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Book Review: Toward a Native American Critical Theory

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In this book, author Elvira Pulitano analyzes and evaluates selected writings by Paula Gunn Allen, Robert Allen Warrior, Craig Womack, Greg Sarris, Louis Owens, and Gerald Vizenor in their relation to postmodern, poststructuralist, and postcolonial thought. As she privileges cross-cultural and cosmopolitan paradigms and hybridic identity constructions, she de-emphasizes culture- or nation-specific identifications and describes authors and texts mostly as Native or Native American, dismissing, for example, the cultural grounding in the work by Osage scholar Robert Allen Warrior on other writers from the Great Plains culture area as “Nativist.” She explains her leaning toward a “crosscultural dialogic approach” as “quite natural” because of her own “readerly position”—without fully explaining the implications of this position. Rather, she presumes a constituency for her readings of Native American works, a “we,”
that seems to legitimize her approach “If we want a Native American theory to challenge the binary opposition of Western conceptual frameworks.”

Who is “we”? In the introduction, after arguing convincingly that (literary) theory may have many facets and is therefore not just the domain of Western scholarship, she asserts the significance of a “connection between critical theory and oral tradition” and the problematic nature of “separatist approaches to a Native discourse” as her main tenets. Their repeated reassertion in the subsequent chapters gives the book its cohesiveness, but the ranking of the Native critics on a “bad to good” scale makes her reasoning too predictable, contradicting the openness of the so-called trickster discourse that she favors. Also, instead of culturally and socio-politically contextualizing “the gynosophical perspective” of Paula Gunn Allen’s work, she merely criticizes it for its essentialism. Similarly, she critiques Warrior’s and Womack’s “tribalcentric” attitude toward creating a literary theory and their notions of sovereignty not in culture-and history-specific contexts but partly through undue comparisons with postcolonial scholars like Appiah who do not share the same colonial history. However, she clearly shows her appreciation for Sarris and Owens, seeing them as “deeply committed to a discourse on hybridity and dialogism,” using the oral traditions to challenge Western conventions of theorizing. Finally, to her, Vizenor is the most “revolutionary,” his trickster discourse merging “Native epistemology with Western literary forms,” restoring “the liberative, imaginative freedom inspired by tribal storytelling.” For a reader from the other side of the imperial divide this form of revolution might be the easiest one to accept.

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