
James J. Donahue. *Contemporary Native Fiction: Toward a Narrative Poetics of Survivance*. Routledge, 2019. 186 pp. ISBN: 9780367185954.

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While James Donahue's book contributes a much-needed acknowledgement of Indigenous literatures to the field of narratology, this book will be of less interest to scholars working in the discipline of Native and Indigenous Studies for the simple reason that his is not an Indigenous Studies project, though in this respect my interpretation is diametrically opposed to Donahue's own description of his "attempt [to develop] a Native-based literary theory" (22). It seems to me that his orientation emerges quite clearly and very fundamentally from the scholars whose work do not enter into conversation with his. For instance, to my mind, this recent addition to the Routledge series "Narrative Theory and Culture" can be, and really should be, interestingly compared with Helen May Dennis's narratological study, *Native American Literature: Towards a Spatialized Reading* (2007)—also published by Routledge, though in their "Transnational Perspectives" series. However, Donahue does not cite this significant methodological forerunner. Dennis broke relatively new ground by setting aside the literary nationalist debates that dominated Indigenous studies in the early 2000s in order to privilege the narratological analysis of textual form over political and cultural content, a move perhaps most familiar to readers of *Transmotion* through the call made by David Treuer, in *Native American Fiction: A User's Manual* (2006), to reorient the literary analysis of Indigenous texts away from ethnography and towards a greater emphasis on aesthetics. The network of scholarly texts within which Donahue situates his work is characterized by other odd omissions. What he calls "cultural focalization" and "cosmopolitan ethics," for instance, resonate loudly with James Ruppert's *Mediation in Contemporary Native American Fiction* (1995), which is not cited (though Ruppert's less immediately relevant 2015 essay on James Welch's novel *The Heartsong of Charging Elk* is referenced). And while Donahue's modelling of Indigenous fiction through a non-Indigenous methodology bears some similarity to Catherine Rainwater's semiotic approach in *Dreams of Fiery Stars: The Transformations of Native American Fiction* (1999), he distinguishes his project from hers by (mis)identifying a focus in Rainwater's work on "storytelling as opposed to the narrative form itself" that, he claims, leads into issues of orality rather than written literature (22). Juxtaposed with this (to my ears) dissonant claim is the equally misguided account of Elvira Pulitano's *Toward a Native American Critical Theory* (2003) from which Donahue differentiates his work by describing Pulitano's critical model as one that excludes the work of non-Native critics, concluding from her book that "to ignore advances in critical

theory by western critics would force some critics (myself included) to reinvent the wheel" (22-23). This claim must appear strikingly odd to anyone who is familiar with the attacks on Pulitano's book made by Robert Warrior, Jace Weaver, and Craig Womack in *American Indian Literary Nationalism* (2006). Complementing these interpretations of Rainwater and Pulitano is Donahue's proposed alignment of his non-Indigenous project with that of American Indian literary separatism, exemplified by what Donahue claims is Craig Womack's endorsement of multiple "legitimate approaches to analyzing Native literary production" in *Red on Red* (1999)—a claim that radically minimizes the implications of Womack's sub-title, *Native American Literary Separatism* (Womack qtd. in Donahue, 15).

For readers of *Transmotion*, what will be most surprising and disappointing, given the explicit evocation of Gerald Vizenor's work in the title of this book, is Donahue's selection of the primary texts around which his chapters are organized. There is a complete absence of any extended treatment of Vizenor's narratives. Vizenor's concept of "survivance" features prominently in the formulation of this project and Donahue devotes a significant part of his introduction, "Notes Toward a Narrative Poetics of Survivance," to an explanation of how survivance intersects with his focus on the narratological analysis of narrative perspective, voice, and narrators. If there is *any* contemporary Indigenous author who experiments with perspective, voice, and literary narrators in provocative and truly innovative ways, it is Gerald Vizenor. Instead, Donahue devotes the main text of his book to chapters on each of: James Welch's *Fool's Crow* (1986) in the opening chapter, "Focalizing Survivance, Racializing Narratology" (and Donahue explains that his 2014 essay, published in *JNT: Journal of Narrative Theory*, on which this chapter is based, inspired the book project); Leslie Marmon Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes* (1999) in the second chapter, "Gendered Survivance and Intersectional Narratology"; and Joseph Boyden's *The Orenda* (2013) in the following chapter, "Rhetorical Narrative and Racially Charged Disclosure." The concluding and, to my mind, the most engaging chapter, "Naturalizing Unnatural Native Narrative" surveys the emerging domain of "unnatural" narratological theory and uses Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993) to illustrate his main points of critique concerning the non-Indigenous bias in current narratological deployments of the concept of the "un/natural." All of these novels Donahue terms "paradigmatic," though what paradigm they represent is not entirely clear. Unifying the book is a central concern with the political and aesthetic implications of the act of narrating, linked to what Donahue calls the "narrative transmission of cultural knowledge" (3). But each chapter explores the applicability of a specific branch of contemporary narratology to his chosen text. Here is the strength and equally the weakness of

Donahue's project: despite his stated intention *not* to use literary texts illustratively, that is precisely where his selections lead. Indeed, he has set himself a rather easy challenge by pairing a theoretical narrative approach with a text that exemplifies that theory in rather superficial ways. Consequently, rather than demonstrating analytically how each text works, he describes the way that the texts model in their content particular theoretical features and ideas.

With admirable honesty, the book blurb promises exactly what is delivered:

Each chapter is read through the lens of a narrative theory – structuralist narratology, feminist narratology, rhetorical narratology, and unnatural narratology – in order to demonstrate how the formal structure of these narratives engage the political issues raised in the text. Additionally, each chapter shows how the inclusion of Native American/First Nations-authored narratives productively advance the theoretical work project of those narrative theories.

The ultimate objective is to show that an Indigenous textual corpus has significant benefits for the field of narrative theory. So, as I claimed at the outset, this is not an Indigenous Studies book. The project is definitively located in the field of narrative theory, as Donahue makes clear. For example, the feminist narratology used in connection with Silko follows from Susan Lanser's 1986 essay, "Toward a Feminist Narratology," and not from the insights offered by the vast body of work that constitutes the field of Native feminisms. Donahue opens the book with an invitation to start a conversation about relations between narratology and critical race theory, an invitation that is welcome—though not so much if what this exchange involves is, in fact, a debate over what Indigenous literatures can give to non-Indigenous narrative theory. So, when the book blurb claims that "each chapter shows how the inclusion of Native American/First Nations-authored narratives productively advance the theoretical work project of those narrative theories," a much more productive question for the present reviewer and, I imagine, for those working in the discipline of Indigenous Studies and on the achievements of Vizenor more specifically, is: how can narratology itself be "Indigenized?" Or, in other words, what might an Indigenous narratology look like? Donahue's book could be one place to start formulating an answer to this question.

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