Daniel Heath Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*

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The illustration by Cherokee artist Joseph Erb on the cover of Daniel Heath Justice’s *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* emphasizes kinship as a key notion at the heart of this seminal critical work. However, while the title suggests a wide reflection on Indigenous literatures, Justice’s references are in fact mainly drawn from North American history, criticism and from American and Canadian fiction and poetry, even if he occasionally mentions Hawaiian and Aboriginal cultures and works. He also explains in his introduction that he has chosen to prioritize the works of “Indigenous women and queer/two-spirit writers of multiple genders” to counterbalance “the disproportionate attention” usually granted to “straight male indigenous voices” (30).

Throughout his essay, Justice, a Colorado-born citizen of the Cherokee Nation, repeatedly anchors his reflection within the Indigenous world and in an Indigenous perspective. He admits that his essay is “avowedly political” (xix) and that, although not particularly “controversial,” it may seem “provocative” at times for some readers (xxi). His aim is, indeed, to emphasize the power of stories, which can reflect or distort history and contemporary reality, and thus “strengthen, wound, or utterly erase humanity and connections” (xvii). To him stories, and therefore literatures, can erase but also heal, and his work stresses the importance of Indigenous literatures after centuries of maltreatment, dispossession, deportation and misrepresentation.

The historical and political viewpoint underlying the choice of the title of the essay is clarified in the introduction. Justice vindicates both the importance of the capital letter for “Indigenous,” which places Indigenous people on an equal footing with other
citizens and inhabitants, and the plural for “literatures,” which eschews the constraining Eurowestern framework applied to the art of writing. Whereas his approach is politically and socially committed, he is critical enough to acknowledge a North American “complicated and entangled colonial context” (14) and certain Indigenous problems and mistakes. Without turning a blind eye on Indigenous social ills, he intends to fight against stereotypes, including the so-called “Indigenous deficiency” (2), and emphasizes the strength of stories able to reconnect within the Indigenous world and beyond. To him, today’s North American Indigenous people are “survivors” of the “colonizing apocalypse” (5) and their literatures are part of the survival process.

4 Stories, chapter 1 (“How Do We Learn to Be Human?”) argues, “articulate our humanity” and “shape” people (35–36), hence the need for diversity to avoid a single-minded approach which ignores not only Indigenous populations but also “other-than-human neighbours” (38). When focusing on environmental concerns related to the contemporary consuming culture, Justice offers what is perhaps his most scathing argument. The “Abrahamic traditions [...and] stories” (40), he claims, are at the root of the Eurowest and its “settler colonial cultures,” whose hierarchical nature he relates to “centuries of expansion, invasion, expropriation, and exploitation” (40). However, the main line is less attack than hope as he also insists on the issue of kinship, which, according to him, Indigenous women in particular have managed to preserve, despite the residential school system and its pernicious way of tearing families apart (64–65).

5 Chapter 2 (“How Do We Behave as Good Relatives?”) extends the understanding of kinship to wider circles of “connections and commitments” (75) by considering literary works which tackle relationships with other-than-human beings on the one hand, and within human marginalized groups, such as “queer and two-spirit Indigenous folk” (79), on the other. Justice asserts that literatures can provide guidance, but also teach obligations and empathy. Stories and imagination are thus celebrated as “act[s] of resistance,” as they have managed to maintain, restore or establish bonds, despite the context of residential schools in particular (85–86). In a world of denial, his emotionally charged assertion “We exist” (106) insists on community survival and sustains the idea of love and kinship as major factors at the “heart of decolonization” (111). He celebrates “works of refusal,” which are also “works of recognition and acknowledgement” (110) staging trauma and wounding, but, above all, love, which, according to him, is not “saccharine sentiment,” but the best shared terrain to move “beyond differences” (111).

6 The question “How Do We Become Good Ancestors?” (chapter 3) prompts a reflection on transmission and continuity which tackles the “Spirit World” (124), “halfbreedenedness” (126) and the complicated history between Indigenous people and anthropology. Indigenous societies have endured and survived despite heavy human and cultural loss, which leads Justice to wonder which literary genres are apt to convey this heritage. For Indigenous communities battling against “a singular model of ‘realism’ as the dominant standard” (142), “fantasy, science fiction, and horror” (142) offer ways to challenge stereotypes and misrepresentations and to address decolonizing and self-determination issues. Justice thus considers what he calls “wonderworks” (155) as ways to “loo[k] at and liv[e] in the world” (155) and borrowing from Bevacqua and Bowman, claims convincingly that these texts constitute an
alternative to “counter colonialism [...] as they] promote ecosovereignty” (154) and imagine a new future.

Chapter 4 (“How Do We Learn to Live Together?”) can then imagine a collective future after the apocalypse which Indigenous people and people “of color” have survived. Writers from these groups, Justice asserts, will focus on “what endures beyond it” (167), i.e. the new connections within the ruins of their former worlds. Within the Canadian context, this obviously conjures up the issue of “Truth and Reconciliation,” although Justice bitterly notices that the Commission launched in 2008 seems to have dropped the “truth” aspect (158). Because it seems to have been set aside on the political scene, he considers that Indigenous literatures matter all the more as they do offer possibilities to voice it, heal and “live together.”

After studying excerpts from various novels, poems and essays in the first four chapters, Justice shows once again why stories matter by offering his own story, that of a “mixed queer Cherokee kid” (184) away from Cherokee land. Chapter 5 (“Reading the Ruptures”) is, indeed, devoted to his family history, mainly on his father’s side, and more widely to the history of the Cherokee, this so called “civilized” Nation from the South East, which underwent deportation, along the notorious 1838 Trail of Tears in particular. The map of “Cherokee Nation allotments,” which illustrates this chapter and serves as the opening and closing pages for the whole book, presents a patchwork of names and places, including Justice’s great grandfather’s. It draws the intimate and painful links between writing, history, geography and families, and asserts kinship as a resilient component of the Indigenous world. Historical, literary but also intensely personal, this last chapter, like Justice’s whole essay, closes on the optimistic, non-divisive and repeated assertion “We matter,” suggesting that stories and literatures are “us,” not only Indigenous people, but also all people ready to read and share another point of view about Indigenous societies and the world at large.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. I’m using Justice’s preferred self-designation. As he explains in his introduction: “Today’s Indigenous people in North America are the descendants of those who survived the colonizing apocalypse that started in 1492 and continues today. We are more than just ‘of descent’ from those initial survivors, however—we’re survivors, too, every one of us. According to the settler stories of Indigenous deficiency, our peoples were supposed to vanish into the sunset long ago; our families’ stubborn refusal to disappear has vexed and perplexed colonial apologists for
centuries, for, in spite of all their hopes and ambitions, policies and practices, laws and customs, and assaults and editorials, our peoples are still here, as are our relations, as are our stories” (5).

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