

Achieving “Presence Within Absence” in Western Narrative Theory

Hend Ayari

Donahue, James J. *Contemporary Native Fiction: Toward a Narrative Poetics of Survivance*. New York and London: Routledge, 2019. 186 pages. ISBN 9780367185954. \$48.95

N. Scott Momaday's winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1969 for *House Made of Dawn* (1968) was climacteric for Native American literature. Regardless of the fact that storytelling has always been embedded in Native American/First Nations worldviews, this date helped Native-authored fiction to be brought to the fore as well as to inspire scholarly interest in the field. Despite acknowledging Indigenous literature, Momaday's novel was undoubtedly steeped in the “Western (European-American) standard that consciously excludes Native epistemologies” (121) for the sake of earning academic hospitality.

James J. Donahue's ambitious project is to “develop a Native-based literary theory” (22) to atone for the absence of Native American authors in the American literary canon. The latest volume in the Routledge Narrative Theory and Culture series seems ideally suited to achieve the goal of “bring[ing] together the fields of narrative theory and Native studies, as there is much to learn from the combination” (i). His insightful analysis of how “four paradigmatic Native American/First Nations novels” (1) engage with Native survivance when read through the lens of a specific narrative theory is carried out to this end.

According to Gerald Vizenor, the originator of the term that animates the central argument of this book, Native survivance is “an active sense of presence, the continuance of Native stories” (qtd. in Donahue 6). The term relocates Native Americans from the past where they were relegated and places them in contemporary times. Donahue dedicates the introductory chapter of his book to the elucidation of this notion by repeatedly citing Vizenor's collection of essays *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* published in 1999. Donahue maintains that the choice of a specific narratological device is inscribed in the act of survivance, as the authors of the four novels “are centrally concerned with who gets to tell these stories, and how the telling of these stories reflects one important aspect of Native survivance” (3). This is where Donahue's contribution to narrative theory makes its mark: reconciling two areas of study—narrative theory and Indigenous literature—that have hitherto been kept apart by the procrustean bed of Western literary scholarship.

Fools Crow (1986) by James Welch, *Gardens in the Dunes* (1999) by Leslie Marmon Silko, *The Orenda* (2013) by Joseph Boyden, and *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993) by Thomas King are read by Donahue adopting a structuralist,

feminist, rhetorical, and “unnatural” narratology, respectively, to highlight how these novels embody the act of survival. In this respect, each chapter functions as a case study, offering a solid ground for diagnosing the author’s work just outlined. Each chapter is constructed on the lacunae and oversights of narrative theories to support the claim that the advancement of narrative theory is precluded by the omission of Native narratives as subjects of study. Following an extensively theoretical pursuit to contextualize his claims, Donahue provides practical examples of his approach as he analyzes the narratives.

“Focalizing Survivance; Racializing Narratology” is an extension of the author’s earlier attempt at reading *Fools Crow* in accordance with structuralist narratology. Donahue lauds Welch’s artistry in documenting culturally competing worldviews, those of the Americans and the Pikunis, by insisting on writing as an “insider” through the “construction of a culturally focalized narrator” (39). Donahue draws on Mieke Bal’s claim that the choice of perspective is ineluctably political (43); hence, his emphasis on cultural focalization which conveys “an active sense of presence” (7). In this sense, by constructing a narrative around Blackfeet mythology and narration, *Fools Crow* becomes a paradigmatic survivance narrative.

The feminist perspective in the second chapter took its final shape after the author’s participation in the 2017 Narrative Conference in Lexington, Kentucky. Donahue contends that his placement of this chapter in the second position signals a “paradigm shift” that ensued from the publication of Susan Lanser’s seminal essay in 1986, “Toward a Feminist Narratology,” in which “polyphony” is defined as peculiar to “women’s narratives and in the narratives of other dominated peoples” (qtd. in Donahue 74). Through a thorough analysis of Silko’s well-wrought “narrative voice” (61), Donahue unveils the adumbrative nature of a purely feminist reading of this novel. His assumption is that Free Indirect Discourse—by virtue of its unraveling the narrators’ biases—calls for an intersectional reading as it “highlights the power disparities along the lines of sex and race” (61). Donahue infers that *Gardens in the Dunes* adheres to what Deborah A. Miranda considers “Indigenous feminism” because it challenges fiction of authority through innovative formal poetics.

“Rhetorical Narrative and Racially Charged Disclosure” discusses Boyden’s *The Orenda* by building upon the foundational principles of rhetorical narratology—originally laid out in Wayne C. Booth’s *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961)—and his disciple’s, James Phelan’s *Living to Tell about It* (2005). The emphasis on the platitudinous “the more voices we have, the more truth will finally emerge” (95) justifies Boyden’s use of multiple voices to revisit the history of the first contact between European settlers and the Haudenosaunee people,

which the novelist achieves through a “multiple character narrator” and “redundant telling” (91) as these strategies fittingly engage with the act of survivance through “the continuance of stories” (98). Whereas these rhetorical devices are artfully registered in *The Orenda*, they are “largely drawn from the Anglo-American literary tradition” (94). On this account, Donahue discusses Boyden’s choice of giving voice to a European character, Christophe—a choice that earned the novelist displeasure from First Nation scholars. By presenting him as an unreliable narrator, though, Boyden accentuates the subversion of “manifest manners,” (9) along with the Anglo-American literary tradition that supports this choice. Yet, it is unfortunate that Donahue does not elaborate on what makes *The Orenda* a paradigmatic novel, albeit identified by him as such.

Along with its catchy alliterative title, the chapter “Naturalizing Unnatural Native Narrative” constitutes the book’s most fascinating contribution to the imbrications of narrative theory and Native-authored narratives. Not only does this chapter introduce its readers to a “recent” and “most exciting” perspective on narrative theory (121), but it also opens new academic avenues since the “scope and parameters” of unnatural narratology are still unidentified (121). As Donahue puts it, “unnatural narratology is not named for a larger critical practice whose principles are then applied to the study of narrative” (122). Instead, it is a reaction to Monika Fludernik’s definition of “natural narrative” as “mainly spontaneous, conversational storytelling” (qtd. in Donahue 122) in *Towards a “Natural” Narratology*, published in 1996. The theories and methodologies used for categorizing unnatural narratology as anti-mimetic events engender the identification of Native-authored narratives as “unnatural.” This pretense of universality by theorists of “unnatural narratology” is of Western origin and, therefore, inseparable from the denigrating framework of Western narratology. Donahue examines unnatural narratology through King’s *Green Grass, Running Water*. By listing various instances of King’s formal poetics, he posits that the “unnatural” can be naturalized as a narration rooted in Native epistemology. To this end, he delineates “unnatural” examples in King’s novel and points out how they are manipulated by the novelist to present them as natural (138).

Here, a note on Donahue’s selection of novels is in order. Inasmuch as the corpus is relatively considerate of tribal and gender affiliations, as well as the author’s desire to feature survivance narratives, a few questions remain unanswered with respect to his choices. For example, *Green Grass, Running Water* is discordant with the other novels not so much because of its theme but because, unlike other works discussed, it is not a historical novel.

In the same vein, the absence of a solid ground for his selection is jarring. This assessment is echoed by Deborah Madsen from the University of Geneva in her review of *Contemporary Native Fiction*. She lambasted Donahue's choice of corpus, primarily, for leaving out any of Vizenor's novels, which, according to her, would have aligned perfectly with the treatment of the notion of survivance (183). Similarly, Madsen commented on what makes the narratives "paradigmatic" novels. I concur with her on this particular point, for the repetitious use of the term "paradigmatic" is perplexing. Donahue's claim that "Native-authored narratives are not survivance narratives just by virtue of the tribal affiliation of the author, the use of Native characters, or the presentation of Native peoples" (162) dispels all doubt as to whether the descriptor "paradigmatic" refers to the novels' enactment of survivance. As it has been suggested by Donahue, each novel is considered paradigmatic in its own way. Nevertheless, it is regrettable that the four novels do not partake of the same paradigm. The fact that they were crafted as paragons of Native survivance could have been a more tenable premise.

Contemporary Native Fiction is commendable for magnifying Native American literature rendered invisible by traditional Western narrative theory. Additionally, the book ends on a promissory note as Donahue warns in Coda: "[t]his book is at best a beginning to a conversation, not a final pronouncement" (3). As suggested in the addendum, Donahue acknowledges the efforts by scholars with a minority background for their attempt at including minority-authored narratives in narrative theory. This book's features make it a compelling read for a narrative theory enthusiast as it opens the horizons of this field long-dominated by the Euro-American canon. Seeing its germinal premise, Donahue's work is highly recommended to early-stage researchers in Indigenous Studies.

Hend Ayari, Ph.D. student, North American Department, University of Debrecen received a Fulbright Teaching Excellence Achievement Award (2020 University of Arkansas).

Works Cited

Madsen, Deborah L. Rev. of *Contemporary Native Fiction: Toward a Narrative Poetics of Survivance*, by James J. Donahue. *Transmotion* 6.2 (2020): 182–84. Print.