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*Review of Art as Performance, Story as Criticism:
Reflections on Native Literary Aesthetics* by Craig S.
Womack

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Art as Performance, Story as Criticism: Reflections on Native Literary Aesthetics. By Craig S. Womack. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009. 406 pp. Bibliography, index. \$39.95 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

Art as Performance, Story as Criticism is a grand experiment. In it, Womack plays with the possibilities of critical form as well as analytic content. One of the commonplaces of Native literary studies is that knowledge is made through story, so artistic production should count as a means of studying the world. Following this line of thought, Womack here blends story with more conventional scholarship, creating a multilayered counterpoint that conveys more the sense of an opening to a conversation than the self-enclosure that can emanate from thesis-driven arguments. In this vein, the pieces collected here—ranging from new short stories and a play to extended engagements with still underexamined writers like E. Pauline Johnson, Alexander Posey, Lynn Riggs, Durango Mendoza, and Beth Brant—prove

more evocative than conclusive, raising questions and tracing errancies rather than following a single conceptual throughline. Both the book's greatest strength and its weakness, this organizational strategy presents a series of linked, open-ended challenges to critical conventions in the field, while also potentially leaving the reader feeling a bit disoriented as to where to go from here.

As with his earlier scholarly work, Womack is interested in exploring how Native people and nations survive and change in a complex interaction with the circumstances of contemporary life. In this offering, however, he is less concerned with defending an approach based in the specificity of a particular tribal nation (although he does dwell most on peoples in what was once Indian Territory, now Oklahoma) or with developing a notion of essentialism that would allow for preserving the integrity of Indigeneity as a distinct kind of identity or set of experiences. He presumes Native nationhood as his frame in order to move to what might be thought of as its margins.

While foregrounding the importance of sovereignty, Womack, in the various modes he uses, seeks to render it more capacious. He explores disagreements within nations (such as with respect to the citizenship of the freedmen), the limits of tradition (making room for invention and "deviance"), and the complex negotiations of everyday life (including musings on the biographical details of the writers he addresses). Rejecting the idea that art, or its analysis, should function as a form of ethnography, the book emphasizes the messiness of Native life and literature, especially where it fails to fit ready-made versions of what should count as "tribal." Reciprocally, Womack locates the difficulty of interpretation within peoplehood as part of an ongoing, necessary project of (re)making Native nationhood, instead of invoking a somewhat genericizing hybridity as an explanatory tool.

Overall, Womack seems far less interested in explaining than elaborating—"tell[ing] stories about stories"—in ways that both frustrate a desire for clear statements of theory and

method and promote a greater attention to the potential inherent in storytelling as a method of theorization.

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