Daniel Heath Justice. *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*. Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfried Laurier University Press, 2018. 284pp. ISBN 978-1-77112-176-7.

https://www.wlupress.wlu.ca/Books/W/Why-Indigenous-Literatures-Matter

Daniel Heath Justice's latest book works from the clearly stated premise that Indigenous literatures matter and sets out to explore how and why they do so. At the same time, he already makes clear in the introduction that this premise cannot simply be taken for granted. This is especially the case in social contexts both inside and outside North America in which settler-colonial perspectives and assumptions about Indigenous people's "primitiveness" and/or "disappearance" foreclose discussions about the value or even the existence of Indigenous literatures. Prevalent conditions of ongoing settler colonial domination pervading all aspects of life, society, politics, and culture make narratives of, as Justice puts it, "*Indigenous deficiency*" the most widespread and readily accepted story about Indigenous peoples from the U.S., Canada, and elsewhere (2, emphasis in original). Clearly, these stories cannot coexist with the idea that Indigenous peoples are capable of creating their own narratives that do not only counter these imposed, harmful stories but are proof of and represent Indigenous people as existing within rich, complex, and vibrant communities that have their own multifaceted literary traditions and practices.

It is the great achievement of Justice's book that it not only answers but also preempts the tedious question everyone, Native or non-Native, involved with Indigenous literatures (whether as scholar, teacher, or writer, or a combination thereof) has probably heard at one time or another: "Is there writing by 'Indians' at all?" Beyond answering this question strongly in the affirmative (as does any other book on Indigenous literatures or by an Indigenous writer), Justice's book also responds to the questions that might follow from the first: why is it important (to know) that there are Indigenous literatures; what is their significance for anyone interested in literary productions; what do they accomplish; and how and why do they matter? And one way in which they matter, as Justice clearly shows, is that not only their presence but the stories they tell and how they tell these stories work against and refute the very assumptions that lead to the question of and skepticism surrounding Indigenous literatures in the first place. By unpacking the key terms of his title—"Indigenous" (along with "settler," as the contrary position), "literature," and also the combination "Indigenous literature"—in an astute, rigorous, but also compassionate and generous fashion, Justice already by the introduction makes clear that Indigenous literatures matter vitally. The four major chapters following the introduction are then dedicated to discussing how they do so specifically. Namely, Justice addresses Indigenous literatures—as a teaching tool, as a site of interlocution, and as form of interrogation—via four questions that give each chapter its title (cf. 28): How do we learn to be human? How do we behave as good relatives? How do we become good ancestors? How do we learn to live together?

If we approach the book simply as an introduction to Indigenous literatures mainly from what are today the U.S. and Canada, this is clearly an unconventional approach, although it is also an approach that liberates the book from issues of periodization, canonization, or identification of thematic foci that can be burdensome for more "conventional" literary introductions. In fact, the open-ended questions serving as chapter titles are not only intriguing sub-questions to the main question stated in the book's title but—when thinking about a wider readership for the book, or

its use in classrooms—also provide intellectual points of entry for readers who otherwise might shy away from more "conventional" academic perspectives on Indigenous literary histories, forms, and practices. Beyond that, these titles also make clear that this book can only imperfectly and incompletely be called an introductory text to Native writing. It is rather, as Justice puts it himself, "part survey of the field of Indigenous literary studies, part cultural and family history, and part literary polemic" (xx). Further, it "asserts the vital significance of our literatures to healthy decolonization efforts and just expressions of community resurgence" (xx). With this outspoken commitment to the potential political role of Indigenous literatures, Justice demonstrates throughout the book how each of the questions put by the chapter titles speaks to ongoing issues that Indigenous peoples face in their continuing existence under settler colonial conditions. Additionally, they resonate with long-lasting social structures, cultural practices, and communal self-understandings that characterize the multi-faceted and multi-dimensional ways of Indigenous peoplehood.

For Justice, the key term for such a decolonization- and community-oriented approach to and analysis of Indigenous literatures is, maybe not surprisingly, kinship. Kinship being a complex, dynamic, and evocative term, Justice makes sure never to fully define or "fix" it, but he offers a number of varying approximations of it throughout the book. When combining some of these, kinship appears as encompassing "an active network of connections, a process of continual acknowledgments and enactment" (42), that is embedded within "obligations to the diverse networks of relations and relationships" (74) and characterized by "chosen connections and commitments, as well as political, spiritual, and ceremonial processes that bring people into deep and meaningful affiliation" (75). Ultimately kinship, as evoking manners of social formation that exceed settler models of societies defined by the nation-state, becomes the term that links the concerns of the questions guiding the four chapters and also constitutes a central category for putting the readings of the individual texts in relation to each other.

In addition to a survey, a cultural/family history, and a literary polemic, the text can thus be read, intriguingly, as I find, as a study of Indigenous literatures guided by what Justice has called "kinship criticism" in his 2008 essay, "Go Away, Water" (Justice 2008, 147). In this essay, Justice suggests an "explor[ation] of how the principles of kinship can help us be more responsible and, ultimately, more useful participants in both the imaginative and physical decolonization and empowerment of Indigenous peoples through the study of our literatures" (154-55). Expanding his initial interest in this idea, Justice spells out more explicitly and practices this theory throughout his most recent text. Kinship becomes the central category for analyzing Indigenous literatures for their significance, and the referent connecting the central terms of the four main chapters: human, relative, ancestor, and living together.

In the first chapter, a reading of Ella Deloria's novel *Waterlily* (1988) shows that, for the novel, kinship is the basis for practicing humanity and civilization. Further in the same chapter, continuous investment in kinship also helps to counter narratives of Indigenous vanishing while still allowing characters and readers to acknowledge historical losses, as Justice's discussion of Geary Hobson's *The Last of the Ofos* (2000) shows; the ongoing imagination of kinship similarly places the last Ofo speaker into a web of relations. As Justice states, the character's isolation does not erase how he identifies through the principle of kinship: "as a nation of one, he embodies multitudes" (55). In the second chapter, "How Do We Behave as Good Relatives,"

LeAnne Howe's *Shell Shaker* (2001) shows the dangers when "even the foundational bonds of kinship are at risk of crumbling" (80) under settler colonial assault, but also how it remains possible across time to "uphold your obligations to one another, no matter what the cost" (83). In the same chapter, Justice explores the relations between other-than-human peoples—namely between the racoon people and Nanabush, the "Ojibway trickster-transformer" (92)—in Drew Hayden Taylor's *Motorcycles and Sweetgrass* (2010). Importantly, Justice also discusses kinship as "a very powerful and equally vexed set of understandings" for queer/two-spirit Indigenous writers who face settler impositions of heteronormativity from outside as well as, potentially, homophobia and anxiety over non-normatively gendered bodies in their own communities.

In the third chapter, on the question of how to become good ancestors, the focus lies on the relation of past, present, and future and the commitments to kinship these entail. This focus leads Justice to explore the memoir of Lili'uokalani, Queen of the sovereign Kingdom of Hawai'i, and how her writing of resistance speaks to present-day Kanaka Maoli struggles against U.S. settler nationalism. Further, he discusses recent works of Indigenous futurism such as Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* (2017), in which new forms of kinship form the basis to remake traditions and communities for future generations in the midst of fatally increased settler assault and colonially induced ecological catastrophe.

Finally, the fourth chapter, on the question of how to learn to live together, extends the question of "relation" to relationships between Indigenous peoples, settlers, and people of color. In Leslie Marmon Silko's *The Almanac of the Dead* (1991), a number of characters come to realize that the forms of oppression Black and Indigenous peoples are subjected to in the Americas depend on each other. As this realization helps Black and Indigenous peoples to unite in resistance, the novel envisions the potential of an apocalypse that does not restore white patriarchal supremacy, as is often the case in more conventional apocalyptic fiction, but opens the possibility of a future that entails "different kinds of relatedness, different models of kinship, different ways of living with and on the earth and her varied peoples" (Justice 2018, 173). And in *The Only Good Indian…* by the Turtle Gals Performance Ensemble from Toronto (the only play examined in the book, as Justice himself admits), the vagaries of Indigenous women performing for largely non-Native audiences at the beginning of the 20th century and today are considered in a way that connects figures like E. Pauline Johnson and Gertrude Bonnin/Zitkala-Ša to contemporary characters. The struggles of Johnson and Bonnin contribute to efforts of Indigenous women artists such as the Turtle Gals today to stage their own vision, which they, in turn, do "in collaboration and in community" (179) with these earlier performers preceding them and with whom they finally become united on stage.

As their "shared creation becomes a transformative act of love" (179), the second connective thread next to, and related to, kinship becomes apparent (as it has in previous chapters): love becomes a central quality through which multiple forms of kinship can be enacted, embodied, and experienced. One vital way in which Indigenous literatures matter is that they can point to and imagine the possibilities of such love which, in turn, points to the potentials of decolonial struggle and resurgence: "We love: courageously, insistently, defiantly. We love the world enough to fight for it—and one another" (180). The possibilities of love toward which Indigenous literatures can point are ultimately embedded in ideals of relation and thus evoke larger contexts and modes of being and embodiment that extend beyond settler models of

individualistic society, instead moving to embrace kinship-based community formations that ideally are both expansive and inclusive.

From the texts selected here in the space of the review, it is already apparent that Justice attends to a varied corpus, which includes well-known, but also many lesser known or underrepresented, examples. In addition, the book moves across multiple genres that mainly include narrative, poetry, memoir, non-fiction, and, to a lesser degree, plays. Within the chapters, Justice also provides important contextual information, such as a brief discussion of the history surrounding the terminology of queer and two-spirit for Native people who do not identify as heterosexual, or a consideration of the achievements and limitations of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in the third chapter on how to become good ancestors.

Justice provides personal and family history in the context of Cherokee peoplehood and settler violence of removal and allotment in the fifth chapter, "Reading the Ruptures," before pointing in the conclusion to the many ways in which Indigenous literatures have mattered to him, how he has seen it matter to others, and how the work of young Indigenous writers ensures a future of Indigenous writing that will continue to matter. The focus on personal/familial histories and perspectives in the last chapter and conclusion highlights a quality that characterizes the entire book, namely Justice's personal involvement with the subject matter and with the wider community of Indigenous writers and (literary) studies in North America today. This does more than simply add to the highly readable and enjoyable quality of the text. The fact that Justice writes on the matter of why Indigenous literatures matter in an analytically clear and intellectually generous, compassionate, and inclusive manner, always making clear how and why they do so to him, might make it easier for readers less familiar with Indigenous writing, history, and culture to consider the significance of Indigenous literatures to them *personally*, even if the possibility did not occur to them before. The book ends with an appendix that makes a case for the richness of Indigenous literatures in a more encyclopedic fashion and provides an excellent starting point to explore more Native writing. It does so by revisiting an earlier project of Justice that introduced one Indigenous writer every day for one year via Twitter, with the hashtag "HonouringIndigenousWriters." The appendix is followed by a bibliographic essay, "Citational Relations," that provides the bibliographical information in an essayistic form that makes the documentation of the sources themselves intriguingly readable and extends the notion of a relational criticism into citational practice.

With a book in which there is, as has become evident, so much to like (and possibly even, in the spirit of the book, to love), it is hard to argue. Even so, at the end of my review, I would like to raise two points that I do not see as objections so much as ways to continue the critical conversation, as Justice himself invites readers to do in the introduction. Firstly, I wonder if Justice's account of kinship as a central value of Indigenous writing might be extended by a more expansive focus on Native mobility and the increased urban experience that comes with it. I might be mistaken here, but in his discussions of Indigenous urbanization, usually in the context of displacement and dispossession (see, for example, 59-60, 65), Native mobility and the urban experience appear as a form of loss (mentioned together with the generational disruptions of the Residential school system, for instance) or a trade-off (separation from reservation, but the creation of new affiliations), rather than an Indigenous living situation in its own right, which includes the connection between Indigenous peoples coming from a now-urban area and

Indigenous peoples having moved there from other places for various reasons. These reasons might not always be reducible to dispossession or displacement but, more complexly, might also include different forms of Indigenous agency manifest in mobility (I am thinking, in this context, of the online project led by UCLA, "Mapping Indigenous L.A." [https://mila.ss.ucla.edu/], as well as the recent literary portrayal of urban Indigeneity in Tommy Orange's *There There* [2018]). Secondly, in the third chapter on the question of ancestors, Justice discusses how Native writers use genres of speculative fiction to their own Indigenous-centered and decolonial ends and, within this illuminating argument, introduces his term of "Indigenous wonderworks" to distance such works from the conventional terms of fantasy and/or science fiction, which denote genres conventionally rooted in the settler colonial imaginary. In this context, I would have wished for a more sustained discussion of this term in relation to the recent term of "Indigenous futurism" coined by Grace Dillion (who is mentioned and cited for *Walking the Clouds* [2012], her anthology of Indigenous science-fiction, but without reference to her coinage). This absence is particularly notable as Justice makes a reference to Octavia Butler as arguably a key proponent of Black or Afro-futurism. Especially in the chapter with a focus on Indigenous future, I think a consideration of "Indigenous futurism" in relation to "Indigenous wonderworks" could have been helpful, as it also might have shown how the two terms emphasize different aspects of the same, or at least a similar, phenomenon; furthermore, if "wonderworks" might be said to be the term better suited to describe writing that does not immediately gesture to potential futures, I would have welcomed such a discussion, too.

Of course, these are only two minor caveats that should not at all deflect from this review's emphasis on the important accomplishment Justice's book represents. In a time where the question about the existence and worth of Indigenous literatures still has not ended, it now stands as the number one recommendation to anyone asking this question. But much more than that, it can provide readers—students as well as general readers—with a passionate introduction to the richness of Indigenous literatures, specifically in North America, and can give teachers a very helpful tool for their future courses. Additionally, it gifts those of us interested and/or working with Indigenous literatures (including myself) with the opportunity to refamiliarize ourselves with old favorites, discover new ones, view Indigenous literatures through the rewarding perspective of a kinship-based criticism, and remind ourselves (in case this might be necessary) why we are doing the work we are doing, and why not only the writing but also the reading, studying, and writing on Indigenous literatures continue to matter.

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