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Review of *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism* By Craig S. Womack

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Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism. By Craig S. Womack. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. Notes, index. viii + 336 pp. \$18.95 paper.

The struggle of Native scholars to develop a distinctly Native literary criticism—one that draws from tribal histories, stories, and traditions, rather than accepting Eurocentric and often racist standards of critical and artistic sophistication—has seen varied degrees of success since the late 1970s. In 1994, Osage scholar Robert Allen Warrior published *Tribal Secrets*, which called for Indian scholarship centered in Indian lives and world views. Now, at the edge of the colonizers' millennium, easily one of the most nuanced, respectful, and penetrating examples of such scholarship has appeared in Craig Womack's *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism*.

Womack, who is Oklahoma Creek and Cherokee, makes his aim clear from the start: this is a work of separatism, one in which Native traditions are the center, not the margin. For Womack, the center is distinctly Creek, and his readings of the works of some of the greatest Creek writers—Alice Callahan, Alex Posey, Louis Oliver, and Joy Harjo—are grounded in Creek history, spiritual ways, and perspectives. (The final chapter, which explores the life and work of gay Oklahoma Cherokee poet and playwright Lynn Riggs, is similarly rooted in Cherokee understandings.)

Womack defines intellectual tradition to include and in fact depend on the ancient stories, oral and family histories, and other often non-literary but necessary aspects of any peoples' understandings of themselves. His is an exercise of sovereignty, for, as he writes, "[A] key component of nationhood is a people's idea of themselves, their imaginings of who they are. The ongoing expression of a tribal voice, through imagination, language, and literature, contributes to keeping sovereignty alive in the citizens of a nation and gives sovereignty a meaning that is defined within the tribe rather than by external sources."

This study is a welcome corrective to the too common insistence among many scholars in Native American literatures that there is still an all-encompassing, pan-Indian understanding of Native texts and cultural expressions. While acknowledging the many shared concerns, and certainly the shared political experiences, of other tribal Nations in the US, Womack distinguishes himself as, above all else, a sophisticated Creek scholar. He is immersed in the views, history, and knowledge of his community and dedicated to the continuation of these intellectual traditions among this and future generations of Creeks.

Yet those of us from other Native traditions will find the book equally indispensable in its offering of a clear blueprint for writing about, expressing, and continuing our own histories and world views. Womack advocates not only a Native-centered understanding of Native literatures, but also a reevaluation of the entire concept of the American literary canon, centering that discussion in Indian Country as well: "[W]ithout Native American literature, *there is no American canon.*" Thus Native literature, as the first literature of this hemisphere, is also the "most American of American literatures. *We are the canon.*" As he writes in the introduction, "[T]his criticism emphasizes unique Native worldviews and political realities, searches for differences as often as similarities, and attempts to find

Native literature's place in Indian country, rather than Native literature's place in the canon." *Red on Red* stands as a powerful, evocative example of such a criticism and is vital reading for anyone—Indian and non-Indian alike—who seeks to better understand the literatures of America.

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