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Author
Fitz, Brewster

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Reviews

American Indian Literary Nationalism. By Jace Weaver, Craig S. Womack, and Robert Warrior with foreword by Simon J. Ortiz and afterword by Lisa Brooks. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005. 296 pages. $19.95 paper.

This potentially controversial book opens with a foreword by Simon Ortiz. He implicitly likens his words to a ritual prayer that he speaks to begin a ceremony in which Jace Weaver, Craig S. Womack, and Robert Warrior will perform. As a written foreword, however, Ortiz's words are more than a prayer. They form an incipient philosophical argument woven around a painful issue that he explicitly brings up and that he and the other essayists in the book address with varying degrees of success. This issue can be stated as several questions: Has the adoption of English as their principal oral and written language radically altered the points of view of peoples who traditionally saw, thought, and spoke in a multiplicity of languages, which they must now work to preserve? Does the adoption of English leave conceptual contradictions in the various worldviews of different indigenous peoples and undermine their cultural integrity? Did the imposition of English on the indigenous peoples of the Americas not serve as a *felix culpa* that now makes possible the very cultural salvation that these critics prophesy in a contemporary nationalist American Indian literature? These are not facile questions, and some readers will probably judge that they cannot be answered by simply uttering the tautology that Ortiz repeats several times, perhaps as much to convince himself as his readers: "Indians are still Indians" (xii). Nor are these questions answered in the image that Ortiz poetically paints of himself, a lone Acoma elder in cold and snowy Toronto, far from his pueblo, uttering an early morning prayer in a language that few, if any, of the other multicultural inhabitants of that metropolis can understand.

The principal polemical argument that informs the book is stated by Weaver in the first chapter, "Splitting the Earth: First Utterances and Pluralist Separatism." Weaver, who holds degrees from Union Theological Seminary and Yale Law School, couches this argument in a rhetorically clever analogy that interweaves religion, history, education, and language: "We are being pushed into a postmodern boarding school, where, instead of Christian

conversion and vocational skills, assimilation requires that we all embrace our hybridity and mixed-blood identities, and high theory replaces English as the language that must be spoken. To give in runs the risk of producing yet another lost generation, out of touch with, and unable to talk to, Native community" (30). Assuming a voice that blends the preacher and the lawyer, Weaver skillfully uses this analogy to attempt to persuade his congregation of readers that they shall not commit the sin of postmodern high theory. Concomitantly he prepares his jury of readers for Elvira Pulitano, the theorist colonizer whom he and his fellows are putting on trial. In the second essay Craig Womack interrogates Pulitano, a Swiss professor who currently teaches at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo.

Implicit in Weaver's analogical argument, in which he likens Indian boarding school students to contemporary Indian students in graduate programs in literature and cultural studies, is the assumption that most members of American Indian communities read criticism and literature. However unlikely this may be, there is another way to interpret and to use this analogical intertwining of religion, language, literature, and theory as a rhetorical tool to persuade one's readers. It can be argued that speakers of common languages, whether indigenous American languages or English, should go to the university in order to study not only the languages of other important cultures (for example, Spanish, Portuguese, French, German, Arabic, Chinese, Japanese) but also the figurative "languages" of other professional and academic disciplines. Whether these are the technical languages of sciences like geology or medicine, the abstract language of mathematics, the traditional language of law, with its expressions in Latin and antiquated syntax, or the ever-evolving languages of semiotics, linguistics, or deconstructive theory, with its untranslatable puns and neologisms in French, these technical idioms are not the equivalent of the language spoken around the kitchen table by the "Native community."

Perhaps the most important professional issue raised in the book is whether non-Native critics "can or should do Native American studies" (10). Weaver points out that non-Native critics, like Robert Dale Parker, in a critical remark on *Red on Red*, are unable to quote a single passage in which Womack explicitly states that non-Natives are unwelcome in Native American studies. Explaining that Parker is reacting to what he labels Womack's "implication" that non-Natives are not welcome, Weaver brings up the thorny interpretive question of the relation between the writer's or poet's intended meaning and what is understood by the reader and critic (10). This question has long been problematic. It is central to any theory of reading. I cannot say whether or not Weaver has read Wimsatt and Beardsley's "The Intentional Fallacy" (1946), in which these two non-Natives, who once ruled the empire of American New Criticism, set themselves up against traditional literary historians and philologists from all over the world, but he must know that what he, as a prosecuting attorney, can lead the members of the jury to *infer* is as important as what he can lead the accused to confess. He inveighs against implication at the same time that he uses it. According to Weaver, what Parker calls the implication in Womack's text is not Womack's intended meaning but is "actually Parker's own

highly charged inference" (10; italics mine). In using these words, Weaver *implies* not only that Parker is mistakenly reading into Womack's words something that Womack did not intend but also that he is making an emotional rather than a rational appeal to his readers. Weaver then provides his own reading, namely that Womack is "simply saying that in reading literature one should privilege internal cultural readings" (10). Needless to say, what it means to "privilege internal cultural readings" can be interpreted in many ways.

Weaver declares he is going to be "explicit and I hope (for the last time) coruscatingly clear" in dealing with the issue of the participation of non-Native scholars in Native American Studies (11). Nevertheless, he uses highly suggestive metaphorical language in order to separate the needed and wanted non-Native critics from the unneeded and unwanted non-Native theorists: "We *want* non-Natives to read, engage, and study Native literature. The survival of Native authors, if not Native people in general, depends on it. But we do not need *literary colonizers*" (11; second italics mine). By metaphorically designating the unneeded and unwanted literary theorists as "literary colonizers," Weaver opens this allegedly "coruscatingly clear" statement to readers' inferences about what constitutes literary colonialism. Is it possible for a non-Native scholar and critic to put forward ideas and interpretations based on theoretical understandings of oral and written language that differ from those of Weaver, Womack, and Warrior, without opening herself to the charges of being a literary colonizer? Owing to their rhetoric, in which religion, politics, law, literature, and criticism are inseparably interwoven, it becomes difficult not to liken their own nationalist discourse to the very ethnocentric colonial discourse they see as misguided. Weaver, who seemingly without irony declares that "Native Americans need the experience of making our own mistakes in literary criticism," who implies that his own critical discourse might be faulty by explicitly stating that "[e]ven a faulty criticism is more interesting than a 'correct' one directed by a literary overseer," and who explicitly states that making mistakes is "what sovereignty and self-determination are all about," appears knowingly to leave himself and his coauthors open to the charge that their understanding not only of high theory but also of their own discourse may be faulty owing to their own willingly admitted ethnocentrism (37).

Craig Womack ends his chapter "The Integrity of American Indian Claims (Or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love My Hybridity)" in which he, among many things, attacks Elvira Pulitano with the explicit mention of this initial ironic nod to *Dr. Strangelove* and a humorous gloss of the final scene of that film: "One of Kubrick's most enduring images is Slim Pickens straddling the bomb like a bull rider just before the chute is thrown open, then his trip down, falling from the hatch of a B-52 and waving his cowboy hat as he plummets through the clouds. Embracing my hybridity is about as sexy as wrapping my legs around an H-bomb. While you might get a big tingle during the initial descent, it's the impact that will kill you" (174). Whether Womack wraps his legs around Elvira Pulitano's book and rides it to the ground, or picks it up and throws it back into the group of scholars from whom she has metaphorically tossed it, is left to our interpretation. Nevertheless, everyone at a rodeo knows who the best bull riders are, even if they do wear cowboy hats.

Before reading the three central chapters in this book, one should already have read, and still be familiar with, Simon Ortiz's essay, "Towards a National Indian Literature: Cultural Authenticity in Nationalism," which first appeared in 1981 and is included as an appendix. The best place to start reading after Ortiz's essay and his foreword to this book, as well as the introduction, is probably chapter 3, Robert Warrior's "Native Critics in the World: Edward Said and Nationalism." Warrior starts his chapter in the autobiographical narrative mode, telling how, during his graduate studies at Union Theological Seminary, before his return to Pawhuska to work on his doctoral dissertation, he took two seminars in literary theory across the street at Columbia University. There he encountered Edward Said, the only critic and theorist, non-Indian or Indian, whom he appears to consider worthy of being an intellectual and political role model. He ends his chapter with the story of Said's last painful decade as a theoretical scholar, passionate advocate for the nationalist cause of Palestine, and victim of leukemia. In between he sketches how he and other American Indian theorists can practice a theoretical secularism, similar to the one advocated by Said, and at the same time adhere to a tribal nationalism-tradition, which is informed by religious beliefs of various sorts. This is a complex issue, and Warrior probably would be the first to point out that he and his coauthors are far from having had the last word. Whether Said's secularism, in effect, can operate as a belief system without having the same epistemological, ontological, and ethnic grounding of religious belief systems is a tough question.

A feminist reader of this book might see Lisa Brooks to be the token female. Invited to the gathering around the kitchen table after the ceremony, Brooks cooks and serves the literary fry bread. An Ivy League academic who earned her PhD at Cornell and is an assistant professor of history and literature and of folklore and mythology at Harvard, Brooks has genetic and cultural roots that reach back to Missiquoi, "an Abenaki village on the northeast shore of *Bitabagwa*, or Lake Champlain, that has been continually occupied by Abenaki families for over twelve thousand years," and to Poland, where her mother survived birth in a Nazi labor camp (246). Seemingly the perfect incarnation of the mixed-blood hybridism against which the book inveighs, Brooks favors instead the concepts of self-contained, total indigenous culture and nationalist literary sovereignty. She rejects poststructuralist thought. Probably alluding to the crimes against humanity committed under German *Nazionalsozialismus* and to the murderous Anglo-American nationalist expansion under manifest destiny, she "admit[s] that talk of nationalism makes [her] wary" (244). Implicit in her essay, however, and in the other essays in this book, is the argument that not all nationalisms are the same and that not all nationalisms give birth to abominable crimes against humanity. In other words, just because indigenous tribes claim to be close to the land, just because some indigenous writers refer to concepts like blood memory, one cannot automatically infer that the literary nationalism espoused by the coauthors of this book is informed by a troubling ideology like that of *Blut und Boden*, which is the German expression for the racist, essentialist, and warlike National Socialist (Nazi) ideology that led to so much bloodshed

during World War II. Nevertheless, there are disturbing signs that these five nationalist critics have not understood that the linguistic, literary, and cultural theory that informs their writings is quite similar to that which informs the thought of conservative literary and historical scholars who not only reject high theory but also reject cultural studies of all sorts.

Brewster Fitz
Oklahoma State University

Bear Island: The War at Sugar Point. By Gerald Vizenor with foreword by Jace Weaver. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006. 112 pages. $19.95 cloth.

On a visit to Indianapolis a few years ago, I came across a glass memorial wall along the White River that evokes the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, DC. Panels of glass, which are beautiful when illuminated at night, wind along the river. Etched in the glass are the names of all the recipients awarded the Medal of Honor since 1861. I was fascinated to see this memorial, and I looked for the Indian names, just as I do when I go to the Vietnam Memorial. I immediately located the name of one famous Indian soldier from World War II, Ernest Childers, who had received a citation for risking his life in 1943 in Italy. To my dismay, I remembered that I would be able to locate Medal of Honor winners who were in service during the Indian Wars. The longer I gazed, the more the glass wall resembled a map of Indian Country—San Carlos, Arizona, the Platte River in Nebraska, White Clay Creek in South Dakota, all still important Indian landscapes. I counted the names of twenty men who had received the Medal of Honor for military action during the massacre at Wounded Knee Creek in South Dakota in December 1890, in which several hundred Lakota men, women, and children died. The place and name that stood out for me, as an Ojibwe person, was Leech Lake, Minnesota, and Oscar Burkard. His citation on 5 October 1898 was "for distinguished bravery in action against hostile Indians," a reference to the Ojibwe of Leech Lake. Burkard's was the final Medal of Honor awarded for participation in an Indian campaign in the United States.

The short-lived War at Sugar Point is the subject of Gerald Vizenor's new book, which is a masterful ninety-three-page epic poem about the people and events of 1898. The War at Sugar Point, dismissed by most writers as a footnote in the history of the Indian Wars, took place near Bear Island on the Leech Lake Reservation eight long years after Wounded Knee. As Vizenor points out, in an ironic twist, the Ojibwe fighters were outnumbered but still won the three-day war. The longer war in northern Minnesota, to protect Ojibwe lands and wild rice from new dams constructed at the headwaters of the Mississippi and from predatory timber companies, was less successful. The War at Sugar Point took place during an era of graft, greed, and terrible corruption in Indian affairs in Minnesota. Vizenor's language in *Bear Island* is striking but spare, describing in very few words the complexity of issues behind the War