

Summer 2003

Review of *Feathering Custer* By W. S. Penn

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Nelson, Joshua B., "Review of *Feathering Custer* By W. S. Penn" (2003). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2408.
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Feathering Custer. By W. S. Penn. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001. 240 pp. Notes. \$35.00.

William S. Penn (Nez Perce) has compiled a series of essays that twirl through problems concerning Native American studies in academia. In "Paving with Good Intentions" and elsewhere, Penn takes aim at popular critical theory that cannot adequately conceptualize Native thought, identity, or writing. Throughout, he advocates careful scrutiny of elements of identity arising from forces outside of Indian culture.

In Kenneth Burke's metaphor comparing the field of cultural criticism to a parlor discussion, Penn sees much of what limits the study: the conversation quashes dissent and honors hegemony; the conversers privilege the written over the oral and are almost exclusively white and Christian. In "Leaving the Parlor," he advocates moving the entire business outside, into the open air where those formerly excluded from the long-running discourse might drop by without an invitation. The essay "In the Gazebo" offers an excellent and thorough reading of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* employing a conception of time rooted in oral culture (as opposed to "Euramerican" culture) and illuminates the novel's circuitously spiral structure. The framework of *Feathering Custer* itself approximates this inclusive strategy: Penn's elusive approach, combining close reading, personal experience, and systemic inspection, demonstrates his unwillingness to write the way we have always written. As he says of the narrative essay's form, "It must be an essay (or perhaps a collection of essays) that provides connection, giving context to ideas, . . . creating a metaphorical relationship between the idea and the broader context."

In broadening his focus, Penn unfortunately loses much of it. As a theoretical critique, his analysis lacks depth; as a memoir, his ironic tone dodges intimacy and specificity. What remains is a freely concocted gumbo—a sprinkle of theory, a dash of narrative, and a

healthy dose of what unfortunately reads like revenge literature. He frequently targets academic bureaucracy and Christianity in critiques that begin and end on the commonplace grounds that they fall short of their ideals. Penn's hazy rhetorical focus problematizes use of this volume for close literary study, political action in the institution or the arena, or much other practical application. It is not Penn's use of "'digressiveness' or the sense of conclusive inconclusion"—oral elements he uses to write from that tradition—that limits *Feathering Custer*; it is his sacrifice of the particular for the general that leaves too many questions unanswered and, more importantly, unposed.

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