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Red Matters: Native American Studies, and: Grave Concerns,
Trickster Turns: The Novels of Louis Owens (review)

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That Zora Neale Hurston serves as lynchpin in both books speaks to the ever enriching activities of the best criticism. Rediscovered, republished, and reread in ways both textual and cultural, Hurston is now iconic. Her current position allows her to serve as a stable, accessible point of focus in considerations of less familiar writers and their works. In Konzett's book, Yeziarska and Rhys draw energy from being grouped with Hurston, as do Fauset and West in Jones's study. If any of us has ever questioned the centrality of Hurston to today's study of literature, these very good books provide emphatic positive answers.

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***Red Matters: Native American Studies.* By Arnold Krupat. Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press. 2002. xiv, 167 pp. Cloth, \$47.50; paper, \$18.95.**

***Grave Concerns, Trickster Turns: The Novels of Louis Owens.* By Chris LaLonde. Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press. 2002. xiii, 220 pp. \$34.95.**

Arnold Krupat's *Red Matters* and Chris LaLonde's *Grave Concerns, Trickster Turns* seek to position Native American literature and cultural production centrally in American studies. Krupat addresses a variety of Native American texts, from the narratives of Sherman Alexie, Charles Eastman, and Mourning Dove to oral histories and translation theory; LaLonde, on the other hand, focuses exclusively on the novels of mixed-blood author Louis Owens. But their goal is the same: to use a variety of theoretical methods (from Derridean-informed poststructuralism to formulations of trickster metafictional techniques) to enrich and complicate our understanding of Native American identity and experience.

In *Red Matters*, Krupat aims to develop a "cosmopolitan comparativism" (ix) that will acknowledge nativist scholarly and political endeavors (the reach for tribal sovereignty), embrace an indigenist, earth-affirming non-Western knowledge system, employ a poststructuralist understanding of language (the indeterminate sign), and posit a postcolonial subaltern that speaks within and against master narratives of colonialism. Krupat's overarching goal is to develop an inclusive, post-Native "ethnocriticism" that will displace "colonial knowledge" systems that continue to erase or contain Native peoples. Here Krupat balances a series of close readings of texts ranging from Mourning Dove's *Cogewea* (1927) to Alexie's *Indian Killer* (1996) with Native social, judicial, and political struggles contextualized within a long history of genocide. For example, in his reading of mixed-blood representation, Krupat explores the varying narrative engagements throughout the twentieth century with larger social and political concerns. *Cogewea* must be read in its sociohistorical context not as a tragic story of "selling out" but as a text that affirms the

“betwixt-and-betweenness of mixed-bloods of different blood types and quanta in the period” (95). And Krupat reads Eastman’s autobiography as the cutting edge of race representation. Forcefully declining to embrace the melting-pot ideals of his day and the notion that mixed-bloods are the only ones that face confusion and conflict, Krupat’s Eastman is a cosmopolitan, postethnic author who anticipates much of the writing that would pour forth from Native American authors and theorists in the 1980s, affirming hybrid identity in its move from a biological to a social constructionist purview.

Krupat, however, is careful not to wallow in readings that uncritically romanticize the Native as hybrid, carefully noting how this representation and rhetoric can also have a destructive absencing effect for Native peoples. For Krupat, Alexie’s power as a writer lies in his unromantic depictions of Natives such as John Smith in *Indian Killer*. Krupat is careful to mention that although the novel is set during the Vietnam war, another war was being fought closer to home, “in American Indian Country; and this is a war to end domestic colonialism rather than a war to preserve foreign colonialism” (98). Alexie invests John Smith with a “murderous rage” toward whites that, according to Krupat, illustrates the complex process of Native channeling of American society’s violent xenophobia. For Krupat, Smith’s conscious act of rage represents a powerful form of reterritorializing otherwise colonized Native American lands and subjects.

While Krupat proposes a new, post-Native critical method, LaLonde uses a number of different critical tools, nativist and poststructuralist, to uncover the complex layers of meaning in the novels of Choctaw-Cherokee-Irish-Cajun author Louis Owens. LaLonde grounds his eclectic analysis in an understanding of the power of stories to create resistant communities and cultural identities. For example, he interprets Tom Joseph’s mind-body journey in *Wolfsong* (1991) as simultaneously rediscovering home and coming into a sense of counterconsciousness. Here, as in some of Owens’s other fictions, the character must discard Western conceptions of time and space and embrace his trickster spirit in order to radically “reexamine the world” (22). As the character discovers a new way of being in the world, so too does the reader. According to LaLonde, a novel like *Wolfsong* ultimately “destablizes referents and readers in order to compel the latter to see the world anew” (36). LaLonde also reads Owens’s use of metafictional mirrorings in *The Sharpest Sight* (1992) as a self-reflexive concern for how his characters and the reader are reminded not to get stuck in romantic notions of an Indianness frozen in the past, and to realize that Native identity and experience are very much alive in the present.

Krupat and LaLonde certainly provide fresh and nuanced insight into Native American literature. Their readings of the way Native authors sculpt language and reform generic convention (the quest narratives in *Huckleberry Finn* and *Moby-Dick*, for example) vastly expand the contours of Native and American literary and cultural studies. However, it would perhaps be advan-

tageous for Krupat and LaLonde to reconsider the importance of the role that poststructuralism ultimately comes to play in their analyses, for it often occludes and diminishes the power of the fiction they study. LaLonde writes, for example, that “[v]ia trickster, we are in a position to recognize and adjudicate our anxiety within the postmodern world of pragmatics and language games articulated by Lyotard in *Just Gaming*. In the playfully serious world we recognize that we judge based not on matters of truth or ontology but on matters of opinion” (41). In other words, both Krupat and LaLonde make the misstep of confusing the fictions they analyze with the real historical, political, and judicial acts that inform the real world *hors texte*. One could ask, for example, if they really believe that the truths of narrative fiction and myth are equal to the actual bloodshed of millions of Native peoples that inform their history. Of course, narrative fiction and history are discrete entities governed by distinctly different referential relationships to truth. Although one of the leading theorists both authors cite, Hayden White, brilliantly blurs the boundaries between those two entities, he can accomplish this feat only by reducing the complex organization of elements of narrative fiction (mode, tempo, point of view, theme, and characterization) to simple plot. Krupat and LaLonde might do well to explore whether the historical text’s referential organization that provides a one-to-one correspondence between the facts represented and the verifiable reality of the world is the same as in narrative fiction. And LaLonde would do well to ask himself if Owens’s novels are, as he proposes, expressions of a “Trickster activism” that will effect real change in the real world and will actually allow Native peoples “to have a home” (192). Could LaLonde provide one single case, one single occurrence in history, in which narrative fiction has produced his posited in-between “aesthetic activism from which to counter and supplement the violence and violation done to the Native” (18)? Finally, Krupat and LaLonde would do well to ask themselves if it is true that the narrative fictions they analyze have the power to mobilize and organize Native people’s aspirations and struggles in the world and how they can effect such transformation. While this superstitious assumption may be the reigning dogma in many quarters, not everyone has to accept it uncritically. Perhaps, in the last instance, the power of a novel by Sherman Alexie or Louis Owens lies in its ability to open the reader’s eyes to the brutalities of colonialism. Perhaps, too, the power of Native American narratives lies in their creative and rich fictional representations of other ways of experiencing and imagining the world?

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