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STORIES THROUGH THEORIES. THEORIES THROUGH STORIES. NORTH AMERICAN INDIAN WRITING, STORYTELLING AND CRITIQUE.

Gordon D. Henry Jr., Nieves Pascual Soler, and Silvia Martínez-Falquina, eds. Michigan: Michigan UP,2009. ISBN: 978-0-87013-841-6.

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The study of Native American oral storytelling has been the subject of multiple researches by both Native and non-Native writers, scholars and literary critics. Understanding the relevance oral stories had in the formation of American culture and recognizing the important role Indigenous people have played have been essential points for contemporary Native American writers, who feel enthusiastic about the recovery of oral traditions and their incorporation in their writings. However, most of these Native writers, scholars and literary critics have been and still are reluctant to refer to Western concepts of theory and discourse, despite the fact these two terms are often referred to in their works. The editors of *Stories Through Theories. Theories through Stories. North American Indian Writing, Storytelling and Critique* compile a series of articles dealing with the relationship between Native American literature and contemporary critical theory. Although this relationship is sometimes controversial and uneasy Gordon D. Henry Jr., Nieves Pascual Soler and Silvia Martinez-Falquina include essays in which the concepts of theory and story are often mentioned in different contexts.

The book is divided into three main sections, “Living to Tell,” “Critical Traces,” and “Good Listeners,” and starts with the introductory chapter by Gordon D. Henry Jr., “Allegories of Engagement: Stories/Theories - A Few Remarks.” This chapter deals with the relationships between theory and American Indian works and Henry refers to authors such as Gerald Vizenor, Karl Kroeber, Vincent B. Leicht, Penelope Myrtle Kelsey, Eric Cheyfitz or James Youngblood Henderson. Henry believes the concept of theory may have different meanings for people and that it can even be a limited or expanded one depending on certain individualism or circumstances. Henry makes use of the allegories of the deconstructive trickster and anti-trickster and tries to demonstrate that white and some native scholars have grounded their criticism on theory that is based on Western philosophy and that has overlooked Native American Literature. In general they have placed too much emphasis on the formal and aesthetic elements of the texts while ignoring the social,

political and historical contexts of Native Americans. Henry refers to this as New Criticism. Resistance comes with the quotation of words by Karl Kroeber or Kelsey.

P. Jane Hafen starts the first part of the book with her article "Living to Tell Stories," in which she states that it is extremely difficult to assert tribally centered literature because most the time, learning institutions require critical discourse to be conducted according to some theories that are thought to be universal, so that students are not actually exposed to certain native critics because they are not believed to be the appropriate ones. For her "such critical approaches constitute literary colonialism" (Henry et al. 2009:28). She refers to Gordon Henry's essay "The First Door: I not as I," in which he has to assert those things he, like a Native American, is not in order to feel free to define what he is. For Hafen, this is what actually happens to all Native American scholars, and although she does not want to be essentialist, it is necessary to understand that the image of Native American people has often been distorted by romantic/ villain portrayals which have to be avoided. She classifies scholars who study American Indian literature in three terms: "dilettantes or tourists," those who "re-colonize" literature through theories that only work in the intellectual context but which have little to do with tribal contexts and those scholars Hafen calls "their allies," being the only one she appreciates. In order to help her students understand what a correct approach to Native American people is she provides the example of a Navajo community and refers to two important Navajo poets, Laura Tohe and Esther Belin. (Henry et al. 2009:32-39). With her poems they will understand the relevance Native American literature has as part of contemporary literature and the position Native literature has within a decolonized context.

The third article, written by Rob Appleford, is entitled "Taking Turns Breaking Me into Pieces: The Reading of Immiscible Others in Ray A. Young Bear's *Black Eagle Child: The Facepaint Narratives,*" centers on the first chapter of the novel "The Supernatural Strobe Light," in which the protagonist, Edgar Bearchild and his wife Selena have a strange encounter with extraterrestrials. Appleford defines Young Bear's texts as "immiscible," that is, resistant to literary tools that are used to make its ambiguity potable for the rest of readers. He provides this chapter as an example of the use of rhetorical devices of humanist poetics typical of autobiographies although the use of these tools reveals different types of relationships. For instance, the relationship between the reader and the narrator is not like the constitution of selves between humanist readers and writers, but a collision of Others. Appleford considers that contemporary writers have to face a series of challenges dealing with the type of self they want to present to readers although for him the self must return as a gift for readers and writers. However, this is not easy as autobiographies also use some devices that come from literary and

social discourses and even less when the autobiographer does not differentiate between reality and fiction as it is in Young Bear's case. Moreover, Appleford states that the audience of a Native American writer who writes an autobiography usually assumes that the subject that is being talked about is framed by the cultural tradition of his or her tribal community. This is not Young Bear's case , as Edgar does not find any support to explain his visions, facing two challenges alone: " a challenge to understanding self—discovery, and a challenge to understanding how readers can or wish to fashion this self-discovery" (Henry et al 2009: 58)

Harry Brown's "Uncomprehended Mysteries. Language and Legend in the Writing of Zitkala-Sa and Mourning Dove" centers on the untranslatability of Native American legends into English. He raises a question that will be the focus of the analyses in the whole article: "How can translation, perhaps our only means of preserving Indian stories, really preserve them when the act of preservation itself changes them?" (Henry et al. 2009:65). According to Brown many contemporary scholars are more and more distant from Native oral tradition because they know that there are continuous and inevitable hermeneutic distortions of ritual stories. Other scholars are more open minded and adopt a different approach to oral tradition, abandoning the insistence on cultural purity and accepting a more fluid adaptable hermeneutic model. They believe that the role of the storyteller is more important than the linguistic context and thus varies stories to fit the audience. Their model is not a distortion of the original but just the adaptation of traditions to new social and historical demands, to which Brown adds "change represents the life, not the death of the tradition, and untranslatability represents not a barrier to understanding but rather the liberation of the storyteller to make new meanings from old stories" (Henry et al. 2000:67). He examines the literary works of Zitkala-Sa and Mourning Dove to understand this problem, as for him, both women attempt to reconcile authenticity with adaptability and interpret traditional stories for those readers who ignore Indian culture while at the same time try to maintain fidelity to the rituals and the linguistic sources of the legends. They overcome the problems that translation brings, evolving a new method which blends autobiography and creative tribal legends. In this vein, they also solve the problems of recreating live performances in a written text by telling the stories that they had heard as children.

Elvira Pulitano bases her article "Chances of Surviviance: Gerald Vinezor's Autocricical Auto/biographies" in Vizenor's *Interior Landscapes (1990)* and the author's position as a creator and as a theorist. Pulitano considers that Vizenor redefines the genre of life writing and challenges previous definitions because he presents stories that he remembers from his childhood while at the same time expresses his own ideas about autobiographical theory. For her "Vizenor's auto/biography becomes a form of auto/criticism, the line between the two discourses constantly blurring in an endless process of transformations and trickster turns" (Henry et al. 2009:83). His mixture of personal pronouns I/Me/He, which he

names "pronounce," helps him show his self, an important element that Vizenor considers essential in an autobiography. He shows a deep concern for language, as he believes that words are able to transform the images of memory, attempts to mediate oral and written discourses or includes autobiographical stories together with conversations with theorists and critical readers or stories that he had heard before. Pulitano considers that "in creating his autobiographical "myths and metaphors," Vizenor *unsettles* the theater of autobiography, apparently playing the role of the faithful reconstructor of salient events of his life but ultimately and inevitably *playing* with the autobiographical act itself" (Henry et al 2009:98). In this vein his work *Interior Landscape* becomes an example of the ambiguity and open nature of autobiographies, something which has been the subject of criticism in the last decades, or even an example of autocritical writing "through which the author continues to wage his cultural word wars on restricted views of mixedblood identity while confirming his dedication to stories and narratives of survivance" (Henry et al 2009:98).

The next article, Molly McGlennen's "Ignatia Broker's Lived Feminism: Toward a Native Women's Theory," examines the role of female storytellers and theorists basing on Ignatia Borker's *Night Flying Woman: An Ojibway Narrative*. McGlennen refers to the history of colonization and the role women played. She mentions colonizers believed they had the right to own the lands they had discovered and mistreat the Indians who already lived there. Besides, women were even more poorly treated and while white European women were subdued but protected by white men, Native women were dehumanized and hipersexualized so as to eradicate the egalitarian Native societies that existed prior to colonizers. Native women were inaccurately portrayed through the lenses of Western patriarchs but have been able to survive and their stories remain despite the years of colonization because their narratives show "that retaining traditional meanings of balance from and toward one's community is a form of combat and resistance to women's oppression and these systems have always been encoded in the stories" (Henry et al 2000:108). The protagonists of *Night Flying Woman*, Oone and Awasasi, are presented as examples of "lived feminisms," and as an illustration of how womanhood was and is understood by Ojibwe communities. For Molly McGlennen Ignatia Broker's main aim is not highlighting the need of women of color to enter into the dominant centers of discourse, but to help us seek out our communal knowledge, to listen.

The second section of the book is opened with Nigonwedom James Sinclair's "A Sovereignty of Transmotion: Imagination and the "Real," Gerald Vizenor and Native Literary Nationalism." Sinclair starts his essay with the old tale "Wenabajo and the Cranberries" and its analysis attending to three main points: its

surface, fundamental and philosophical meanings. This is used as an introduction to the trickster stories and Vizenor's version of this character. For him, trickster stories are about imagination, possibility and transgression but also tied to histories, politics and experiences and considers Vizenor's version of the trickster to prove that. He considers that much has been told about the author in this vein but in his opinion, Vizenor's work has been helpful to redefine, reestablish and reassert the practices and processes necessary for Anishinaabeg "notions of nationhood to be reactualized" (Henry et al 2009:128). Sinclair focuses on the multiple criticisms about Vizenor and states that Vizenor understands the abilities of language to liberate Native American identities. He also believes that Vizenor cannot be criticized for not being politically involved as he has written about Native identity using Anishinaabeg characters, historical events, cultural expressions and traditions, inventing the neologism "transmotion" as "a cultural, political and historial Anishinaabeg method of continuance" (Henry et al 2009:137). Vizenor considers survivance begins with creative and active imagination because this is the main tool that Native people have to sustain themselves and their cultures. He fights against colonialism and with words, as it is necessary to combine thought and language to create the world. According to Sinclair, Anishinaabeg people should take the concept of transmotion to their encounters and "by drawing on collective knowledge embedded in history, language, and land, Anishinaabeg can learn from mistakes, devise notions of nationhood and assert presence" (Henry et al 2009:180).

Susan Berry Brill de Ramirez focuses on Simon Ortiz's poetry in the article "Writing the Intertwined Global Histories of Indigeneity and Diasporization: An Ecocritical Articulation of Place, Relationality, and Storytelling in the Poetry of Simon J. Ortiz." The author considers that although indigeneity is based on geocentric boundaries, there is the possibility of including theories of diaspora in the study of Native American literature, and this will open multiple directions. Ortiz's poetry is taken as an example of these theories as he demonstrates that geographical and language distances are closer when poetry and stories invite the readers and listeners to share history and experience and language is a basic tool for that too. Susan Berry Brill de Ramirez calls this "subversive language" and thinks that Ortiz is a clear example of how a poet belonging to the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century can provide the "means for intercultural communication that can transcend both personal affiliations (tribally Indigenous or diversely diasporized) and the broader public geopolitics of place and nationhood without the erasure of either" (Henry et al 2009:167) with the only help of his poems and words. Language is also an important issue within the topic of alienation, and Ortiz felt it on his own. He knows well the personal alienation and dislocation that lies "in the world's intestinal nowheres" (Henry et al 2009:175) and thanks to a poetic journal he could overcome the solitude. As De Ramirez concludes "perhaps the most powerfully integrative means available to assist persons anywhere on the globe is

centering themselves within their respective geographies has been and continues to be a relationally based, conversive storytelling" (Henry et al 2009:186).

Silvia Martinez-Falquina starts her essay "The Stories of Ceremonial Relation: Native Narratives and the Ethnics of Reading" with the assumption that there is a creative dialogue between storytelling and criticism and that stories imply theories. For her, stories and theories are intrinsically connected and stories can be read from different perspectives. Her main objective is studying Gordon Henry's autobiographical narratives to understand how complex the issue of Native identity can be and how theory and story are not exclusive but both illuminate each other. She refers to *The Light People* as an example of the appropriation, objectification and questionability of Western ways of knowledge when addressing Native American topics, and to "Entries into the Autobiographical I" as a text structured as a ceremony which breaks with traditional considerations of Native American literature as static. For Falquina many Native American writers feel unable to give voice to all Native American people and when the Western readers know about the ethnicity of a writer, they assume a series of expectations and stereotypes which may be destructive. Besides, many critics read Native American texts looking for some examples that fulfill their expectations or theories. However, she considers that "we must be ready to listen to the story in the text, for it may speak differently than we expected" (Henry et al 2009:202), as Henry's work shows.

Michael Wilson centers his essay in Vizenor's *Bearheart. The Heirship Chronicles (*1990), and in the figure of the trickster, who appears as a necessary tool for the teaching of contemporary Native American philosophies and for the current theories of language and literature (Henry et al 2009 212). Vizenor defines the trickster as actually able to help human beings physical and psychologically, healing and saving people, but also as vengeful, cruel and capable of violence. He is a mediator between the two alternatives and that he calls "the compassionate trickster" (Henry et al 2009:210), resisting theories that create hierarchies between "the conscious and the unconscious, encouraging positive manifestations of the unconscious in creativity, play, and self criticism" (Henry et al 2009:213). Wilson also analyses the novel itself, its narrative style as a combination of an episodic travel narrative and a generic version of the prophecy of four worlds that some Southwest tribes have, and the writing as a moral novelvwith a deep description of most characters.

The last essay in this section is "Story, Braid, Basket: The Woven Aesthetics of Jeannette Armstrong's *Whispering in Shadows*" by Jane Haladay. She establishes a theory of storytelling in which she compares the process of basket weaving to that of creating a story, because both weavers and storytellers demonstrate a similar attitude to the creation process and because they are the oldest

forms of manufacture and verbal world making forces. Native people select and prepare the materials to make a basket as they prepare the words to create a story and they consider both as living elements that must be nourished and well cared, as the most valuable objects are those which are always in use. The stories that Armstrong creates in *The Whispering Shadows* also require the readers "to weave together the lives, stories, settings and themes involving protagonist Penny Jackson's human, plant and animal relatives across time and throughout the Americas" (Henry et al 2009:240). When Native American women construct a theory of woven motion in their writings, they are also weaving pieces of history, humor, original creations or sacred worldviews. As Haladay concludes in general, Armstrong's work is similar to an emerging basket because it does not remain flat on the page but on the contrary "takes shapes from the first strand and arises from the page to weave its meaning within the heart of and consciousness of each reader" (Henry et al 2009:254).

The following section is inaugurated with Teresa Gibert's "Stories Are All We Are: Thomas King's Theory and Practice of Storytelling." She centers the article in the study of "A Short History of Indians in Canada," a story that would also become the title of his latest collection, and in the analyses of King's Massey Lectures, collected in the book *The Truth About Stories. A Native Narrative*. With them, she refers to the concepts of hybridity and the rejection of Native communities as being vanished. She starts the essay with a series of opposite concepts that characterize King's works but that he is able to blur, such as history versus myth or private versus public, among others. According to Gibert, King populates his work with Blackfoot characters and with a mixture of magic realism and typical Native American figures extracted from oral storytelling, surrealism, everyday events and supernatural or fantastic ones. She notices King also sets his stories in contemporary or future settings but mixes present and past events, making use of anachronisms or retelling traditional stories including new or unexpected events. In his Massey Lectures he quotes the words of referential Native American writers such as Gerald Vizenor, Leslie Marmon Silko or Jeannette Armstrong, as a starting point for his theories, but he mixes them with stories that he recollects from his childhood and which are part of communal life writing because he believes in the transformative power of stories. In general, King's is closely related to the Native American oral literature and he often relates oral stories to public ones and written stories to private ones, because he considers that reading is an individual and private experience whereas oral storytelling is a group dynamic. So there are stories that can be told aloud and others that would never be. All the stories in *The Truth About Stories* are free except one, but he always ends his lectures with an important sentence he wants all readers to bear in mind: "But don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You've heard it now" (Henry et al 2009:271).

The next essay, "Indians in Sunday Clothes: the Imposturing Strategies of Grey Owl," Nieves Pascual Soler debates the concepts of authenticity and inauthenticity through Archibald Stansfeld Belaney, who adopted the name Grey Owl and pretended to be Native American a great part of his life. The author goes through the concepts of imposture and theory at the beginning of the essay. She considers that the narrative of colonization has been a narrative of imposture because it is built on concepts that are imposed on the others "a look existing in his mind and made the referent vanish into the concept" (Henry et al 2009:277). However, imposture demands exposure, "because if the spectator is deceived imposture ceases to exist as a promise of truth" (Henry et al 2009:277). Theory is compared to perception and perception is a photographic view of the things. Grey Owl's photography is too Indian- like and tries to compensate some kind of lack, according to Pascual. The same happens with his books, as he wanted to express too much Indianness in his works so that readers did not feel he was inauthentic. Indeed, he actually believed in his own fabrication, *storia* that is defined as "narrative of fictitious events meant to entertain" (Henry et al 2009:288). So his imposture was "not the imposture of passing off as Indian but the imposture of not having dispossessed himself of the truth-content of himself" (Henry et al 2009:289).

Gordon D. Henry Jr. contributes again to the book with the article "The Eagleheart Narratives: contexts, Process, Representation, and Ceremony in Making Texts," in which he revises the life and work of Francis Cree, also known as Eagleheart. Henry describes him as a ceremony man whose life may give readers insights of the history, the lives, the traditions or customs of Anishinaabeg people and tribe and whose narratives "will serve as a cultural resource, preserving information about cultural and spiritual perspectives that might otherwise be forgotten, fragmented, or subsumed to insignificance in smaller concerns of assimilative cultural considerations" (Henry et al 2009:296).

In the last essay "Origin-of Poem Story: Origin and Ownership of an Indian Poem, "Earth Death," Patrick R. Lebau explains the origin of his own poem "Earth Death," after being asked by Susana Onega about it. He tells the story that served as an inspiration for him, that of two old men, his grandfather and his best friend, discussing about the origin of a human skeleton found near the shore of Missouri River. As Lebau himself explains, it is not simply a poem, but also a political claim about the issue of repatriation of Native bodies. The author also considers the poem is a way of blending Native oral traditions with Western forms which helps non-Native readers understand it too.

After reading *Stories Through Theories. Theories Through Stories. North American Indian writing, Storytelling and Critique* one gets a clearer idea of the concepts of story and theory in the wide range of contexts in which they may appear.

The book covers a great variety of perspectives and contrasting representations, well documented and extensively argued from authors who show a great mastery of the topics they focus on, and who do not only show us the native point of view, as they are also non-native Americans. This enriches the comprehension of the reader in topics such as storytelling or Indian voices linked to different disciplines. The high number of bibliographical references and the pieces of scholarship the book contains turn it into an interesting work for students of Native American literature.