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Book Review: The Invention of Native American Literature

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Through the lens of historical interpretation, Robert Dale Parker presents a controversial, deconstructionist argument that the field of Native American literature has been invented by Native writers who have drawn on Indian and literary traditions in order “to theorize an Indian aesthetic” that links artistic and cultural identity. As Parker points out, however, the works of critics and early transcribers and translators in the field have also been partly responsible for this invention of Native American literature. Parker is critical of the work of early non-Native scholars who have translated oral traditional stories into poetic form because, he argues, they confound “Indian imagination and invention with pocticality itself . . . and threatened to displace the work of actual Indian poets”; however, what he seems to take issue with is not the poetic interpretation but the authoritativeness of the claim. In his commentary on Ray A. Young Bear’s poetry, Parker argues that Young Bear derides the non-Native appropriation of Native cultures but, in keeping with Meskwaki ideas about authority, refrains from positing an authentic, authoritative idea of “Indianness” to take its place.

Parker delineates both the historical development or creation of the field of Native American literature and the creation of paradigms by that literature. In particular, he critiques four patterns that he argues have become particularly well worn and often stereotypical in Native writing and the critical commentary on it: “young men’s threatened masculinity,” the oral tradition and storytelling, the poetic tradition, and “Indian cultures’ aloof renegotiations of what the dominant culture understands as authority.”

The Invention of Native American Literature seeks to redirect the current theoretical and thematic foci of Native American literary studies away from the essentialist, authoritative directions of the canonical past into a more postmodern understanding of the field and its relationship to international literary studies. It is a compelling, original, meticulously researched, and strikingly honest text, and I would recommend it to anyone working in the field. Although every reader may not agree with Parker’s “non-essentialist approach” or his assessments of the critical work in the field to date, his thought-provoking analyses of the relationship between the social and the aesthetic and issues of gender and representation raise questions that will have far-reaching implications for the study and teaching of Native American literature. Parker’s text is also valuable for its emphases on the works of a diverse range of Native writers, including Great Plains authors John Joseph Matthews and D’Arcy McNickle, as well as Ray A. Young Bear, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Thomas King.

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