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**Toward a Native American Critical Theory.** By Elvira Pulitano. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003. 233 pages. \$50.00 cloth.

Elvira Pulitano sets out to discuss the work in critical theory produced by Native Americans, outlining its foundations and parameters. She identifies two different emerging strands within Native literary criticism: the “separatist” (or “nationalist”) and the “dialogic.” To explicate these two approaches, she examines the work of six contemporary critics: Paula Gunn Allen, Robert Warrior, Craig Womack, Greg Sarris, Gerald Vizenor, and the late Louis Owens.

The author writes well and with erudition. She is clearly extremely well-versed in both postmodernism and postcolonial theory. She is at her best in discussing Vizenor, arguably the doyen of Native literary scholars and certainly the foremost Native American practitioner of postmodernism, both as a critic and creative writer, and Owens. She is adept at pointing out interstices in the arguments of the scholars analyzed that might suggest lines of future discussion.

Pulitano’s own argument and her style, however, are cozening and hobble what might otherwise have been an important contribution to our understanding of a distinctive Native American critical discourse. The end result is a deeply flawed text, highly selective and subjective in both its sources and assessments. Though she professes to appreciate the importance of all her exemplars, the author clearly prefers the relative inclusiveness of those dialogic critics who discuss a “mixed-blood” positionality or multiple identities to those who take a firmer stance in favor of Native culture and self-determination.

On the first page of the monograph Pulitano asks a series of crucial questions: “Is there such a thing as a Native American critical theory? If so, how should we define it? As a non-Native critic, am I entitled to define it? Does my ‘speaking about’ necessarily mean ‘speaking for?’” (1). Only on the penultimate page, however, does she fully admit her ideological agenda, writing, “As a non-Native critic presenting this material from the outside, but implicating and exposing my own readerly position as well, it appears quite natural for me to embrace the cross-cultural dialogic approach of Sarris, Owens, and Vizenor, rather than the separatist stances of Allen, Warrior, and Womack” (191). Despite her self-acknowledged status as an outsider, she does not hesitate to be prescriptive. Ex cathedra statements abound. Far from simply discussing this emerging Native critical dialogue, she becomes the arbiter of the worthy.

The first section of the book is devoted to the separatist/nationalist approach (the second to the dialogic). In particular, she chastises Warrior and Womack for their refusal to engage high theory. She accuses them of running the risk of essentialism and of promoting romantic notions of “Indianness,” since they are already inextricably imbricated in Western discourse and culture. Her discussion, however, shows her to be the one risking romanticism and essentialism. Concerns about purity, legitimacy, validity, and authenticity run like red threads through the text, the words appearing repeatedly. In discussing Warrior’s *Tribal Secrets*, she asks how his subjects, John Joseph Mathews and Vine Deloria Jr., can provide the basis of a “valid” Native intellectual

tradition when both were highly educated and their experience was so cosmopolitan. Apparently, the more educated one is in a Western institutional sense and the better traveled, the less Native.

Pulitano contends that what marks all her subjects is their attempt to bring the orality of Native traditions into the world of written criticism, but she immediately excludes Warrior from this in a footnote because his “critical strategy follows a more traditional Western rhetorical pattern” (193). She criticizes Womack for his “Creekcentric” approach in his book *Red on Red* because once “oral tradition enters into dialogue with the rhetorical systems of the Western tradition,” it becomes impossible to discuss “an authentic Native perspective.” Womack’s approach, she avers, “means turning Native identity into a textual commodity that continues to perpetuate fabricated versions of Indianness” (81). Yet despite postmodern claims of fragmented, fractionated, and multiple identities, Native identity is not freewheeling and infinitely refracted. One cannot, for instance, dream oneself Indian while possessing no Native ancestry. Not even the most louche of her subjects would contend so. There is thus something more grounded in Native identity than Pulitano wants to admit. It is here that she sells short, especially, Gerald Vizenor. Though he champions what he calls “crossbloods,” he nonetheless champions them as *Natives*.

Pulitano queries whether those who take nationalist stances can maintain them despite the fact they speak from the privileged position of the academy and publish with university presses. She writes, “Does the fact that Womack holds a professorship at the University of Lethbridge (in Alberta) change the way in which he speaks to his own community? . . . *Red on Red* remains . . . a sophisticated work of literary criticism and, as such, inaccessible to those members of a Native audience who cannot approach it from a similarly privileged position” (92). These are important lines of inquiry, but they ignore, for instance, Warrior’s long-standing participation in the In-Lon-Schka or Womack’s move to the University of Oklahoma to be closer to the stomp grounds or the fact that he donates all royalties from *Red on Red* to the Muskogee Nation Language Preservation Program. In declaring the absolute inaccessibility of academic writing to folks on the ground, she also ignores the number of ordinary Osages and Creeks, including elders, who have read *Tribal Secrets* or *Red on Red* and think they have gotten something from them.

Certainly one cannot deny the historical reality of cultural change. As both Pulitano and her subjects point out, Native cultures have always been highly adaptive, and they continue to evolve constantly. To acknowledge the reality of hybridity, however, does not mean that we are globally merging into a single McCulture in which we must all consume the same Happy Meal, using the same critical utensils, and then excrete the same McCriticism. Supersize me!

The issue of power and self-determination cannot be ignored here. Pulitano points out the syncretisms of the Ghost Dance, whose transmission, as Vizenor writes, was hastened by the use of English. The movement also borrowed elements of Christianity, perhaps the ultimate hybrid collaboration. Yet these were choices made by Natives themselves. Native American critics may

use the tools of critical theory or not, as they choose. They may choose to do so in some instances and not others, depending on their particular goals and audiences. Contrary to what Pulitano avers, separatism and the use of Western forms and theory are not antithetical or contradictory. As Mohawk Robbie Robertson's Virgil Caine says, "Ya take what ya need and ya leave the rest." Allen, Warrior, and Womack may, to varying degrees, espouse separatism, but it is a pluralist separatism (a charge my friend Alan Velie levels at me and on which I elaborate in the preface to my book *Turtle Goes to War*).

In his famous essay "Power and Racism," Stokely Carmichael wrote that when he discussed the nationalism of Black Power with well-meaning whites, they inevitably asked, "What about me?" They never recognized that, in doing so, they were returning the subject of the conversation to themselves. An insistence that Native American critics embrace high theory because of our mutual hybridity comes across as a whining, "What about us?" It is the turn to the (non-)Native.

Though the critics discussed by Pulitano have been unquestionably important in the development of a Native American criticism, others are curiously absent. She does not include Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, arguably an equally important nationalist voice, though she does allow her a couple of comments. Though Pulitano critiques the concept of "sovereignty," she makes no mention of Gerald Taiaiake Alfred, who raises similar questions in *Peace, Power, and Righteousness*. I am dismissed in a footnote as adding "very little to a discourse on Native American critical theory that is attempting to generate rhetorical strategies of its own" (7), presumably because I engage and critique Western theory while still maintaining a separatist position, thus undercutting much of her argument. As with Cook-Lynn, I am quoted a few times from my early *Wicazo Sa* essay, "Native American Authors and Their Communities," but Pulitano then twice refers to my book *That the People Might Live* as *That the People May Live*, leading the reader to question whether she has read the larger work. Finally, Pulitano explicitly excludes non-Native critics (Krupat, Velie, Jahner, Ruppert), except, of course, herself.

To return to the issues of power and autonomy, in my living room where I sit writing this review, I have only art by Native artists on the walls, an exclusionary act that is solely my choice. At the same time, on my mantle, I have Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* nestled next to *The Papers of Chief John Ross*, an act of hybridity, but again my choice alone. In justifying himself to the Athenian people, Pericles said, "I wanted a just society, but I didn't think it was possible if I gave up the empire. And empires, no matter how gained, are dangerous things to let go." It seems that such is no less true in literary criticism.

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