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On Indigenous Literatures.

**Review on *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* by Daniel Heath Justice.
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Why Indigenous Literatures Matter refutes the idea of “Indigenous deficiency” which is identified as the Indigenous “state of constant lack in morals, laws, culture, restraint, language, ambition, hygiene, desire, love” (2). It is the second major book by the author after *Our Fire Survives the Storm: A Cherokee Literary History* (2007). The plural word “literatures” used in the title indicates the great diversity of what Indigenous people produce as an art of narration. It is not irony but a common belief, which the book is a polemic against, “that aboriginal people ... would never have a *real* literature until there was an aboriginal Shakespeare” (19). Justice points out aspects of strength and diversity in selected literary works through the analysis of some prevailing ideas of Indigenous writers. His references to the previous idea of Aboriginals’ inhumanity shows a massive intellectual void in Indigenous studies and the need for more investigation and discussion; otherwise, the mainstream of scholars, as well as decision-makers will remain submissive to accept the other’s idea and believe in considering the untruthful stereotypes in the management of aboriginal society’s affairs.

Justice succeeds in relating the literary works under examination to the actual world; he never feels reluctant to signify what may be challenging or how the stories are “expressed or repressed, shared or isolated, recognized or dismissed” (xvii). He paraphrases his title as “A Few Reasons Why I Believe Indigenous Literatures Matter Based on My Own Subject Position and Idiosyncratic History and Relationships” (xx). His arguments are logically based on two facts: his ancestors practiced the principle of transferring civilization through orally narrated stories, and his job as a faculty member and the Chair in Indigenous Literature and Expressive Culture at UBC who admits that “[indigenous] literatures are the storied archives” (186). Nevertheless, as he clarifies in his concluding chapter, “Keeping the Fire,” the experience with deceptively Indigenous claiming narrations like Karl May’s or Disney’s enforces his desire to discuss some real ethnographic works.

In his first chapter, “How Do We Learn to Be Human?”, the author defends his idea about the vital role of stories, although I will call them *narrations* since the author uses different literary genres in constructing Indigenous existential humanity. Justice argues with some exaggeration that “only through stories” (34) can aboriginal people know themselves. He is sure that “the unstoried life is a terrible thing to comprehend, a soul-deep desolation” (34). *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country* is examined as a source of inspiration for all Indigenous people to look for the reason behind their existence as humans. Louise Erdrich, the author of that book, narrates her journey to explore the history of writing in the Ojibwe land. Justice sees Erdrich’s discovery of books and inscriptions as “a remarkable alchemy, this storied transformation of self to other, and back again” (36). Throughout these findings, the ideology of “singular stories about all kinds of peoples” (37) will be shattered and scholars, like Justice, will make reference to the story of colonization as

a special case for each Indigenous tribe. Diversity and multiplicity of human experiences must be acknowledged.

After clarifying the idea of humanity as a training process developing from the depth of civilization, the chapter turns to explain the importance of maintaining the permanence of the link between people and the tribe. This link indicates supremacy provided by the tribe and its reflection on human education. Therefore, the question—"who are your relatives?"—is of great importance to Indigenous people. "To be human is to practice humanness," (42) while proximity to relatives is one form of these practices. To demonstrate his statement, Justice analyzes *Waterlily* by Ella Cara Deloria. The story of this novel has a complex plot of family obligations, social accountability, hospitality, and discipline in contrast with mobility, familial fragmentation, and lack of discipline. Justice suggests that "for readers steeped in the individualist ethos of contemporary capitalist consumer culture, *Waterlily's* world is a bewildering place" (44).

To sum up the idea of this chapter, perhaps all chapters, Indigenous identity becomes inextricably entangled with dominant presumptions about what makes us human. Many Indigenous people nowadays live in urban areas far from their homelands as a result of economic displacement, as well as legalized dispossession, such as the Termination and Relocation policies of the post-WWII era. For this, the persistent conviction that blood is what makes the individual becomes an irrational explanation as presented by the author: "We learn to be human from everything around us, as the worlds we inhabit help to define both the limits and possibilities of our humanity" (34).

Conventionally, Indigenous people from different tribes have commitments and obligations toward their relatives in an "active and meaningful engagement" (73) as Kyote represents in *This is a Story* by Jeannette Armstrong. Kinship is not easy to be maintained; it is a "learned process" (74) just like humanity. This perspective dominates the second chapter, "How Do We Behave as Good Relatives?". Biological, genetic, cultural, and community relationships are identified as equals in importance. Narration, in this aspect, "highlights what we lose when those relationships are broken or denied to us, and what might gain even from partial remembrance" (75). Kinship among Indigenous tribes and the representation of the relations with the other- than- human world and queer/ two-spirit Indigenous folks are emphasized. Shakabatina, in LeAnne Howe's *Shell Shaker*, offers her life to save her daughter, who is unjustly accused of murder, and to preserve peace and kinship networks among the Choctaws and the Red Fox people. Further, Justice reflects on some queer literary works within the call for the necessity to be good relatives. Among others, he selects "We Exist" by Janice Gould (queer Konyank'auwi) as a joyful celebration of their role in the kinship context. The Indigenous Nations, all different autonomous tribes, all over the Americas were dehumanized as early as the settler's

era. In this sense, homosexuals became unable to represent themselves as an entity and their works deserve attention.

Chapter Three, “How Do We Become Good Ancestors?”, argues that Indigenous people think of themselves as future ancestors in an answer to the “cataclysmic impacts of colonialism” (115) in which everything is taken including the early death of their ancestors. Nevertheless, the surviving nations are “the embodiment of the fierce, desperate hope and relentless insistence of our ancestors to continue on whatever way they could” (115). In this sense, writing is an example of continuing what the ancestors started. Justice explores his idea in some works that are not publicly identified as “creative” (116), and each of them is chosen to show a different dimension of interest in ancestors. The Kanaka Maoli (Hawaiian Natives) and their Queen Liliuokalani (1838-1917) come first. The Queen wrote works that remained as a valuable inheritance from the ancestors. Her song “Aloha Oe” became the anthem for the Hawaiians. Moreover, her autobiography, *Hawaii's story by Hawaii's Queen*, ends by asking if she has done anything for her people. Certainly, the answer in the book is yes, as it “offers fuel for the continuing fire of Hawaiian nationhood” (122). The Kanaka Maoli writer Haunani-Kay Trask is given as an example of an activist calling for Hawaiian sovereignty in her work, *We Are Not Happy Natives*. From a different perspective, the poet and anthropologist Wendy Rose (Hopi/Miwok) worked to protect her ancestors’ bodies in the United States and Canada from being exposed to the public in museums or medical schools. Such debates ended with the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) as legislation in 1990. Sherman Alexie’s (Spokane/Coeur d’Alene) *The Sin-Eaters* is another literary example used to reflect on the idea of Native Americans’ pure blood being used to cure disease among the settlers. “Here, ancestry matters more than ancestors, who are significant only in their blood quantum, not their relations” (133). To conclude the idea, Justice calls everyone to respect the ancestor’s heritage and pursuit to walk in their footsteps to set an example for future generations as their forefathers exemplified them.

In his fourth chapter, Justice brings about the previous ideas of being humans, preserving kinship, and acting as an ancestor to discuss the conditions and possibilities of “living together within the context of autonomous identities in relationship” (158). Among the texts used here are Richard Wagamese’s *A Quality of Light* (1997) and Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead*. Within the different plots of these novels lies the fact that the authors want every Indigenous to believe in hope. Living the apocalypse theme should not be interesting anymore; the Indigenous Nations should start marching towards the post-apocalypse world of survival. This way, Justice makes his argument a significant realization not only to produce such literary works but also for understanding the interconnectedness of the Indigenous population. “If relationship is the central ethos

of Indigenous literature,” argues the author, “then we must consider how these works articulate existing relational concerns and offer new possibilities, fresh perspectives on existing conflicts and struggles” (158). Living together is a strategy for survival, and, for its sake, it is necessary to encounter the ability to confront and challenge neo-colonialism.

Chapter five, “Reading the Ruptures,” may seem inconsistent with the book in terms of structure, but it is important to understand the idea behind the intense focus on literary texts in Justice’s work. The chapter indicates the epoch behind an allotment map he found in his father’s pocket. He argues: “I see these plate maps as something akin to our literature” (195). The maps are “family histories” (197). Like most Indigenous writings in all forms and genres, Justice points to a small portion of a traumatic history that his grandparents went through and ended by their parting to become “scattered across the continent” (194). He starts from the election of Andrew Jackson (1828), then moves to the Treaty of New Echota, which was ratified by a single vote in the Senate in 1836, to end up by the Trail of Tears. As a reflection on the Allotment Act, Justice states “allotment remains the great rupture in this history” (193).

Why Indigenous Literatures Matter, in general, is prepared as a platform or a catalogue of Indigenous writings. Instead of offering chronological accuracy, the book provides the examination of many books and authors from different Indigenous Nations. The study does not conclude in a synthesis but rather introduces texts that may not have been permitted in academic expeditions before. This diagnosis may motivate researchers to go further by studying one of them. The book, with its intellectual content, celebrates Indigenous achievements in life throughout its analysis of creative literary works.