krupat) and produces an unrestrained attack on the nationalists that unfortunately damages the credibility of her claim that all the theorists she surveys are of equal value.

However, rather marvellously, the controversy over Pulitano's book does not end there. Womack and Warrior, joined by their colleague Jace Weaver, have now hit back with the publication of *American Indian Literary Nationalism*, probably the most important book to have emerged from the field since Gerald Vizenor's *Manifest*

[3] "Maze of Injustice: The Failure to Protect Indigenous Women from Sexual Violence in the USA," Amnesty International, 24 April 2007 (AI Index: AMR 51/035/2007). Available at http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGAMR510352007; accessed 11 June 2007.

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Manners. Each of the three authors contributes a chapter that responds directly to Pulitano's misconceptions of their work (most notably in Womack's chapter), lays out the problems with the hybridist approach and, most importantly, sketches their shared vision for an American Indian Nationalist criticism.

The tripartite polemic is forcefully and clearly written. The writers demonstrate the fallacy of applying a "divide-and-rule" approach to Native thinkers, and show that Pulitano's caricature of nationalist criticism as rejecting cosmopolitan approaches is simply untrue. This is an important point, as this misunderstanding is by no means unique to Pulitano among European critics. All five contributors to this volume at one point or another explicitly state their desire for non-Native critics to engage with American Indian texts in a global context. Drawing on Edward Said, they emphasize the requirement for real engagement with Native tribes not as "margins" or "peripheries," but as intellectual centres in their own right. Weaver makes the point that "Native American literature is a separate national/local literature from that produced by immigrants" (40), and all three point to a critical duty to emphasize intellectual sovereignty and continuity of cultural inheritance (not, however, a changeless or fixed culture). This seems not so much radical as common sense, very much in the tradition of Vizenor's concept of survivance. Indeed, it is some critics' insistence that examining the ways in which Natives "write back to power" is the only valid critical model that seems bizarre. Perhaps the most telling phrase in the book comes from Lisa Brooks's Afterword (which itself should be required primary reading). Talking of anti-nationalist criticism, she says it "diminishes my belief in the prospect of real dialogue [and] makes me less hopeful that our voices will be heard" (234; added/original emphasis).

American Indian Literary Nationalism is far from programmatic – indeed, Weaver explicitly defines nationalism here as "processual" – and there are important differences of approach between Womack's tribalcentricism, Warrior's cosmopolitan nationalism and Weaver's pluralist separatism. The dialogism at the heart of their endeavour is important: as Warrior emphasizes, dissent is crucial to Native intellectual endeavour. Indeed, as the authors must be aware, in writing a polemic against Pulitano they have ensured that her book will continue to be read for years to come (not only in Native American circles: a comparative reading of Pulitano's chapter on Weaver and Weaver's chapter on Pulitano would be useful for anyone working in postcolonial studies). Comparing the two books, it is impossible not to hope that the literary nationalist calls for responsible criticism prevail.

One question that remains for European scholars of these literatures is how best to respond to this call to responsibility. Jace Weaver suggests that we start by looking to our bibliographies, wondering just how well-read we are in contemporary Native philosophy, legal issues and tribal history and cultures,[4] as opposed to non-Native-authored anthropological texts, colonial histories and postcolonial theories that, in the wrong hands, reinscribe a response to Anglo-American hegemonic power as the only model for colonized peoples.

[4] For such a reading list see Jace Weaver, "More Light than Heat: The Current State of Native American Studies," *American Indian Quarterly*, 31, 2 (2007) 233–55. To that list I would add Anne Waters, ed., *American Indian Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

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However, the question that must be asked of any theory of criticism is how well it works to illuminate actual texts. Of the four books of practical criticism here under review, Daniel Heath Justice's *Our Fire Survives the Storm* is perhaps the most purely nationalist and hence the best test case. Justice considers Cherokee writers working in English as forming a distinct national literature, to be studied in its own right. To that end he employs a figuration drawn from the eighteenth-century Cherokee division of civic governance into White and Red spheres. Drawing on specific historical moments, Justice defines his twin literary modes as Beloved Path, which accommodates and cooperates with Euro-Western ways, and Chickamauga consciousness, which is the path of resistance. Justice carefully emphasizes throughout the book that these paths are not separate ways that can be weighed against each other, but that they are complementary and interdependent. He also takes time in his conclusion to weigh into the debate considered above, with a number of well-aimed potshots at the hybridist model.

Justice provides a (superbly written) comparative guide to a national literature that has rarely if ever received such careful treatment. Nonetheless it has to be said in all honesty that the results are sometimes disappointingly slight, nowhere more so than in his treatment of modern-day authors. Diane Glancy and Robert Conley, two fascinatingly complex writers, need a more subtle comparative analysis than the rather simplistic classification into "assimilationist/accomodationist/Beloved" and "rejectionist/defiant/Chickamauga" on offer here. As with much nationalist criticism, a feeling persists that the work is barely started: if Cherokee tribalcentric criticism is to be useful for future critics, it will need to create subtler and more precise tools than this. Equally, however, it is a testimony to Justice's skill that one finishes *Our Fire Survives the Storm* impatient to see how his future work will build on its foundations.

Robert Warrior in *The People and the Word* examines nonfictional writings by Natives between 1820 and 1970. The choice of texts, in keeping with his focus on historical indigenous intellectual traditions, allows him to reverse the narrative of many critiques of Native American literature by finishing, rather than beginning, with N. Scott Momaday and the so-called Native American Renaissance. Warrior cogently argues that Native people have chosen to express themselves mostly through nonfictional writings, and it is to these that we must turn if we are to trace a history of Native intellectualism. He significantly qualifies the separatist stance of his major work, *Tribal Secrets*, by introducing the concept of the "intellectual trade route," a metaphor that allows Native and non-Native intellectual traditions to meet but without the subordination of Native tradition implied by "hybrid" readings. At times Warrior's rhetoric seems to overwhelm his close reading of the texts, and his imaginative "synchronistic" understanding of the ways in which ideas can be followed through varying places and periods also seems to assign to coincidental patterns an importance that they simply cannot bear. It is also noticeable that to justify his critiques he frequently turns back to fiction and autobiography (especially in examining the boarding-school experience), which rather undermines his choice to focus on nonfictional works. The broad sweep of this study, combined with the carefully contextualized readings of somewhat neglected texts, makes this book a useful resource, but fails to justify some of its stronger claims.

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Helen May Dennis in *Native American Literature* situates herself in opposition to Warrior – "European by birth and inclination, I could never pretend to participate in [the nationalist] project" – but argues that "my acts of … interpretation contribute to a larger sense of community that implicitly supports the current work of Nativist scholars" (1). This self-consciousness extends to the readings she carries out, which examine some of the major Native novels of the last forty years along with less canonical texts. Beginning with a declared intention to create an interpretive framework by combining Bachelard's "poetics of space" with narratological analysis, Dennis seems to be making the standard error pointed out by Blaeser, of assuming that Natives do fiction and Europeans do interpretation. However, the subtly nuanced discussion that results avoids "making the text fit the theory," the Procrustean trap against which the nationalist polemics are aimed. Rather she tests her theories against the text, staging a series of confrontations via a complex structure that pits theories of reading against each other, frequently finding that universalizing predictions simply do not match up to close readings of Native or mixedblood narratives. An extremely strong reading of Linda Hogan's *Power*, focused on representations of childhood abuse, for example, questions the simplistic Bachelardian notion of "felicitous space," while a reading of Owens's *Dark River* stages the failure of the "homing-in" model proposed by William Bevis. Dennis's deliberate eclecticism in choosing theoretical models and comparative texts, always insisting on close attention to questions of space and narrative structure, allows her to construct a deliberately self-questioning hybrid criticism. This allows the texts to speak for themselves and ensures that the literary and imaginative power of these novels, the reason for their success in the non-Native world, comes through.

Dennis shares with David Treuer a belief that "literary texts should not be read for simplistic … political agendas" (Dennis 178) and a close textual analysis that arguably produces better readings of texts than have as yet emerged from the nationalist movement. However, where Dennis is respectful, Treuer's *Native American Fiction*, with its breezy subtitle "A User's Manual," is cheerfully iconoclastic. His essays take aim at academic desire to make Native texts somehow perform Native culture, a direct though sadly unacknowledged attack on the nationalist position. Treuer believes passionately that romantic notions of Native culture have blinded literary critics to both the real strengths and the real flaws of these works. He tears into Sherman Alexie, demonstrating the unworthy racial assumptions encoded in *Reservation Blues*; its stylistic reliance on hyperbolic, meaningless statements; and its one-dimensional portraits of white characters. Taking New Criticism's focus on craft to heart, Treuer produces an energetic counter to the thrust of much of Native American literary criticism. His analysis of Louise Erdrich is particularly useful, problematizing her claim to write from within Anishinaabe tradition and showing that her use of the Ojibwe language is always "subordinate to the English context" (60).

There are, however, real problems with Treuer's stance and method. He begins by declaring an aversion to the authenticity–identity debates, and his discussion deliberately encompasses *The Education of Little Tree*, by the notorious fake Forrest Carter, as a Native text. This seems to me to be an entirely justifiable and consistent approach – as opposed to defining the subject as fiction by Native Americans, he instead defines it as fiction about Native Americans. Which is fine as far as it goes,

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though ignorant works about Native Americans so overwhelm works by Native Americans that this approach would quickly return to the absolute fake of the Hollywood Indian. This overwhelming is something that Alexie mocks in Clarence Mather's syllabus in *Indian Killer*,[5] and it is interesting that Treuer badly misrepresents this in his summary of the chapter. Alexie's point is that the ethically irresponsible Mather constructs an entire syllabus without including Native voices; Treuer thinks the problem is the inclusion of white voices, a reading that borders on dishonesty. And the conclusion, that there is "no such thing as Native American fiction," is disempowering and needlessly sensationalist, not to say a flat contradiction of his introductory sentiments. It is also irritating that the book contains few overt references to other critics, no index, no bibliography, few footnotes and rather murky chapter titles. For all its flaws, however, it is *Native American Fiction*'s concentration on close textual critique and its careful attention to the representation of Native languages that make this a valuable work. The author's strong attacks on sacred cows will continue to be useful for some time to come. When Treuer is being bad, he is very, very good – when he tries to be constructive, unfortunately, the results are mixed.

It seems from a consideration of these four Native studies books that the nationalist critics' choice to limit the use of "Western" literary analysis and draw on tribal histories and philosophies to construct new, specifically Native, critical methods has as yet some way to go to equal the results of more traditional forms of textual critique. However, the tendency among some academics to dismiss nationalist criticism as simply naive is far more problematic. Although American Indian literary nationalism seemingly has some way to go before it can produce readings as subtle and diverse as those offered by hybridist and postcolonial models, the endeavour both is worthwhile and will make Native American literature one of the most fascinating areas of study for years to come. As for European critics, outsiders to the conversation, it seems to me that our duty is to use where possible the insights of nationalist criticism, to engage with these critics in ways that will help refine the nationalist critique without at any point pretending that we have the right of judgement. Lisa Brooks calls for all critics, Native or not, to understand that we have a place at the dining table; at the same time, as she argues, nobody should presume to set the menu in someone else's house.

[5] Sherman Alexie, *Indian Killer* (London: Vintage 1998; first published 1996), 57–61, 66–69.

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