Beasts of burden: How literary animals remap the aesthetics of removal

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores three genres of Native storytelling and their echoes in contemporary literatures of removal. The Five “Civilized” Tribes—the Choctaw, Seminole, Creek (Muscogee), Chickasaw, and Cherokee Nations—have not only been shaped by the memory of removal but also by the process of telling it as history, of feeding an American appetite for tragedy, which maps their displacement on its material, cultural, and political axes. In the U.S. historical imagination, removal thus exceeds the bounds of event and condition to form an aesthetic within the larger arena of trauma discourse. By invoking each genre and its alter-species figures, Five Tribes authors enact a decolonization strategy that takes aim at this removal aesthetic as well as the colonial Eurowestern cartographic consciousness that undergirds it, which construes Indigenous people and non-human animals as lacking any sovereignty in a U.S. landscape. By articulating Native ecologies and place-making practices, authors unravel Eurowestern models and attend to what Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) calls “a long-term process involving the bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic and psychological divesting of colonial power” (p. 98) as reflected in popular representations of removal, specifically the Trail of Tears. At stake in contemporary stories for Five Tribes communities is a process of remapping home spaces under the historical and present condition of removal, a cartographic act that expresses Indigenous knowledge, thereby countering aesthetics of removal.

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Joshua D. Miner earned an MA in linguistics at the University of North Texas and is currently completing his doctoral dissertation in English and Native American Studies at the University of Iowa (2015). He teaches courses in contemporary Native American literatures, cultures, and social movements, and his research interests include Indigenous languages and arts, critical health geography and border studies, postcolonial studies, and trauma and violence in literature. His most recent critical publication, “Navigating the ‘Erotic Conversion’: Transgression and Sovereignty in Native Literatures of the Northern Plains,” appeared in Beyond the Border: Tensions across the Forty-Ninth Parallel in the Great Plains and Prairies (McGill-Queens, 2013).
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Beasts of Burden: The Presence of Others #1 Writer: Evan Dorkin Artist: Jill Thompson Publisher: Dark Horse Comics Release Date: May 1, 2019

A team of paranormal investigators poking around Burden Hill disturb the graveyard where the “Master” lies, setting off a chain of events that will have serious consequences for the animal defenders of the haunted town.

For literary animal studies are framed by a paradox: animals abound in literature across all ages and cultures, but rarely have been the focal point of systematic literary study. When attended to at all, representations of animals have been seen first and foremost as dissembling humans, as at best metaphorically speaking. These studies demonstrate how the influence of literary animals on other forms of thought and expression merits the reevaluation, even reformation of the literary canon. But the problems of metaphor especially point to the...
danger of arriving at the same old conclusions, namely that animals are only literary as human subjects. Margot Norris's groundbreaking Beasts of the Modern Imagination: Darwin, Kafka