

Red Criticism

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...I've chosen *Red matters* because red has not mattered much as yet, not in the aura of the postcolonial, gender and race, borderlands, cultural, or subaltern studies. Although there exists at present a solid body of criticism demonstrating the importance of Native American literature in its own right and in relation to ethnic, minority, or difference literature of a variety of kinds, Native materials still continue to be badly neglected.

(Arnold Krupat, *Red Matters*, 2002)

Although we are in dire need of examination of new ways to engage in the discipline rather the unquestioned acceptance of what we have inherited under the rubric Native studies, we have nevertheless been passed down an important intellectual tradition built not only in the last thirty years or so, in terms of the rise of Native studies programs in universities, but on past generations of Native writers and thinkers.

Craig Womack (*Red on Red*, 1999)

The title I chose – Red Criticism – prompted me to choose the two epigraphs above. Red has been a word used by several Native writers because it avoids the white misnomer, Indian, and at the same time carries the mark of radical resistance to Euro-American accounts of Native representation. Red, one of the three primary colors, is related to passion, anger, shame, violence, danger and blood, and known to increase heart beats, so it is an apt metaphor for the discussion of Native literature, that has been referred to, occasionally, as Red Literature, and its main themes.

The aim of this essay is to map the amplitude of “critical strategies” (a term Womack uses) informing the reading of Native American literature by Native American scholars. Because it is only in the last decade or so that this criticism has started to produce indispensable bibliography for those interested in the subject and because the first attempt I came across, *Toward a Native American Critical Theory*, published by Elvira Pulitano in 2003, includes commentaries that seem, at times, too anxious to reinstate an Euro-American upper hand in the debate. One term that strikes me that way is, for example, “tribocentric” to refer to Womack, Warrior and Cook-Lynn’s arguments that actually talk about maintaining a tribal affiliation as an identity stronghold closely related to sovereignty issues. But I do not want to introduce many Euro-American voices in this presentation¹, for I believe that Native critics have a lot to say for their art that is worthy of our attention.

It is only a natural follow up to more than thirty years of consistent textual production called Native Literary Renaissance that a body of criticism starts to come up as well, written by indigenous critics about indigenous writing, as varied as the indigenous experience on the continent, as Craig Womack tells us:

Just as there are a number of realities that constitute Indian identity – rez², urban, full-blood, language speakers, gay, straight, and many other possibilities – there are also a number of legitimate approaches to analyzing Native literary production (2).

The first recognized attempt was made by Choctaw-Cherokee Irish descendant Louis Owens, in *Other Destinies*, in 1992. Owens examines the question of identity up close in the work of the best known Native

¹ I hope two of Arnold Krupat’s recent texts on the subject come out during 2008, for we have been exchanging notes on Native criticism and he presents a deeply analytical and more comprehensive view of the theme at hand: “Culturalism and Its Discontents: Native American Literary Criticism Today,” presented on July 12 in Mainz, Germany, and “Culturalism and Its Discontents: an Essay Review of David Treuer’s *Native American Fiction: A User’s Manual*,” to be published by JAST (Journal of American Studies in Turkey).

² Short for “reservation,” a term widely used by Natives.

authors since Scott Momaday won the Pulitzer Prize in 1968: Mourning Dove, D'Arcy McNickle, Leslie Marmon Silko, Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris, Gerald Vizenor. From within his place in the USian academy, and fluent in the western theoretical discourse of postmodernism and postcolonialism, Owens recognizes that "The recovering or rearticulation of an identity, a process dependent upon a rediscovered sense of place as well as community, becomes in the face of such obstacles a truly enormous undertaking" at the center of American Indian fiction (5). The obstacles he refers to are the "inventions" (called "simulations" by Vizenor) of the American Indian in public consciousness and the notion that this figure has long vanished and been replaced by the actual Native and his contemporary experience. "It is at this disjuncture between myth and reality that American Indian novelists most often take aim, and out of which the material of their art most often arises," Owens says (4). And since the work is written in English, that is also a major concern. "For the Indian author, writing within the consciousness of the contextual background of a non-literate culture, every word written in English represents a collaboration of sorts as well as a re-orientation (conscious or unconscious) from the paradigmatic world of oral tradition to the syntagmatic reality of written language" (6), and he also recognizes that "[t]he nature of the confrontation permeating Native American fiction is intensely political" (8).

Perhaps more important than language itself is the "additional challenge" Native American novelists face of "making themselves understood in a prose form quite foreign to traditional Native American discourse" (Owens 9) that were "oral and communal," so Native writers also have to worry about the loss of power this "written literacy," increasingly more descriptive and historical, may cause (Owens 9). Owens goes on to say that "The privileging of the individual necessary for the conception of the modern novel (and for the conception of the American myth) is a more radical departure for American Indian cultures than for the western world as a whole" (10). "While American Indian poets, regardless of their consciousness of influence, may imagine themselves part of an ancient oral tradition of singers and story tellers, the Native American novelist works in a medium for which no close Indian prototype exists" (10) and have to "graft" Native thematic and structural principles onto an "intensely egocentric genre." Regardless of the "infinite flexibility" of the genre, and to what extent a novel

may “incorporate the cyclical, ordered, ritual-centered, and paradigmatic world of traditional oral literatures ... the Native American novelist can never step back into the collective anonymity of the tribal storyteller” (11). The consequence is the “desacralization” of the traditional materials and their consequent “decontextualization” into the world of “art” (11), or “literature.”

That is what most of us non-Native professors and critics have been doing when we teach these works as part of a corpus of “minority” or “postcolonial” literature, most of the time with a limited knowledge of the cultures represented. Decontextualization leads not only to desacralization, but also to the ignoring of specific political issues highly important to Native cultures, as that of sovereignty.

Owens believes that “In every case, however, the Native American novelist plays off and moves beyond (and challenges the reader beyond) that faint trace of “Rousseauist” ethnostalgia – most common to Euramerican treatment of Native American Indians – toward an affirmation of a syncretic, dynamic, adaptive identity in contemporary America” (12). By the way, Native critics are also providing us with plenty of new terms such as “ethnostalgia,” and more will surface here.

Owens also says that although writing for the Indian reader, Indian novelists who desire to be published must also write for the non-Indian reader (14). The result may be a richly hybridized dialogue but “one effect of this hybridization is subversive: the American Indian writer places the Eurocentric reader on the outside, as ‘other’, while the Indian reader (a comparatively small audience) is granted, for the first time, a privileged position” and thus “[t]he Native writers establishes a basis for “authoritative discourse” (14). By appropriating an essentially “other” language, the Native author is “entering a dialogue with the language itself” (15), Owens thinks.

“With few exceptions, American Indian novelists – examples of Indians who have repudiated their assigned plots – are in their fiction rejecting the American gothic with its haunted, guilt-burdened wilderness and doomed Native and emphatically making the Indian the hero of *other destinies*, other plots” (18, my emphasis). Owens is also a pioneer in recognizing the important function of humor in Native American literature, indicative of Indian identity, which makes many non-Native readers

uncomfortable inside Native novels. Because he is himself a mixed-blood, Owens examines this complication of the identity issue extensively in the work of Mourning Dove, Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris, Vizenor, as do several others. We will come back to the topic.

When we get to his last chapter and Owens's description of Vizenor's writing as "trickster narratives," a historiography of the Native American novel begins to take shape, for he detects in Vizenor, whom he calls "one of the most productive as well as one of the most radically imaginative of contemporary American writers" (notice he does not say *Native American* writer), who has "a fascination with what it means to be of mixed Indian and European heritage in the contemporary world" – in Vizenor's terminology, a "crossblood." And out of this fascination arises the central and unifying figure in Vizenor's art: "the trickster" (225) who is a perfect metaphor for the contradictions of existing between two world visions. The big difference every critic recognizes in Vizenor's writing is that his characters are shape shifters, mediators, rather than victims. "In Vizenor's fictional world – a coherent and fully realized topography, as complete as Faulkner's South or Garcia Marquez's Macondo – the tortured and torturing mixedblood . . . simply refuses to perish in the dark cave of the American psyche but instead soars to freedom in avian dreams and acrobatic outrage" (225). Owens points out in Vizenor's fiction that "necessary upsetting" and "intent attacking of terminal creeds" enacted by shapeshifting. By finding cause for joyous celebration in being a crossblood, Owens believes that "Vizenor has taken Indian fiction into the future" (254). And I find significant that he claims a place for Vizenor alongside two of the best recognized writers of the post 60's literary boom in the Americas. It is a bold act of self inclusion within such a solid hegemonic literature.

Creek-Cherokee critic Craig Womack's 1999 book, *Red on Red*, starts from a radical stance enunciated in his subtitle, *Native American Literary Separatism* (that he later recants to some extent), and as he comments on the work of major Native American writers who are also critics, he draws a map of this criticism and their "strategies", going a step further than Owens. Womack invokes the comic caricatures written by nineteenth century Creek journalist Charles Gibson, in *Red English*³, as he calls for

³ A variety of non-standard English common among reservation populations.

“the forming of a substantive body of critical discourse” about their own literature (9) to discuss the purpose of Indian literature, the criteria used to determine what constitutes Native literature and the ethical issues surrounding a Native writer (10).

Having said that, and brought to the forefront a list of nineteenth and early twentieth century names worth perusing, Womack proceeds to mention enough Native writers who have been acting as critics to justify the reality of “Red on Red.” Quoting Vine Deloria’s polemic title, *We Talk You Listen*, Womack claims it is possible to “teach courses on Native lit and now even Native criticism, assigning as texts, books authored exclusively by Native people” (10). And he is absolutely correct about that. Not only there is enough great quality material available for such a course, for serious and meaningful graduate research, thesis and book writing. Mainly, there is enough material to make a course on Native literature declare its scope and focus for Native cultures can be as widely diverse as their languages are, something that may be covered by the use of English.

The difficulties in resolving these issues is very clear in Womack, who takes a radical stance in what is perhaps the strongest differential in the discourse of Native critics about their literature: that it is tribal and closely linked to discussions of sovereignty, or nationalism. Womack constructs his claim through close examination of his own Creek culture, to which the book is mostly dedicated, as he declares that literature bears some kind of relationship to communities, both writing communities and the community of the primary culture, from which they originate (4). He engages current theory in this debate, saying that “The postmodernists might laugh at claims of prioritizing insider status, questioning the very nature of what constitutes an insider and pointing out that no pure Creek, or Native, viewpoint exists, that Native and non-Native are constantly deconstructing each other” (5). But he will not abandon “a search for the affirmation of a *national* literary identity simply to fall in line with the latest literary trend” (6, my emphasis), since for Womack this identity is closely related to historical and political issues. To him Native writing “has come a long way toward legitimizing tribal experience as an appropriate subject for writing, and most importantly, toward assuming that tribal life will continue in the future” (6), while postmodern decentering might decenter the very legitimacy of a Native perspective as it does to every

other one. And after the strong affirmation I used as my first epigraph, Womack goes on to declare the American and the Native “two separate canons” (7), or what he calls his version of “red stick criticism” (11).

I say that tribal literatures are not some branch waiting to be grafted onto the main trunk. Tribal literatures are the tree, the oldest literatures in the Americas, the most American of American literatures. We are the canon (7).

Womack summons Crow Creek Sioux Elizabeth Cook-Lynn to reinforce his point as she says “The second worry for the nativist is the question of whether or not opening up the American literary canon to include native literary traditions and contemporary works will have much relevance, given its own set of unique aims – the interest in establishing the myths and metaphors of sovereign nationalism These are the elements of nationalism which have always fueled the literary canon of tribal peoples and their literary lives” (qtd in Womack 14).

Cook-Lynn is a firm believer that the enormous impact that the book and media culture in America has on its citizens, Native and non-Native, could and should be used to produce new visions and promote a re-examination of the mistaken ideas about the Native past as well as about USian history, and the place to do it is in colleges and universities. Coming from the seventies’ tradition of affirmative action, a lot of her writing is radical and sarcastic. Her 1996 book *Why I Can’t Read Wallace Stegner*, a collection of her published essays and conferences, tackles what she sees as the central and crucial questions about reading and teaching Native literature, such as the large contribution of Native women, the preservation of tribalism, and the need for decolonization. Her dispute with Stegner comes from the centrality of his vision within Western culture that cuts off the dialogue with the indigenous habitants of the country, condemning them to silence and oblivion.⁴

As Womack, Cook-Lynn calls for a political concern associated to aesthetics as, for example, a way of struggling against canon formation

⁴ I talk at some length about Cook’s book, as well as about King, in “A Theoretical Dialogue about Reading Native Literature”. *Crop* 11 (2005-2006): 95-112.

tendencies, reinforced by books as Harold Bloom's, for is it possible for Natives to read works "where the death and burial of their presence is so explicit" and "make the necessary reconciliation with continuity and primordial historiography" (33), she asks, when they were forever excluded from making part of contemporary human thought?

Central to her criticism is the task of the Native American writer of mythologizing his relationship to place. As a firm believer in tribal affiliation, Cook-Lynn discusses American Indian fiction writers in relation to cosmopolitanism, nationalism, and First Nations Sovereignty.

Cook-Lynn sees "cosmopolitanism as the enemy of 'resistance literatures' because its criteria derives from Western tastes and aesthetics," and she points out the main problems, some of which Owens brings up as well.

1. The preference for novels over poetry, testimonials and plays;
2. The preference for literature published in European languages;
3. Writing about colonialism without using a "strident" point of view;
4. And the attraction to literature that aesthetically is "like us," or displays the complexities and subtleties of all "great art." (79)

Cook-Lynn believes that the violation of nationalistic models in fiction should be a legitimate concern in literary theory, and part of its discourse when applied to Native American Fiction. She believes it is a mistake on the part of Native American writers to think that they can become "cosmopolitan," hybrid, or even exotic, with impunity (84).

She proceeds to define Erdrich's vision as "apocalyptic and Christian-oriented," Welch as dismissive of Blackfeet nationhood, and Momaday's mysticism as self-absorbed, while Vizenor invitation to "whoever wants to be tribal can join the tribe" is seen as lacking seriousness. She even thinks her own novel (*From the River's Edge*) effaces the ambiguity in the Indian rights struggle of politics and land.

Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* (1991) seems to Cook-Lynn the most ambitious novel published by an American Indian fiction writer for asserting a collective indigenous retrieval of lands stolen from them through colonization and creating a "fictionalized pantribal nationalism."

Cook-Lynn admires her for clinging to “the idea that the imagination plays a functional role in political and social life, an idea which most of the native traditionalists I have known have always held” (89). Perhaps Cook-Lynn is tickled by the novel creating a nightmarish vision of what America could become to its colonizers: “the triumph of the indigenes as tidal waves of South and North American Indians wipe out borders and reclaim lands” (Silko 91).

Laguna Pueblo writer Paula Gunn Allen, in her essay entitled “Who is your Mother? Red roots of white feminism” (ironically published in an anthology about “multicultural literacy”) seems to group naturally with Womack and Cook-Lynn. Allen uses the Laguna Pueblo New Mexico gynocratic societies in a region where “your mother’s identity is key to your own identity” (13) to spin her argument.

Failure to know your mother, that is, your position and its attendant traditions, history, and place in the scheme of things, is failure to remember your significance, your reality, your right relationship to earth and society. It is the same thing as being lost – isolated, abandoned, self estranged, and alienated from your own life. (14)

And she adds: “American Indian Nations place great value on tradition” (14). To Gunn Allen the importance of continuity with one’s cultural origins runs counter to contemporary American ideas where immigrants seem eager to cast off cultural ties, seeing their own parents as backward, restrictive, or shameful. This attitude of rejecting tradition reaches back to colonial history, she affirms, and nowadays is validated by every institution in the country. Feminist practice follows that road as well for the loss of tradition and memory is at the roots of oppression, since it comes with a loss of positive sense of self.

She believes American society should not only recognize and honor Native Americans, it should model itself after them. If Native American tradition had been followed “the place of women in society would become central, the distribution of goods and power would be egalitarian, the elderly would be respected, honored, and protected as a primary social and cultural resource, the ideals of physical beauty would be considerably enlarged Additionally, the destruction of the biota, the life sphere, and the natural resources of the planet would be curtailed, and

the spiritual nature of human and non-human life would become a primary organizing principle of human society” (15). Allen offers the example of suffragette Eva Emery Dye, from Oregon, who found in Sacagawea, the Shoshoni teenager figure buried in the Lewis and Clark journal (who traveled with the expedition carrying her infant son while she acted as a guide and a translator) an embodiment of her vision of feminism: “a historical figure whose life would symbolize the strengthened power of women” (20-21).

But to Gunn Allen the roots of American feminism reach back even beyond Sacagawea since the first white women who arrived in this continent became well accounted with tribal women as neighbors who shared food, information, child and health care. This is very visible in pioneer women’s diaries, as in the famous Canadian accounts of Susana Moodie and Catherine Parr Traill. Allen also believes that questions as intermarriage between Indians and whites or Indians and blacks had been as little explored as the account of those women’s encounters, leaving visible only the degradation of Indian women into squaws or princesses (21), a subject I will return to when examining Janice Acoose’s book.

She is aware that as she writes, around 1986 (the year *Sacred Hoop* was published), her version of the roots of American feminism must seem far away from mainstream and radical versions of feminine history. She is “keenly” aware of the lack of image Americans have about the continent’s past and “intensely” conscious of popular notions of Indian women as beasts of burden, squaws, traitors, and so on (18). She claims women should get aware of their history in this continent and how the same forces also devastated gynarchies in Britain and in America, and in ancient African civilizations, for example (19). To her the wars of imperial conquest have waged over the land and its resources as well as the bodies, the minds and hearts of the peoples of the earth (19). To Allen “Indianization” is not a simple concept, one that North Americans strongly resist, but it has taken place. Regardless of its recognition it is at the roots of the most valued personal, family, social and political arenas (23).

It is very important to acknowledge Paula Gunn Allen’s major contribution to Native Studies by devising curriculum suggestions for university courses that include critical as well as pedagogical material in a way that the reader can perceive their critical foundations. Published in

1983, *Studies in American Indian Literature*, aims at integrating Native American studies into the study of USian literature at every level, to provide insights and critical approaches to Native literature, to provide a study diverse in aesthetics and style, but moreover, it wants to enrich English programs by opening possibilities for much needed research in the area (viii-ix).

In the essay that became best known in the book, “The Sacred Hoop: a Contemporary Perspective,” Allen examines the difficulties in teaching non-Western literatures to an audience familiar with the terms “primitive,” “savage,” “pagan” and “folklore” applied to these works (3). The basic difference between Western and Native American literature, Allen points out, is in their assumed purposes, for Native Literature “is never simply pure self-expression.” The tribes do not celebrate individual ability to feel emotion since everyone is able to do so. And to suggest that one’s personal emotions should be imitated is to impose on someone else’s personal integrity. Native American culture – through song, ceremony, legend, sacred stories (we call myths) and tales – “embody, articulate and share reality” and bring private self into harmony and balance with this reality (4).

The artistry of the tribes is married to the essence of language itself, for through language one can share one’s singular being with that of the community and know within oneself the communal knowledge of the tribe. (4)

Trying to get out of the more conservative, or separatist, line of criticism, but still radical in his embracing of postmodern strategies, stands Gerald Vizenor. His two books published in 1999, *Manifest Manners* and *Postindian Conversations*, introduce series of neologisms that seem to exert the shamanic function of exorcising terms associated to stereotyping and victimization of Natives that became characteristic of colonial discourse dilemmas. As Womack, who talks from his Creek experience, Vizenor departs from his Ojibwa inheritance where he finds the mere “Presence of natives ... an obvious narrative on sovereignty” (181).

Vizenor introduces the ironic play with the founding father’s notion of manifest destiny in *Manifest Manners*. (The term originated in an anecdote about a university president who encouraged students to greet

minority students in hallway encounters to make them feel integrated.) The massive teaching of European and Euro-American literature is called another type of *manifest manners* by Vizenor, who defends Indians write a *literature of survivance* – a crossing of survival and resistance. According to him Native literature is not “mere reaction” (vii), but “re-invention.” Since Indian was a European invention, Native stories of survival and resistance dislocate the original meaning into figures he calls *postindian warriors*, or *word warriors*, those in charge of dissociating themselves, through their stories, from the existing perception of *Indianness*. Vizenor’s post-Indian mixedbloods, for example, possess tribal, but not national values and maybe that is why his writing troubles other Native writers beyond the playful, trickster-like quality of his approach to contemporary Native reality.

In the neologism creation arena, addressing the postcolonial theories, is Greek-Cherokee Canadian writer Thomas King. In “Godzilla vs. postcolonial,” a 1997 essay, King declares the term postcolonial unacceptable to describe Native literature. And he does not hesitate to call the triumvirate – pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial – terms that “reek of unabashed ethnocentrism and well-meaning dismissal, and they point to a deep-seated assumption that is at the heart of most well-intentioned studies of Native literatures” (242).

To King, the problems with the term postcolonial reside in its inescapable nationalism and in its dangerous assumption that any discussion starting point is the advent of Europeans to North America. He also accuses postcolonial studies of organizing literature progressively, implying progress and improvement, as well as of assuming that the catalyst for contemporary Native writing is the struggle between the oppressor and the oppressed.

Pre-colonial literature, thus, according to King, “has no relationship whatsoever to colonial literature. The two are neither part of a biological or natural cycle nor does one anticipate the other.... Yet, contemporary Native American Literatures cannot be classified among the postcolonial literatures of the world for the obvious fact that there is not yet a “post” to the colonial status of Native Americans” (242).

Despite protests of not being a theorist, King does offer us four terms to describe contemporary Native literature: tribal, interfusional,

polemical and associational, believing they are “less centered and do not, within the terms themselves, privilege one culture over another; they avoid the sense of progress in which primitivism gives way to sophistication, suggesting as it does that such movement is both natural and desirable; their identity points to a cultural and literary continuum for Native literature which do not depend on anomalies such as the arrival of Europeans in North America or the advent of non-Native literature in this hemisphere” (243).

Tribal, he says, refers to that literature which exists primarily within a tribe or community, which is shared exclusively by the members of that community and presented and retained in Native language. It is virtually invisible outside that community partly because of the language barrier and partly because it has little interest in making itself available to an outside audience, like that of the Hopi.

“Polemical” refers to that literature in Native language, English or French, that concerns itself with the culture clash between Natives and non-Natives and which champions native values over non-Native values. Beatrice Culleton’s *In Search of April Raintree* (1984), Maria Campbell’s *Halfbreed* (1973), D’Arcy McNickle’s *The Surrounded* (1976), *Wind from an Enemy Sky* (1978) and Howard Adam’s *Prison of Grass*. It chronicles the imposition of non-Native expectations and political, social, scientific insinuations on Native communities and describes the methods of resistance used by Native peoples to maintain their culture and above all their communities.

“Interfusalional” King uses to describe part of Native literature which blends oral and written literature. Howard Norman in *The Wishing Bone Cycle* (1976) and Harry Robinson’s *Write it on Your Heart* (1989) are the examples. These writers tell their stories to someone who then translates them into English, as Norman has done with what he calls “ethnopoems”; or transcribes them into writing, as Wendy Wickwire has done with Robinson’s tales. These storytellers develop an oral syntax that defeats readers’ efforts to read the stories silently, to themselves, and encourages them to read aloud. And they keep metaphors, structures, themes and characters from oral literature. Their main value of this literature may well be the influence on contemporary writers, as King himself likes to acknowledge. Or Jeanette Armstrong, for example, in her novel *Slash*

(1985), that tells of growing up Indian in a prejudiced school and a prejudiced society, but manages to stay optimistic, pointing to a possible connection between the cultures.

“Associational” would then be most of the contemporary fiction being written by Natives today. Most often, it describes a Native community and although including non-Native characters or communities, does not center on the latter or on conflicts between the two cultures. Instead, it focuses on the daily activities and intricacies of contemporary Native life. It also ignores traditional plots and climaxes valued by non-Native literature. It also leans towards the group, the collective story rather than the single character, a fiction that devalues heroes and villains altogether. Most importantly, it is a fiction that avoids judgments and conclusions. This literature provides a limited access to the Native world and the non-Native reader can associate with it without feeling a part of it. It helps remind Natives of their cultural values and reinforces a present of cultural tenacity and a viable future.

Examples are Basil H. Johnston’s *Indian School Days* (1988), a biographical narrative of his years at a Jesuit boarding school where Native boys are not seen as victims of their religious jailers, but both sides of the cultural border are given choices and responsibilities. And Ruby Slipperjack’s *Honour the Sun* (1987), a diary-like narrative that follows the daily life of an isolated Native community in northern Ontario. There is no attempt at glorifying the Native way of life or at blaming problems as alcoholism or tuberculosis on their white neighbors.

The feeling of “almost” understanding what is going on in these non-judgmental portraits of native communities is also found in King’s work. His novel *Truth and Bright Water* (1999), for example, introduces Native characters more or less integrated to both their traditional communities and the white world around them, mythological figures, a pervading sense of humor which pokes fun at both sides of the “contact zone.” It gives us Indians who ride motorcycles and shoot at Buffalo with paint balls in the same canvas that portrays an abusive Native father. We also have a mysterious trio of ghost dogs, a suicidal teenager, a very intriguing quilt that displays razor blades and photos among its many components. Several members of these two little towns on the Canadian/US border go back and forth by pulling themselves across aboard a bucket tied to a rope, ignoring national

frontiers and national laws with the same ease they ignore cultural frontiers. But to the non-Native, the reading of King's books, as that of many other Native writers, leaves us feeling as outsiders. Not in a bad way, it is only that slightly uncomfortable feeling that some of those references and icons were not entirely grasped and that those jokes would be a lot funnier if we were Natives.

King alerts us that these categories do not cover works such as Vizenor's postmodern novels *Darkness in St Louis Bearheart* (1978) and *Griever: an American Monkey King in China* (1987), or Graig Strete's surreal science fiction: *The Bleeding Man* (1977) and *If All Else Fails* (1980), emphasizing the great variety of contemporary Native production, spread through all known genres and some of its own making.

The terms he suggests, King warns us, are not "bags" into which we can collect and store the whole of Native literature: "They are more properly *vantage points* from which we can see a particular literary landscape" (243-44, my emphasis). From a non-comparative point-of view, I have to add, but rather from an insider's view.

The terms all these Native writers have been proposing have to be studied and considered not only in their validity for the examination of Native literature, but as reflections which can make us look beyond the theoretical mirror we keep holding up to them. After all, we all grew up with many "Indian" stereotypes in literature and film and the market for those natives or non-Natives who want to do something that escapes the old cowboys and Indians plot may be scarce. It is still very strange in this twenty-first century to see Indians who do not fit the imaginary roles we are used to and do not speak or write in traditional ways.

Despite all attempts to the contrary, Native peoples have not only survived, they have thrived and created their own space and their own voice within these cultures we call our own. So we need to be reminded that Natives, as King puts it, "in addition to a useful past, ... also have an active present" (246).

Janice Acoose uses the term "post-halfbreed" in discussing the work of fellow Native writers, including that of Maria Campbell and her famous autobiographical novel *Halfbreed* (1973), in *Iskwewak – Kah 'Ki Yaw Ni Wahkomakanak* (or *All Our Relations*) subtitled – *Neither Indian Princesses Nor Easy Squaws*. We soon perceive that Acoose's task is to

examine the ideological influences of what she refers to as “white-canadian-christian patriarchy” (all written in lower case) and their consequences for her people (8; 10) and that is done through an analysis of literary texts.

Her introduction is a celebration of her heritage where she names “all her relations” and makes them real with the insertion of several family photos. As she describes her family, mainly the women relatives, she realizes they “fit none of the white stereotypes of Indigenous women. She remembers them as “extremely powerful, resourceful, and dynamic women who vitally contributed to the survival” of the family and were responsible for her own “spiritual flame” (11).

Having reclaimed her own self and registered her personal history, the next step in Acoose’s identity recovery journey is to name several Native women writers who wrote autobiographically-based narratives before her: Emma LaRocque, Beatrice Culleton, Jeanette Armstrong, Lee Maracle, Ruby Slipperjack, Marie Anneharte Baker, Beth Cuthand, Louise Halfe (39). The list seems to prove that the stereotypical images of Indian women as romantic princesses or lewd squaws found in non-Native literature need to be examined critically against what the Native women themselves have to say. And she proceeds to examine the construction of the two stereotypes named in the title within the Canadian literary canon.

Acoose understands the stereotypes as a fundamental European Christian patriarchal ideology of the fifteenth century brought to America by the settlers that carried on into the nationalistic character even after the weakening of colonial ties. She cleverly analyses how Indigenous women who had relations with Christian white men had to be “elevated” beyond their status and thus became the equivalent of royalty. She reminds us of “Dona Marina, the Aztec who had a *liaison* with Hernando Cortez; Pocahontas, who saved John Smith from death; and also offers several illustrations of the New World depicting ‘regal looking women’ and ‘majestic-type women’ with bow and arrow” and barely clothed. After the colonial period, the bad Indian woman, or squaw, justified the imperialistic expansion west and the agendas of missionaries, fur traders and explorers. Acoose displays abundant documentation from both Euro-Canadian history and literature about these stereotypes that continue to be used despite their ethnocentric views (44-45). To these documents Acoose opposes an overview of the roles of Indian women inside their cultures,

with examples taken from Howard Adam's *Prison of Grass* and Emma LaRocque's *Defeathering the Indian*, both published in 1975.

Next, Acoose demonstrates how the perpetuation of these stereotypes is damaging to Indian women as they encourage "sexual, physical, verbal or psychological violence" against them. Here, too, she takes examples of Indigenous women who fought the combination of racism and sexism, legally and politically, reclaiming the central role of "culture keepers" and the autonomy over their bodies and relations with the other they held within their cultures. And here is where Acoose calls for an appropriation of the English language to represent their experience, to re-name and redefine the original peoples (58).

Chapter four is for us, non-Natives, one of the most interesting in the book because it is here that she deconstructs images of Indigenous women in texts written by acclaimed Euro-Canadian writers Margaret Laurence and William Patrick Kinsella. To remain mostly in the company of women I will only comment on the example of Margaret Laurence, a writer I happen to like very much and whose multicultural west coast world I thought was also quite critical. Acoose acknowledges Laurence's "compassion and understanding" for her character Piquette Tonerre, in "The Loons" (a tale from *A Bird in the House*, 1985). Although "sympathetic to the Native," the narrator of the story and interpreter of events is Vanessa MacLeod, "a white Christian lower-middle-class girl whose standing of reality is filtered through a racist, classist and male-privileged ideological value system," in Acoose's words (79). Piquette, the Métis girl, is consistently victimized and seems never to measure up to Vanessa's white standards. "Piquette and her family are represented as hopeless and contemptible victims" and the Métis in Laurence's fiction, as seen by Acoose, "are people whose language is neither Cree nor French" (80), that is, dispossessed even of a language of their own. More importantly, Acoose detects in Laurence a consistent use of negative grammatical constructions to describe the Métis, and the death of the girl as "a victim of her own vices", disappoints her because it is such a cliché.

As a counterpoint to Laurence's representation of the Métis woman, Acoose offers Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed*, its analysis occupying a whole chapter. By the very reference of a book by a Métis, published in 1973, or prior to Laurence's stories, Acoose may be implying that the material to

“educate” non-Native writers was available and was ignored, not by Laurence in particular, but by the literary culture of the time. For Campbell’s text, Acoose says, “challenges existing stereotypes and images of Indigenous women by providing a vivid spiritual, social, political, and economic context” (90).

Campbell is also an important model as a woman and a writer: “one of the first few Indigenous people who appropriated the colonizer’s language to name her oppressor’s unjust systems, laws and processes, and subsequently to work towards decolonization” (91). That is reinforced, Acoose points out, by addressing members of the colonial world in her introduction while her use of the derogatory term “Halfbreed” to refer to herself is disturbing because it is a “reminder of Canadian society’s racism towards them” (93).

Campbell’s book opened a very important path to other Indigenous women and Acoose also comes up with Jeanette Armstrong, Beth Cuthand, Louise Halfe, Lenore Keeshig-Tobias, Marie Annharte Baker, Patricia Monture-Okanee, Monica Goulet, Marylyn Dumont, Mary Sky Blue Morin, Lee Maracle, Ruby Slipperjack and Beatrice Culleton, among a long row of brave women who survived to tell their stories and find comfort and solidarity in their sisters (104), and to thwart the notion that they “are a dying race, suffering victims with no hope of survival, or ‘Natives’ bound and determined to assimilate and make it in the white world” (108).⁵

Jeannette Armstrong calls attention to the fact that, while in the United States, several aboriginal critics (Owens, Vizenor, Paula Gunn Allen, Alexie, for example) are getting considerable attention, even if in a market saturated with books about Aboriginal peoples (the 1980s and 1990s) mostly by non-aboriginal experts, in Canada Native authors and critics have found the academy a less than comfortable space. While the number of published aboriginal poets, novelists and dramatists increases, discussion of their writing has been done mainly by non-aboriginal

⁵ For an extended version of the analysis of Acoose’s book, see “Can we Speak of a Native American Critical Theory?”. *Brasil/Canadá: visões, paisagens e perspectivas do Ártico ao Antártico*. Org. Núbia Jacques Hanciau. Abecan-FURG, 2006. 93-100.

academics and journalists. Armstrong herself has been finding ways of voicing their own views of the matter, slowly building what Kimberley Blaeser calls “an ‘organic’ Native critical language” or “tribal-centered criticism.” Blaeser does not reject Euro-American models of criticism (as Owens does not dismiss Bakhtin, or Womack Said), but she does insist that aboriginal people begin to develop their own critical techniques, even out of their own creative literature. This “literature as theory” strategy was very successful within African-American and Chicana Literature, for example. Good examples of that emerging “theorizing criticism” are essays by Thomson Highway, Gerald Vizenor, or Lenore Keeshig-Tobias’ use of the “trickster” as a way of talking about Native spirituality, relating it to politics, and humor in aboriginal writing.

The reason for this mapping I find in the scattered, limited and insistently postcolonial readings of Native literature enacted in the Brazilian academy. Even in North America Native American studies courses and the inclusion of Native American literature in English department programs present problems not that easy to solve. But in Brazil we have gone, if that much, from an all Anglo-American canon to a fragmentary “Literatures in English” that either contemplates specific postcolonial literatures or a mixed bag of works from several postcolonial realities with wide ranging common traits, as hybridity.

Perhaps it is all we can do given the small size of our subject in our fragmented departments of modern languages that try hard to accommodate a world greatly widened by the fast globalizing of information. But if we reach beyond the literary text and listen very closely to how these voices outside our own life experience read themselves, we may be able to do a much better job than when using only our own, in most cases Euro-American, tools and strategies.

The study of North American Native critics can also be useful in Brazil to lead us into considering our own Native literature as literature, rather than throwing it into the category of mythological or juvenile narrative where Native literature has been segregated by editors, bookstores and teachers. Or dismissing books as Elaine Potiguara’s hybrid and difficult to classify text, as “not quite literature because of its highly autobiographic content” (as I recently heard from an M.A. candidate). I prefer to read *Metade cara, metade máscara* (2002) as a book that enlarges our notions of

what a novel is, as Silko, for one, has written “novels” like Potiguara’s that incorporate testimony, poetry, autobiography and fiction. Potiguara uses the multiple narrative forms to better recover the 500 year encounter with Euro-American culture and its consequences for the Native peoples while it claims a space for Brazilian Native women in the history of our continent. She does that in a transcultural and transnational poetic voyage that gives out a sense of Native perception of time where past present and future are simultaneous, and is totally immersed in the social-political situation of Indians in contemporary Brazil. The book is postmodern in its structure, postcolonial in its conception and postcanonical in its appeal for the opening up of national history and of the novel genre itself. She invites us all into this inheritance we have been ignoring, when not despising altogether.

A list of critical readings we can call “Red on red”:

1970, Vine Deloria’s *We Talk, You Listen*, and 1973’s *God is Red*. Decades before Vizenor, Deloria articulates the idea that for Natives, in their peculiar experience of this continent, the basic recognition of their power and sovereignty should be a major aim.

1986, Paula Gunn Allen’s *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*.

1993, Jeanette Armstrong organizes *Looking at the Words of Our People: First Nation Analysis of Literature*.

1994, Allen Velie organizes *Native American Perspectives on Literature and History*.

1995, Robert Warrior’s *Tribal Secrets: Recovering American Indian Intellectual Traditions* discusses not only political sovereignty, but also intellectual sovereignty.

1997, Jace Weaver coins the term “communitism” in *That the People Might Live: Native American Literatures and Native American Community*.

1998, Vizenor’s *Fugitive Proses: Native American Indian Scenes of Absence and Presence*. The last chapter, Native “transmotions,” makes a strong case for Native sovereignty as grounded on the ongoing tradition of Native

storytelling, both oral and written. Vizenor introduces several neologisms as an attempt to escape colonial and postcolonial deconstructive dilemmas: soverenance – sovereignty and survivance; transmotion, for example.

2000, Scott Lyons introduces “rhetorical sovereignty” in the essay “What do American Indians want from writing?”

2005, Robert Warrior’s *The People and the Word: Reading Native Non-fiction*.

2006, Heath Justice’s *Our Fire Survives the Storm: a Cherokee Literary History*.

2006, Weaver, Womack and Warrior organize *American Indian Literary Nationalism*.

2006, David Truer’s *Native American Fiction: A User’s Manual*. A highly controversial book that even doubts that Native literature exists.

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