

**Henry, Gordon D. Jr. *Stories Through Theories. Theories Through Stories. North American Indian Writing, Storytelling, and Critique.* East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2009. 327 pp.**

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Contemporary American Indian writers, literary critics, and scholars have expressed various degrees of “resistance” to Western discourse and theory. However, in different strains of discourse and narrative, American Indian scholars, critics, and writers have embraced, acknowledged, or tended to methodologies and terminology of theory to advance certain intellectual interests and cultural perspectives in their writing. Gordon D. Henry Jr., Nieves Pascual Soler and Silvia Martínez-Falquina began this collection of articles out of a sense that American Indian Literature and the study of such often stands in a contentious yet complicit relationship with Western Eurocentric literary theory. Stories of theories, theories of stories, stories as theories, and theories as stories are presented from a variety of perspectives through many different strategies of discourse by a group of Native and non-Native storytellers and scholars from the U.S., Canada and Spain who explore the ways in which American Indian literature treats theory in the imaginary spaces of fiction, poetry, and drama.

The book, divided into three parts – “Living to Tell,” “Critical Traces,” “Of Good Listeners–” starts with Gordon Henry’s “Allegories of Engagement: Stories / Theories—A Few Remarks.” This introduction deals with the relationships between theory and American Indian works by Gerald Vizenor and other scholars such as Penelope Myrtle Kelsey and Youngblood Henderson. Henry explores the allegories of the deconstructive trickster and the anti-trickster and claims how white colonial scholars have silenced Native voices in the process of interpreting methodological frameworks around Native texts. Above all, he emphasizes the idea that theory, like story, may bring us closer to the impossibilities of reconciling our needs and desires to legitimize our theories through experiences and vice versa.

P. Jane Hafen begins the first part of this volume with “Living To Tell Stories,” an essay in which she demonstrates some of the complexities of centering critical approaches within tribal apparatus using several concrete examples. Hafen highlights Gordon Henry’s definition of oppression and colonization as the hallmark of Native American resistance literature, as well as remarks on Choctaw Devon Mihesuah’s observation of responsibility to the community as the most serious problem in Native studies today. She criticizes those scholars who spend their whole careers studying Indian and Indian literatures without ever meeting an American Indian, and praises what she defines as “our allies” (Henry et al 2009: 30)—those who carefully lay foundations of understanding through deliberate scholarship and through awareness of the political implications of their work. Through Laura Tohe’s and Esther Belin’s poems, Hafen’s students see the holistic intricacies and diversity of tribal cultures, and are finally able to recognize the importance of American Indians as part of

contemporary living cultures as well as the place of American Indian literature in a decolonized context.

In the next essay, Bob Appleford examines the chapter entitled “The Supernatural Stobe Light” in Ray A. Young Bear’s experimental autobiography *Black Eagle Child: The Facepaint Narratives*, arguing that his story attempts to build a notion of the self around what is a series of unexpected and revelatory “centres,” including an uncanny encounter with extraterrestrial visitors. This “humanist model of autobiography” (Henry et al 2009: 47) invites the reader to transform the autobiographer’s Other into a self, deriving pleasure from the process of reading and making another’s life. Edgar Bearchild –the protagonist– has not confessed his sense of failure openly to anyone but the readers, “allowing them to dismiss the reality of the fantastic events Young Bear bears witness” (Henry et al 2009: 53). For Appleford, Bearchild’s experiences present a twofold challenge that involves readers and the protagonist: a challenge to understanding self-discovery, and a challenge to understanding how readers can or wish to undertake this self-discovery.

The modern theoretical problem of the untranslatability of Indian legends is the central topic of Harry Brown’s article. Conscious of the inevitable hermeneutic distortions of ritual stories when translated, Brown argues that “untranslatability represents not a barrier to understanding but rather the liberation of the storyteller to make new meanings from old stories” (Henry et al 2009: 67). Through analyzing the techniques of Zitkala-Sa and Mourning Dove, he demonstrates that translation represents a means of overcoming cultural understanding and racial difference. For Morning Dove, legend is indivisible from language. Zitkala-Sa, on the other hand, separates legend from the Sioux language. For both of them, “the fundamental dilemma was that preserving Native lore required its translation, but in this act of translation, the lore was ultimately lost” (Henry et al 2009: 78-79). However, Brown concludes their hybrid legends are the best solution for intercultural connection and the preservation of an oral culture altered by the white man.

Elvira Pulitano bases her discussion on Gerald Vizenor’s *Interior Landscapes* (1990), a blending of autocritiques of everyday writing. She discusses how Vizenor becomes at once both a creator and theorist of the genre of autobiography and explores the ways in which such a text as *Interior Landscapes* adds to the current discourse of life writing, while interrogating Vizenor’s intriguing ideas on the self in light of his return to the autobiographical motif in his recent poetry. Pulitano defines his work as an example of autocritical writing through which the author continues to wage his cultural word wars on restricted views of mixed blood identity while confirming his dedication to stories and narratives of survival.

Utilizing Ignatia Broker’s *Night Flying Woman: An Ojibway Narrative* and its characters Oona and Awasasi as models of “lived feminisms,” Molly McGlennen examines the shortcomings of Western feminisms’ applications to Native American women’s texts by addressing the complexities of what she terms a Native women’s theory. Through Broker’s and other Native women’s words, McGlennen points out, “we learn that creative expression creates the critical models, models that teach women

how to heal, how to live in the right way, how to keep in balance” (Henry et al 2009: 117).

The second section opens with Nigonwedom James Sinclair on the important critical and creative contributions of Gerald Vizenor, whose imaginative ideas can be applied to current material struggles of Indigenous (and specifically Anishinaabeg) sovereignty and self-determination. Sinclair argues that Vizenor’s writing is deeply applicable to one of the most important processes happening in Anishinaabeg communities: “the redefining, reestablishment, and reassertion of practices and processes necessary for [their] notions of nationhood to be reactualized” (Henry et al 2009: 128).

While affirming the geocentric boundaries of indigeneity, Susan Berry Brill de Ramírez’s essay suggests ways by which Native American literatures shed light on contemporary theories of diaspora, which, in turn, can open up new directions for critical interpretations and understandings of indigenous literary works. To this aim she uses the poems of Acoma Pueblo poet, scholar and storyteller Simon J. Ortiz, who demonstrates how a late twentieth and early twenty-first century indigenous poetry can provide the means for intercultural communications that can transcend both personal affiliations and the broader public geopolitics of place and nationhood without the erasure of either. A “conversive storytelling,” she elucidates, “[is] perhaps the most powerfully integrative means available to assist persons anywhere in the globe in centering themselves within their respective geographies” (Henry et al 2009: 186).

Silvia Martínez-Falquina starts her essay from the premises that we can and should establish creative dialogues between storytelling and criticism, assuming that theories incorporate narrative patterns and show theories of races in their articulation, and that stories imply and show a familiarity with theory. From these assumptions, Martínez-Falquina attempts to engage in a creative dialogue with Gordon Henry’s short story web *The Light People* (1994) and his autobiographical piece “Entries into the Autobiographical I” (2000) in order to show that the theory of reading offered in them may lead us to transformation and to prove how one author presents Native identities in a way complex enough to unsettle simple positionings we may be tempted to embrace when meeting with the text. Henry’s narratives of the Native body and self let us reconsider the worries of Native history and autobiography in such a way that both story and theory illuminate one another. His texts, she explains, “leave[s] us no alternatives except to become active participants in this reading ceremony” (Henry et al 2009: 206).

Following the theme of the trickster, Michael Wilson analyses this character in Gerald Vizenor’s *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles* (1990). Vizenor asserts the continuing value and even necessity of trickster traditions for their teaching not only about indigenous philosophies but also about current theoretical discussions of language and literature. Wilson remarks on the concept of Vizenor’s compassionate trickster who resists theories that create hierarchies between the conscious and the unconscious, encouraging positive manifestations of the unconscious in creativity, play and self-criticism. With *Bearheart*, Vizenor creates worlds where theoretical and practical considerations merge into compassionate narratives of caution and possibility.

Jane P. Haladay's essay articulates a theory of storytelling that arises in both the structure and content of Jeannette Armstrong's *Whispering in Shadows* through the metaphor of indigenous weaving as a cultural practice and creative process. What is significant is the concept of American Indian women writers' consistent utilization of active, culturally specific processes, which often result in a tangible and valued cultural item (weaving a basket, beading regalia, making a quilt) as a way of theorizing both contemporary writing and the continuation of original Native oral traditions. When understood from this perspective, the ways in which these Native women construct their texts demonstrate the visual and/or literary enactments of these weaving, beading, and/or quilting processes. For Haladay, "Amstrong's story does not remain confined to the flatness of the printed page but, like an emerging basket, takes shapes from the first strand and arises from the page to weave its meaning within the heart and consciousness of every reader" (Henry et al 2009: 254).

The paradoxes of hybridity and the rejection of the notion that Natives are "vanishing communities" are the central topics of the essay which opens the third section. Teresa Gibert examines how Thomas King grounds his stories in personal recollections and contemporary popular culture to later focus on the social realities of today's Canadian urban centres and reserves. Throughout interviews with the author and the Massey lectures he delivered in 2003—later published as a book under the title of *The Truth about Stories: A Native Narrative*—she emphasizes how King "blends theory and practice both by speculating on the enormous potential of storytelling and by narrating a considerable number of [woven] stories" (Henry et al 2009: 266). The combination of elements derived from actual existence and history or those from the world of fantasy mixed with magic realism and surrealism, as well as King's serious concerns within a comic framework, correct widespread misconceptions about Native peoples and their cultures. King believes in the transformative power of his writings, inviting us to do whatever we wish with them. As Gibert remarks, King's are "public stories for everyone to use freely, albeit always honestly, for listeners and readers are encouraged to share the moral responsibility of storytelling" (Henry et al 2009: 271).

In an essay with wide-ranging examples, Nieves Pascual Soler examines the limits between authenticity and inauthenticity through the imposturing strategies of Stansfield Belaney—an English naturalist who adopted an Indian identity under the name of Grey Old until he was discovered. Pascual Soler asserts that "the narrative of colonization has been a narrative of imposture, built on concepts that repressed all qualitative referents," but imposture demands exposure to exist as a promise of truth (Henry et al 2009: 277). Thanks to his books and photographs, Belaney/Grey Old served the purpose of ethnic reconstruction and reinforced the essentialist categories of oppression. His imposturing does not supplant the self because there is nothing so perfectly hidden that is never undetected. In *Pilgrims of the Wild* (1935) and *Tales of an Empty Cabin: Stories of the Early Days in Canada's North* (1936) Belaney believed his own fabrication. Perhaps his failure was his "excess of indigeneity" (279) to show the essence of pure Nateness through his images. As Pascual Soler concludes, his imposture is that "of not having dispossessed himself of the truth content of himself" (Henry et al 2009: 289).

The *Eagleheart Narratives* are scrutinized by Gordon Henry. The book represents Turtle Mountain elder Francis Cree's (also known as Eagleheart) words, the ceremonies he discusses and the communities and people he speaks of and through. This ethno/bio/cultural/Indian story will serve as a cultural resource, preserving information about cultural and spiritual perspectives that might otherwise be forgotten and, in Henry's word, as a way "to energize and empower people, in an on-going development of faculties, for understanding themselves, ourselves and others" (Henry et al 2009: 305).

In the last essay of this collection, Patrick R. Lebeau shows how memories and experience can serve as a way of interpreting his own poem story "Earth Death." This story, which "became a method to explore [Lebeau's] own personal history" (Henry et al 2009: 317), offers not only a contextual world of meaning but also a connection to place and politics, which puts into question the concept of intellectual property and creative ownership. Lebeau reckons that the idea of the poem story bridges the oral tradition with the written word, thus manipulating the language and literary forms of the colonizer to tell a Native American story from a Native American perspective to listeners and readers well beyond the Native American community itself.

*Stories Through Theories. Theories Through Stories. North American Indian Writing, Storytelling, and Critique* is an innovative work which provides evidence for looking at primary Native cultures, authors, and histories as enrichment of Native literature. The editors' objective has clearly been to provide the reader with a collective and miscellaneous review on storytelling and Indian voice, which they have indeed fulfilled, staying true to their commitment to link several disciplines. Thanks to the documentary efforts of the contributors to this appealing collection of essays, it is possible to understand the particulars of searching and understanding cultural encounters as part of "Indian America." All the sections present enlightening and valuable pieces of scholarship that include a high number of bibliographical references. It is doubtlessly an example of well-written academic work that will be a standard for years to come. One does not lack for reasons to celebrate the arrival of this new volume that challenges out roles as intellectual guides until we enter the uncertain territories where writer, listener, reader, and critic interconnect.