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Review of Red Land, Red Power: Grounding Knowledge in the American Indian Novel by Sean Kicummah Teuton

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In Red Land, Red Power, Cherokee scholar Sean Kicummah Teuton considers three Red Power novels by N. Scott Momaday, James Welch, and Leslie Marmon Silko with a methodology he terms tribal realism. Teuton defines tribal realism as a "'postpositivist realist' view, which allows for genuine debate and exchange across cultures, while still respecting how social location may grant special access to knowledge." Teuton finds the novels of the Red Power era especially significant for investigation in his forging of tribal realism because of "a new intellectual rigor that . . . characterize[d] the Red Power movement," citing the proclamation by Indians of All Tribes from occupied Alcatraz Island as a signal example of this shift. Moreover, Teuton argues that the Red Power novel enacts an "empirical process of decolonization" which is linked to identity and experience, thus illustrating its engagement of a postpositivist realist episteme and "an alternative, historically grounded theory."

Teuton's book is divided into two parts, "Red Land" and "Red Power," each consisting of two chapters. "Red Land" addresses "a central social construction in Native thought: that Indigenous people, by definition, grow from the land, and that everything else—identity, history, culture—stems from that primary relationship with homelands." In chapter 1, he considers "how the interactive components of oral tradition and bodily wellness mediate an ethical relationship with American Indian lands" in N. Scott Momaday's House Made of Dawn, naming his approach to land and selfhood as "geoidentity." Protagonist Abel's participation in the novel's ritual race allows him to recover what Teuton refers to as his "somatic place": "only when his body is in tune with the land can he sing and thus be home." The novel "introduces a conception of the Indian body [somatic place] that reaches well beyond mere physical fitness, in which notions of wellness or regard explain the body in the land." Similarly, in chapter 2, Teuton contends that James Welch's Winter in the Blood "not only illustrates the maintenance of culture
but also describes a procedure of political growth, one that “provides a more convincing account of the recovery of American Indian cultural identity” than that currently furnished by Native Studies. Teuton convincingly argues that Welch’s “Blackfeet narrator’s homecoming . . . is more complete not because the narrator discovers the essence of being American Indian, but because his new understanding of himself as a bearer of Blackfeet tradition in the social location of his homelands is historically more justified.”

In part 2, “Red Power,” Teuton glosses Leslie Marmon Silko’s protagonist Tayo in Ceremony as healing himself by reinterpreting and reintegrating his PTSD experiences through a lens of American Indian epistemology. Teuton explains that “this interpretive process in the emotions is indispensable to American Indian political struggles” and to Tayo’s healing, more specifically. In chapter 4, “Hearing the Callout,” Teuton makes his most dramatic and compelling argument for linking experience and American Indian scholarship and for doing so in environments like Auburn Correctional Facility where American Indian scholars invariably must transgress their class status (however newly acquired) to engage meaningfully with incarcerated Indigenous men and women on Native ground: “I began working in prisons to reverse that erasing process among imprisoned Indian men [like Tayo] and to facilitate an imaginative return of Native men to tribal places.”

Perhaps one of the greater contributions of this chapter is Teuton’s examination and dismissal of trickster theory due to its inability “to confront and develop the real politics facing tribes.” Teuton observes that Gerald Vizenor “advocates a skeptical view of tribal knowledge that leads to a number of disabling theoretical problems for American Indian scholars and activists . . . . Those American Indians who actually travel across and are often detained at colonial borders might not find this crossblood cultural margin so liberating.” Instead, Teuton praises Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, Greg Sarris, Robert Warrior, Jace Weaver, and Craig Womack for “avoid[ing] the self-defeat of destabilized knowledge by working to build a secure, epistemologically based Native political criticism.”

Teuton closes by offering two experientially based readings of texts grouped around poverty and sexual-