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Politics and Aesthetics in Contemporary Native American Literature: Across Every Border. By Matthew Herman. New York: Routledge, 2009. 154 pages. \$125.00 cloth.

It has become a truism that a great rift now exists between competing schools of scholarship on American Indian literature. Positioned on one side, so the truism goes, are the literary nationalists committed to building a body of criticism that can support tribal activism and promote anticolonial resistance. Positioned on the other side of the rift are the cosmopolitanists committed to theoretical sophistication and to situating Native literature within broader multicultural, transnational, and global contexts. Each side is easily caricatured. The nationalist position is often dismissed as having little to say about Native literature “as literature,” while its proponents are viewed as angry and exclusive, as being nostalgic for an imagined past or yearning for an improbable future. At their extreme, the nationalists are seen as irrational separatists who allow no room for the contributions of non-Native, nontribal, or nonnationalist scholars. The cosmopolitan position is dismissed by its detractors for foregrounding the study of purely literary matters, such as style or aesthetics, and for minimizing the importance of specific tribal contexts. Cosmopolitanists are thus caricatured as ivory-tower academics, as careerists disconnected from the concerns of Native communities and “real” politics. As this brief overview suggests, the great “rift hypothesis” relies on the logic of simple binaries and entrenched ideologies. It produces narratives of conflict that tend to shift discussion away from the actual nuances and complexities of Native self-representation toward the infighting of a small group of critics.

Matthew Herman, an assistant professor of Native American studies at Montana State University, embraces a version of the rift hypothesis as the starting point for his analysis of “the recent political turn in Native American literary studies” (1). Herman maps this turn as beginning during the late 1980s, and he is particularly interested in how a focused concern with politics has affected the way scholars understand the “status” of American Indian literary texts, which he defines as their “nature, function, and value” (1). This is a productive and potentially provocative question, one that can be posed from multiple perspectives. How, for instance, have scholars’ ideas about literary status changed since the field of American Indian literary studies has grown in size, diversified its methodologies, and become increasingly institutionalized throughout the past several decades? How do understandings of the nature, function, and value of Native literary texts relate—or not relate—to particular scholars’ subject positions, experiences, training, and interests? How do readers, critics, and intellectuals outside the dominant academy understand the literary status of Native texts? What are the consequences of these potentially

divergent definitions of status for current or future scholarship, pedagogy, and activism?

Herman's choice to situate his investigation within the rift hypothesis, rather than to pose the question of literary status as a series of more open-ended provocations, is understandable but also somewhat disappointing. The idea of an entrenched opposition between nationalism and cosmopolitanism provides a clear framework for Herman's study, and the version of the rift he presents is more nuanced and less of a caricature than described above; nonetheless, its polarizing terms limit the range of scholarship and the range of methodological approaches that Herman explores in any depth. The book thus takes fewer risks than it might have, and it argues its position about literary status along clearly partisan lines. Although often engaging, the five chapters offer few surprises. More significant, perhaps, is that Herman uses the idea of an entrenched opposition between nationalism and cosmopolitanism as an easy foil against which to argue his book's larger thesis. Here Herman follows the lead of Arnold Krupat, a scholar of American Indian literature who is often associated with literary cosmopolitanism and who is one of Herman's primary influences. As does Krupat in recent work, Herman argues that we need to move beyond the great rift's supposedly intractable divides. "Nationalism and cosmopolitanism need not be seen as incompatible forms," Herman contends, and thus "the theoretical challenges arising from this apparent impasse should be seen as an opportunity for growth" (6). Although he maintains the terms of opposition throughout, Herman repeatedly champions Krupat's call for a literary cosmopolitanism broad enough to subsume the ideals of tribal nationalism, including the demand to uphold tribal sovereignty.

Given the expansiveness of his title, *Politics and Aesthetics in Contemporary Native American Literature*, Herman's analysis of literary status feels somewhat limited, as well, in its reliance on a relatively small number of contemporary American Indian writers. In the first part of the book, Herman asks readers to contemplate what is actually at stake in ongoing debates over literary status. He turns initially to Simon Ortiz (Acoma), whose groundbreaking literary and critical work confounds any simplistic understanding of a strict divide between nationalism and cosmopolitanism, placing particular emphasis on Ortiz's often-cited statement on literary nationalism, "Towards a National Indian Literature" (*MELUS*, 1981, 7–12). Herman then asks readers to revisit what he calls the "heated wrangle over literary canons" waged between critics Krupat and Robert Allen Warrior (Osage) in 1991 and the "controversy" over politics and style waged between writers Louise Erdrich (Anishinaabe) and Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna) in 1986 (26, 47). This approach offers a useful genealogy for contemporary debates between "nationalist-inflected perspectives" and "cosmopolitanist-inflected perspectives" on Native literature (10).

Readers already familiar with the field, however, may find such extensive attention to the conflicts between Krupat and Warrior or Erdrich and Silko—each of which is based in a single book review—less evocative or influential than Herman claims. These readers may wish that Herman had gestured toward alternate genealogies for contemporary debates as well, such as the one that the polemic Jack Forbes (Powhatan/Lenape) published, “Colonialism and Native American Literature: Analysis” (*Wicazo Sa Review*, 1987, 17–23). Forbes raises the pertinent issue of the primary audience for contemporary Native literature and questions the political efficacy of the work of most if not all of the (then) major American Indian novelists.

In the later chapters, Herman turns to literary works by Sherman Alexie (Spokane/Coeur d’Alene) and Richard Van Camp (Dogrib), published from the mid-1990s through the mid-2000s, with a focus on how the representation of popular culture functions in these American Indian and Canadian First Nations texts. In several respects, this is the most original and productive part of the book. Herman asks provocative questions about how the representation of popular culture intersects with issues of individual and cultural authenticity, tribal nationalism, and anticolonial resistance, and the contrast he draws between the approaches that Alexie and Van Camp take toward popular culture is persuasive. Herman argues that whereas Alexie’s references to popular culture in his 1995 novel *Reservation Blues* and in other works demonstrate a “self-conscious focus on cultural blending,” a “biting sarcasm,” a “whimsical treatment of race and identity,” and a proliferation of “ironies,” similar references to popular culture in Van Camp’s 1996 novel *The Lesser Blessed* read as “naturalized culture, as part and parcel of contemporary native life” (116). That said, Herman could do more to distinguish between American Indian and Canadian First Nations contexts in his comparative analysis; as is still common in American Indian literary studies, he relies almost exclusively on US reviews and scholarship.

At the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, little consensus has been achieved among scholars of American Indian literature regarding the meanings of the key terms *nationalism*, *sovereignty*, and *cosmopolitanism*. In its later chapters, especially, Herman’s study helps to move us toward potential consensus by promoting the investigation of the literary value of Native texts.

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