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## Why Indigenous Literatures Matter

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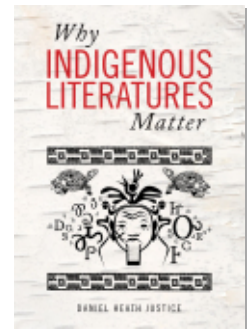
Published by Wilfrid Laurier University Press

Justice, Daniel Heath.

Why Indigenous Literatures Matter.

Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2018.

Project MUSE. [muse.jhu.edu/book/58046](https://muse.jhu.edu/book/58046).



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## *Introduction*

# Stories That Wound, Stories That Heal

I have never forgotten a speech that was made by one of the heads of the Department [of Indian Affairs and Northern Development] when he arrived at the settlement. The Inuit had expected to hear something fantastic since he had come such a long way especially to talk to them. The speech went something like this: “I am very glad to be here and enjoyed my visit to your homes. I am very pleased to see that they are so clean.” One old woman came over to me and asked if he was really the head of the Department, and if so, why he did not have the intelligence to tell us something that we do not know, instead of telling us what our houses looked like. We lived in them every day and we knew what they were like. How could I tell my elder that he did not think the Inuit have intelligence?

—MINI AODLA FREEMAN (INUIT), *LIFE AMONG THE QALLUNAAT*



**T**here are many stories about Indigenous peoples alive in the world today. Some of these stories are our own. They give shape, substance, and purpose to our existence and help us understand how to uphold our responsibilities to one another and the rest of creation, especially in places and times so deeply affected by colonial fragmentation. Sometimes they're in our Indigenous mother tongues; sometimes they're in English, or Spanish, or French, or other colonial languages. But they're still our good stories—not always happy, not always gentle, but good ones nonetheless, because they tell the truths of our presence in the world today, in days past, and in days to come.

Other stories are not so good. These are imposed upon us from outside. They belong to the colonizing populations that claim and dominate our homelands—populations from which many of us are also descended and with which we must navigate our complex relations as well. These stories are sometimes told with good intent. More often they're not. Sometimes they're incomplete rather than wrong, partial rather than pernicious. But sometimes the stories are noxious, bad medicine, and even when told with the best of motivations, they can't help but poison both the speaker and the listener.

Many of the stories about Indigenous peoples are toxic, and to my mind the most corrosive of all is the story of *Indigenous deficiency*. We've all heard this story, in one form or another. According to this story, Indigenous peoples are in a state of constant lack: in morals, laws, culture, restraint, language, ambition, hygiene, desire, love. This story presumes that we're all broken by addiction, or dangerously promiscuous according to pleasure-hating, Puritanical concepts of bodily propriety. It insists that we have a lack of responsibility, lack of self-control, lack of dignity; it claims that we

can't take care of our children or families or selves because of constitutional absences in our character, or biology, or intellect. And it goes even further. Rather than see lower life expectancy, employment, and education rates, and higher rates of homelessness, substance abuse, and suicide as being rooted in generations of sustained and intentional colonial assaults on all aspects of our lives and identities, we're blamed for our supposed lack of basic human decency. Depressed? In despair? Can't be due to centuries of sustained oppressive social structures and racism—must be our supposed lack of mental fitness. Come from a supportive and generally stable family without many of the overt effects of wounding? Don't assume that it has anything to do with your family's good luck or the strength of your traditions or your particular capacity to overcome major obstacles—no, it must be due to successful assimilation and a gradual diminishment of “pure” Indigenous influence. In this poisonous story, every stumble is seen as evidence of innate deficiency, while any success is read as proof of Indigenous diminishment. In a particularly cruel twist, even our strengths are presented as evidence of our inadequacy.

There are all kinds of ways this story seeps into our bones and eats away at our spirits, undermining our potential, eroding our capacity to hold one another up and build affirming relationships through and across difference. It hurts all of us, Indigenous and settler alike, but it's particularly damaging for Indigenous peoples, for whom this unyielding stereotype of deficiency becomes the solid object against which we're so often slammed, the supposed truth claim against which all our experiences are measured—and inevitably found wanting.

This isn't to say that there aren't profound and challenging social and political problems. Indigenous peoples are vastly overrepresented in all negative social indicators in Canada, the US, and other settler states, and grossly underrepresented in the positive ones. But acknowledging these problems and their impacts is not

the same thing as insisting that they are a result of *who* we are. We can't acknowledge these problems without also directly acknowledging the colonial violence in which they're imbedded. Again, contexts matter, and it's these contexts that anti-Indigenous commentators so often refuse to engage or even acknowledge. There's a huge difference between the experience of deprivation as a result of social, economic, and political oppression and having an essential defect in one's humanity that leads inevitably to second-class status—and, not coincidentally, absolves the settler population of any accountability for the conditions they've created. Having a clear and unromantic perspective about the many challenges that face Indigenous peoples is not the same thing as seeing those challenges as an innate expression of *our very nature*.

The story of Indigenous deficiency seems to me an externalization of settler colonial guilt and shame, and is all the more powerful because of the broader society's refusal to take real responsibility for the story's devastating effects. The story wasn't of our making, but we're part of it now. Perhaps the most wounding way in which this story of Indigenous deficiency works is in how it displaces our other stories, the stories of complexity, hope, and possibility. If the simplistic deficiency accounts are all we see, all we hear, and all that's expected of us, it's hard to find room for the more nourishing stories of significance.

So how do we find the strength and the trust to tell *different* kinds of stories? Stories that are truthful about who we are, stories that connect us to the world, one another, and even ourselves? On this point, my colleague David Gaertner reminded me of a line in *Blue Marrow*, by Cree poet Louise Halfe, where she refers to stories as “wihkês,” or “med-sins” in English, agents of both harm and healing. Stories can be bad, bitter medicine and inspire people to bad actions; they can be used to separate us, fragment us into pieces, leave us bleeding and alone. Disconnection is cause *and* consequence of much of this world's suffering. We are disconnected from one

another, from the plants and animals and elements upon which our survival depends, from ourselves and our histories and our legacies. When we don't recognize or respect our interdependencies, we don't have the full context that's necessary for healthy or effective action.

Yet stories can be good medicine, too. They can drive out the poison, heal the spirit as well as the body, remind us of the greatness of where we came from as well as the greatness of who we're meant to be, so that we're not determined by the colonial narrative of deficiency. We're far more than that—though sometimes we need to be reminded, for Indigenous people internalize the bad stories, too. I've long been inspired by something my friend Alice Te Punga Somerville, a Māori literature scholar in Aotearoa, used to tell her all-Māori literature class at the start of the term: "Remember that you are the descendants of gods." Often when I tell this story I get a bit choked up, for it's a beautiful summation of a kind of certainty in presence that's sorely needed and far too rare. As I understand it, Alice's statement wasn't primarily meant to build her students' self-esteem, although it no doubt did that; rather, it was a clear reminder that they were an essential part of something great, something dignified and strong, and worthy of reverence and respect. It was a fundamental expectation that they would hold themselves and one another to the highest possible standards. And they did.

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. In fact, our stories have been integral to that survival—more than

that, they've been part of our cultural, political, and familial resurgence and our continuing efforts to maintain our rights and responsibilities in these contested lands. They are good medicine. They remind us about who we are and where we're going, on our own and in relation to those with whom we share this world. They remind us about the relationships that make a good life possible.

In short, they *matter*.



**Most often a story starts with words**, and words carry meaning far beyond themselves. When it comes to stories about Indigenous peoples, words—especially those in non-Indigenous languages—bear a particularly burdensome representational weight, usually encrusted with hard, jagged layers of colonialist misunderstandings. So we have to start at the beginning, with terminology, and clear away some of those dead layers to find more fertile ground before we're able to continue with the rest of the story.

We begin with *Indigenous*. The capital “I” is important here, as it affirms a distinctive political status of peoplehood, rather than describing an exploitable commodity, like an “indigenous plant” or a “native mammal.” The proper noun affirms the status of a subject with agency, not an object with a particular quality. Here, Indigenous peoples are those who belong to a place—in most cases relevant to this study, in what is now Canada and the US, or more widely referred to, especially in the eastern part of the continent, as Turtle Island—and it affirms the spiritual, political, territorial, linguistic, and cultural distinctions of those peoples whose connections to this hemisphere predate the arrival of intentional colonizing settlers and conscripted and enslaved populations from Europe, Africa, the Pacific, and other regions. It's therefore no surprise that reactionary

commentators and conservative publications like *The Globe and Mail* and the *National Post* here in Canada actively refuse to use the proper noun form, insisting on “native,” “aboriginal,” and “indigenous,” in large part to diminish claims of political and historical distinctiveness, which are anathema to colonial apologists. The proper noun affirms significance; reducing it to an adjective is an intentional act of political diminishment. In 2017, the Canadian Press and the *Toronto Star* joined the CBC, TVO, and *Maclean’s* in updating their stylebooks to indicate that Indigenous and Aboriginal would thereafter be capitalized, indicating a growing momentum toward the proper-noun version becoming the standard across Canada. (In the US, where *American Indian* and *Native American* tend to be the common terms, this is less of an issue, although this is perhaps because Indigenous territorial claims and physical visibility are much less prominent in and thus less threatening to the national consciousness.)

Indigenous is a broadly inclusive and internationally recognized term, admittedly vague and non-specific, but here clearly encompassing those kinship-based tribal-nation peoples in the lands claimed by Canada (including First Nations, Métis, and Inuit, broadly considered under the generic category of “Aboriginal peoples”), the American Indian, Alaska Native, and Hawaiian/Kānaka Maoli peoples in those territories occupied by the US, and *indio* in Spanish colonial regions now known as Mexico. For the purposes of this book, “Indigenous” or even “the People,” when used as proper nouns, refer specifically to the First Peoples of North America, the Aboriginal, American Indian, Native, Inuit, Métis, and otherwise identified peoples who remain in relation to the land, the ancestors, and the kinship networks, lifeways, and languages that originated in this hemisphere and continue in often besieged but always resilient forms. The specifics of identity are complex and contested in nearly every community, especially as a result of diminishing resources and the intrusions of settler ethnicity logics



alongside municipal, state, provincial, and federal agencies in these matters, but Indigenous peoples continue to affirm the responsibilities, relationships, and rights that have connected us to our lands and one another since well before the arrival of Europeans and other peoples to our homelands.

Yet even this broad term is controversial, with omissions and displacements: are Chicanos and Chicanas also Indigenous peoples? What about *mestizos* in Mexico? Do they differ all that much from Métis, Seminoles, or other post-Invasion peoples who constituted themselves as distinct cultures on their own terms and in their own ways, or in response to the catastrophic geographic, biological, and political impacts of colonization? After more than five hundred years of cultural and genealogical exchange, many of our communities have changed significantly, so why are some identified as Indigenous and others not, and who decides? Who gets to claim Indigenous status and identity, under what conditions—and who determines the rules? These are important and very challenging questions, and not all are addressed here, but many Indigenous writers take up these complicated issues with great sensitivity and insight, as we will see in the subsequent chapters.

One related note: whenever possible I refer to the specific name by which communities and writers most frequently identify themselves. Thus, Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm is identified herein as “Anishinaabe” and Drew Hayden Taylor as “Ojibway,” even though both of these terms, along with “Chippewa,” refer to the same broad cultural family, and the same writer may use any one or all three, depending on context. For example, Akiwenzie-Damm’s Anishinaabe community is known formally as the Chippewas of Nawash Unceded First Nation, while also being part of the Saugeen Ojibway Nation, and all these and others are correct in their own contexts.

My approach is broadly inclusive, as it makes no sense to me to draw the circle smaller based on arbitrary colonial standards of unachievable “authenticity” that have *always* functioned to dimin-

ish Indigenous rights and access to the land. Accepting those standards too often reinforces the racist claims of colonialist entitlement, and would seem to be profoundly self-defeating—the exact opposite of sustainable Indigenous sovereignty and healthy self-determination. Yet it's vital to remember that not all claims to Indigenous identity and community affiliation are legitimate; there's a long, sad, and sordid history of settlers “playing Indian” to gain land, money, or fame, or for some personal purpose, often with profoundly negative material impacts on communities.

These discussions can be very difficult and often very painful, especially for those of us with identity insecurities of our own as a result of being raised outside of our communities, having light-skinned privilege, being monolingual English speakers, etc., and I've tried to be as mindful as possible in my choice of authors to balance a spirit of inclusivity with the recognition of healthy, ethical, and necessary boundaries. No doubt some readers will disagree with my decision to draw broadly on the work of writers from a wide range of Indigenous identity positions, or on my decision to leave certain voices out of the analysis due to their ever-shifting or problematic identity claims, but that, too, is part of the ongoing conversation. Ultimately, on these matters in particular, Indigenous peoples' concerns have been central to my considerations here, not those of a settler population that too often conflates colonial stereotypes with authenticity.

While *Indigenous* is certainly a complicated term, far more challenging for many non-Indigenous readers is “settler.” This term is central to a larger analysis of “settler colonialism,” which is distinguished from the more traditional ideas of colonialism (wherein invaders claim resources but return home) by emphasizing the settler population's creation of a new social order that depends in part on the ongoing oppression and displacement of Indigenous peoples. As the late Patrick Wolfe famously affirms, “settler colonies were (are) premised on the elimination of [N]ative societies.... The

colonizers come to stay—invasion is a structure not an event.” Elsewhere he writes that, “so far as Indigenous people are concerned, where they are is who they are.... Territory is settler colonialism’s specific, irreducible element”—in other, chilling words, “settler colonialism destroys to replace.” Historically, many colonizers returned to their “mother country” after extracting whatever wealth they could, but some became settlers who stayed behind to lay claim to the land, its resources, and even its history, a process that was further exacerbated by generations of descendants. And they rationalized their asserted right to those things through the myth of *terra nullius*—or “no one’s land,” a territory supposedly empty of human habitation and prior claims—dehumanizing the peoples who were there first, and who, in most cases, still remained to contest and offer physical testimony of the falsehood of that myth. Settler colonialism, as Wolfe notes, isn’t an anomaly of time and space—it’s an ongoing process of violent self-justification through the erasure of Indigenous peoples as anything but an empty symbol.

While once a term of proud self-identification in expansionist Canada, the US, and other settler-states (or even today, as seen in the conflict in Israel and Palestine), “settler” has in recent years become more negative given its associations with shameful atrocities that many would prefer to remain unspoken and buried with the bygone past—and which, in fact, they assume is entirely a matter of past actions rather than ongoing behaviour of recent and current generations. As a result, some current cultural commentators object to the use of “settler” to describe non-Indigenous populations, seeing it as more of an insult than an accurate description of historical and contemporary relations with Indigenous peoples and lands. White-identified critics see it as prejudicially reductive and dismissive, while critics of colour raise important questions about the conflation of willing immigration with forcible transport through the trans-Atlantic slave trade or the flight of refugees from brutal conditions in their home countries. In both cases, there is an

assumption at play about who “settlers” really are or were—bad people of European descent—and in both cases, there is a clear desire to distance oneself and one’s community from the violent histories and continuing practices of settler colonialism.

But this seems to me an untenable evasion, at least in part. The simple fact is that, regardless of reason, and whether willing resource raiders or unwilling victims of other peoples’ ambitions, and whether intentionally or inadvertently, these groups very often displaced Indigenous peoples and, in many cases, laid claim to the land and took its resources for their own. Sometimes they did it with enthusiasm, sometimes they were forced to do it, sometimes they were reluctant but went along anyway, and sometimes they didn’t realize that their actions were uprooting others or that they had benefited from early dispossessions. There are many occasions where settlers intermarried with or became incorporated into Indigenous communities, but this rarely prevented land loss or cultural destabilization. In many cases, in fact, the intermarried settlers—generally men—had more efficient access to the land and its resources after gaining the community’s trust, thus speeding the processes of colonization. No matter what the reasons were or are, the results have generally the same for the People: displacement and alienation from land and relations.

This doesn’t mean that some settlers didn’t find ways of building community with those they displaced, nor does it mean that they didn’t also face terrible experiences and labour under oppressive conditions from the colonial power structure; it doesn’t mean that profound and lasting alliances of kinship, love, and fierce friendship didn’t emerge. Nor does it mean that all settlers were equally greedy or cruel, or that they had equal rights and respect under colonial law or in their relations with Indigenous communities. But it *does* mean that through force, coercion, trickery, or other non-consensual means, Indigenous peoples lost lives, lands, and livelihoods as a result of non-Indigenous appropriations of lands and territories. This

is distinct from Indigenous processes of kin-making and resource sharing. We must honestly and clearly name that history before we can untangle the complications that different newcomer populations have brought into that relationship, or before we can look for the alliances and connections between marginalized communities.

That said, I'm compelled by the challenge of political theorist Glen Coulthard (Yellowknives Dene). He has expressed concerns about the ways that "settler" has come to be claimed as an identity category by left-leaning activists and scholars—generally, but not exclusively, white Eurowesterners—outside of a robust engagement of colonialism and its violences. Indeed, in this context the term can once again displace Indigenous presence, as it becomes all about the speaker's settler status rather than giving attention to the relationships and displacements in which that settlement takes place. Coulthard recommends that scholars return instead to the older language of "colonizer," which, he argues, returns us to a discussion of colonialism that attends specifically to structures of power, and doesn't sweep all newcomers into the same status, an understanding that there are many ways of being in relation to this land, and that not all newcomers are colonial agents. It's an important analysis, and I've pulled back a bit from insisting that all references to non-Indigenous peoples are as settlers. This, too, is an ongoing and changing conversation. Either way, we must name our violent history to understand its continuing effects.

Though an enfranchised citizen of an Indigenous nation in the United States, I'm also a Ph.D.-holding US citizen who came to Canada as part of its settler colonial immigration policy, so I, too, am very much implicated in these processes. When I first visited the latter country for my job interview at the University of Toronto in 2002, the very first person with whom I had an extended conversation was a security guard at Pearson International Airport in Toronto while I waited for the shuttle bus to my downtown hotel. The man and I started chatting. It was late, and there were few

travellers that night, so, as I was clearly a stranger to those parts, he asked me why I was there. He told me a bit of his own story as a Pakistani immigrant to Canada, and I explained that I'd come to interview for a job in Aboriginal literature at the University of Toronto. He wasn't sure what Aboriginal literature was, so, coming from a US context, I explained it was American Indian literature, and that I was doing work on the literature of my own nation. His follow-up question was unexpected—"So are you a Red Indian or a Brown Indian?"—and I hesitantly replied, "Red Indian, I guess." The next comment was the real surprise: "So, you don't pay taxes then."

This wasn't posed as a question as much as a firm statement. I was at a loss for a moment, as this ugly stereotype wasn't something I expected to hear in Canada, where I naively assumed that progressive ideals had eliminated much of the prejudice against Indigenous peoples I'd grown used to experiencing in the US. And his manner wasn't dismissive or belligerent—it was a very matter-of-fact comment, as though "Red Indians" not paying taxes and being a drain on the system was as much an unarguable truth as the presence of the sun in the sky or the law of gravity. I finally managed to respond that, indeed, I paid taxes, as did most "Indians," both state and federal. He seemed genuinely perplexed by my response, and we chatted a bit more, but then my bus arrived, and I headed off to my hotel, a little less certain about Canadian benevolence than I'd been when I stepped off the plane. And I've never forgotten that conversation or the man's genuine kindness to a stranger, nor the sharp stab of stereotype that inadvertently marred our brief exchange.

Eventually I was offered and accepted the job, and a few years later, as a Cherokee immigrant to Canada—and after much consideration and some ambivalence—I took Canadian citizenship myself, even making an oath of loyalty to "Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth the Second, and all her heirs and successors." (I had a different queen in mind when I heard I had to take such an oath, intending to reaffirm my commitment to Dolly Parton at the required moment,

but alas, the citizenship authorities were quite specific about the queen in question.) Throughout the years since, I've seen again and again how nation-state policies about Indigeneity affect the understandings and attitudes of immigrants to this country, both the privileged and the dispossessed. I've heard my students—multi-generational and new Canadians alike—repeat these and other tired stereotypes for many years now, and they've recounted their own conversations with friends and families about the ways they've come to understand Indigenous peoples. There have always been moving examples of empathy and a recognition of shared oppression, but at least as common are the ugly stories about Indigenous deficiency and degradation. And these are only some of the stories about our complicated and entangled colonial context.

For these reasons, I still most often prefer the term “settler,” followed by “colonizer” and other related terms, to signify those peoples and populations not identified as Indigenous, primarily but not exclusively of European heritage, and often representing and furthering the policies, practices, and perspectives of the larger settler state. It's not a value judgment about the individual people—indeed, many non-Indigenous colleagues in the field whose work has deeply informed and enriched my own claim the term themselves, not in self-hate but in politicized acknowledgement of the privileged histories they've inherited and the responsibilities in their work. And though a citizen of the Cherokee Nation, I, too, am a descendant of settler colonial people on both sides of my family: Scottish, English, German Jewish, and a motley collection of other Europeans who travelled westward across the Atlantic to make new homes in someone else's homeland. My mom's family claims Chickasaw heritage from Paul's Valley, Oklahoma, but the available documentary evidence indicates that those kin were likely white settlers laying claim to Chickasaw lands, as Chickasaw officials successfully fought their claims for over a decade. And then add Black chattel slavery along at least one branch of my Cherokee kin: Jennie

Shields Riley, one of my fourth great-grandmothers, came with her family to Indian Territory from Creek Path, Alabama, as an “Old Settler” emigrant in 1829, along with eight enslaved African Americans whose names were not recorded.

This latter point is where I grapple the most with the unspecific use of “settler,” for it obscures the ways in which physical and symbolic violence against Black bodies, minds, and spirits is also deeply enmeshed with anti-Indigeneity within settler colonial race logics. There is a long and ugly history of anti-Black violence in Indian Country that is sadly replicated in Indigenous Studies, through erasure and exclusions if not outright dismissal, and we can’t honestly contend with the legacies of settler colonialism if we don’t also firmly address anti-Blackness in our scholarship, our fiction, our politics, our families, and our lives. That history isn’t over by any means—it’s fully alive and well today, as the ongoing struggles of the Five Tribes Freedmen make clear. The Freedmen are descendants of Black people (including many Black Indians) enslaved by members of the “Five Civilized Tribes”—the Cherokees, Chickasaws, Choctaws, Creeks, and Seminoles—who were freed by federal decree after the US Civil War. Freedmen were, in principle, entitled to tribal citizenship and broad rights, and many were elected to serve on their respective nations’ councils, but over the ensuing years the Five Tribes leadership constantly fought to erode and deny those rights. The most cruel culmination of this campaign was the 2007 disenfranchisement of Cherokee Freedmen descendants from the body politic of the Cherokee Nation through an ill-conceived and deeply troubling constitutional amendment. In August 2017, after a ten-year court battle, a US District Court supported the Freedmen’s arguments for re-enfranchisement, and the Cherokee Nation did not appeal. For now, at least, the matter has been resolved in the Freedmen’s favour, although some non-Freedmen citizens and politicians continue to seek their ouster from the Nation.



Indigeneity doesn't free me from being implicated in the violent histories of colonialism, even in my broader family. Like all relations, these, too, are complicated, and they demand degrees of accountability and obligation. These entanglements make easy dismissals unsustainable and ethically dubious. But I don't see the use of the term "settler" as an easy out in any of these contexts; if anything, it centres these complexities and the discomfort that comes with them. I'm keenly aware of the bitter irony of "Old Settler" as a term for those Cherokees who went west before Removal, especially after the preceding discussion; the Old Settlers fled from growing white hostility in the east by moving into land already inhabited (especially by the Osages), in many cases, as with my Riley ancestors, forcing enslaved people to go with them. The resulting conflicts were bloody and left lasting trauma for those who lost lands and freedom in the process. In all these cases, "settler" is a challenging word. If it has unpleasant inflections, it's because settler colonialism is unpleasant. It doesn't get any less so when we use less provocative language; if anything, erasing those complexities just becomes another form of violence.

"Literature" is the final term to foreground here. It's so common that we often forget how it, too, is deeply embedded in a vexed history of racism, classism, and arbitrary power. The word comes from the classical Latin *litterātūra*, for the use of letters in communication—the practice of alphabetic writing, as well as the physical objects and cultural archive that result from that practice. Of course, today we don't think of literature as mere writing. "Literature" presumes a particularly elevated *kind* of expression, one that's invested with significant personal and social capital. "Writing" isn't the same thing as "literature"; in most cases, you need the first to have the second, but you can have writing without it being literature. We most often assume that literature is good, even great writing. Literature is thus both uplifted and uplifting; the reader of literature attains a higher rung on the social ladder than the mere absorber of printed words.

“Indigenous literature.” Two powerful words in a powerful relationship—but not a neutral one, as Bay of Quinte Mohawk writer Beth Brant observes: “I sometimes think that one of the reasons our work is not reviewed or incorporated into literature courses (besides the obvious racism) is that we go against what has been considered ‘literature.’ Our work is considered ‘too political’ and we do not stay in our place—the place that white North America deems acceptable.” For some readers, these two words together are an oxymoron, an absurd presumption, political correctness run amok. For others, they’re a revelation, a confirmation, an affirmation. Separately, these are words we generally assume we understand, though those assumptions are often very complicated: what do we mean by “Indigenous” or “literature,” after all? The meanings aren’t self-evident, but too often we behave as though they are, and too often misunderstanding is the result.

It’s amazing how deeply we internalize these biases. When I was teaching a first-year “Introduction to Narrative” course at the University of Toronto, I would include among the required canonical whitestream texts by Chaucer, Pope, Coleridge, and Freud a few unexpected works: one term, it was the political autobiography of Hawai’i’s Queen Lili’uokalani and her testimony about the US-led overthrow of the monarchy, paired with Shakespeare’s colonial island fantasy, *The Tempest*; another year we read Patrick Dennis’s high camp novel, *Auntie Mame*, and Gregory Scofield’s poetic biography of his mother and auntie, *I Knew Two Métis Women*. And, as my own mentor and friend Dr. Domino Perez did when I was in her class as a graduate student at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, I’d insist that students buy a pulp romance novel and read it in a public place.

This last activity always provoked anxiety, especially for the ostensibly straight men in the class. Students had to actually purchase or check the book out of a library themselves—they couldn’t borrow it from a friend or have someone else access it for them. And they had to sit and at least pretend to read it around strangers. Often

students did the experiment on the subway. The results were invariably the same: many students told stories about being given scornful looks and hearing dismissive, even insulting comments—but sometimes they spoke about conspiratorial smiles and encouraging if surreptitious affirmations of support they received from obvious romance fans. I'd ask students to identify how they felt when reading the novel in public, and many would always say the same things.

Embarrassment. Discomfort.

*Shame.*

It was generally the first time they'd thought about the deeply rooted presumptions they brought to reading, and about what "kinds" of people read certain works. We'd unpack the ugly stereotypes: socially dysfunctional guys with bad hygiene read science fiction; intense and vaguely paranoid white men wearing black or camouflage read political thrillers; flaccid old white men with nostalgic dreams of prairie freedom read westerns; sad, lonely, and unattractive women devoid of love read romances. Even those students who admitted to having read and enjoyed romance novels in the past talked about these stereotypes, although generally with a more critical perspective given their own experience with the genre and its social stigma. The more we interrogated these assumptions, the more we all came to realize how heavily sexism and classism influenced their attitudes toward romance novels. I don't imagine that many lifelong romance readers came out of those classes, but I know that some closet romance lovers felt empowered by the experience and discussion, as did fans of other stigmatized genres who'd kept their interest under wraps for fear of censure.

This is just one example of one kind of writing. But what happens when an entire *community* is pathologized as having a lower degree of cultural achievement and is thus excluded from consideration of having any literature of merit at all? Given the privileged status the category of "literature" holds in our broader culture, there is a profound level of shame and self-doubt associated with not

having a body of writing considered as such; not to have literature is, in some ways and to some eyes, to be less than fully human, certainly to be less “civilized.” And of all cultures, Indigenous peoples are most often treated as deficient in this regard, the “savage” side of the “savage/civilized” binary created by imperialist cultures to justify their domination of supposedly “backward” peoples.

A case in point: a couple of years into my position at the University of Toronto, I had the opportunity to meet and communicate with a visitor from Australia. She was a white settler scholar, a fiercely courageous university teacher at one of the country’s regional institutions who was committed to bringing Indigenous literatures from Australia into the classroom and the realm of respected study among her peers. It was an uphill battle, as she encountered constant racism from her colleagues, who couldn’t understand why she’d spend her time on these supposedly sub-par texts—and, by implication, people. Fortunately, she was tenured, and she used that protected privilege to embolden her work. Her visit to Canada was in part a fact-finding mission to learn how Indigenous literatures and scholars in the field had found a relatively secure place in literary studies in this country. Yet I didn’t realize just how challenging her situation was until she told me about a conversation she’d had with her faculty dean—a white man with significant power in her institution—who declared to her with no apparent irony and a great deal of certitude that Aboriginal people in Australia would never have a *real* literature until there was an Aboriginal Shakespeare.

I’ve recently been back in contact with my Australian colleague, who gave me permission to share this anecdote; she and her compatriots continue the struggle to open up space in their university for Indigenous students, writers, and scholars to be acknowledged as equals in an institution built on their own lands. It remains a difficult slog, but she’s still at it. Her story has stuck with me all this time as a particularly egregious but not uncommon example of

attitudes toward the literary achievements of Indigenous peoples. “Literature,” according to her dean, was a mark of basic human value and civilization. And it’s not enough to simply have writing or stories or textual traditions—to be treated as literature, they have to be *recognizable* as literature to others, especially to those with a vested interest in *not* recognizing them as such. It’s a terrible double-bind, and a dispiriting realization, as the more evidence we bring to bear to affirm our literariness, the more we risk becoming tangled in narrower and narrower definitions until we find ourselves mimicking the exclusivist arguments of the colonizing culture that has so long insisted on our literary invisibility in the first place.

“Literature” as a category generally refers to written alphabetic texts; when not exclusively written, it becomes “oral literature,” “oral tradition,” “oral history,” etc., and the distinction is meaningful, as a social evolutionary bias presumes that the oral is a less developed version of the written. And for all the excellent scholarship that has been produced over the last century on oral traditions and their complex, multi-layered, sophisticated, and richly textured qualities—every bit the equal of any written tradition, if not even more remarkable due to the years of training and memory skill required for their continuity—we still live in a world that demeans the oral as a primitive, cruder, less evolved body of knowledge.

All literatures matter—it’s why the term “literature” is so loaded, as it carries cultural capital, and all such capital is embedded in relationships of power. Literature as a category is about what’s important to a culture, the stories that are privileged and honoured, the narratives that people—often those in power, but also those resisting that power—believe to be central to their understanding of the world and their place in relation to it. For many critics, literature is about written alphabetic texts with particular aesthetic qualities, a form of art that exists independent of social usefulness or value beyond particularly elevated notions of beauty—the idea of “art for art’s sake.” Once a revolutionary, artistic call to arms amidst

the suffocating, moralizing late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries of Oscar Wilde and his Decadent contemporaries, today that philosophy seems to be encountered more often as an ostensibly high-minded stance for those privileged enough to be disaffected and politically disengaged. I much prefer the definition of art provided by the Cherokee-Appalachian poet Marilou Awiakta—"art for life's sake"—whereby, rather than the wholly individualist expression of an artist's singular, often self-absorbed vision, art is explicitly, generously engaged with a larger network of relations, influences, and experiences, always with some measure of commitment to articulating Indigenous presence in the world.

Whatever our definition, literature, considered broadly as my kinsman Jace Weaver does, as "the total written output of a people," is an expansive, dynamic, adaptive thing; that's part of its beautiful, terrible power. It serves the powerful and the powerless alike; the rebellious texts of one generation become the stories against which the next generation struggles to be heard, even while providing inspiration and guidance for those who follow. And it's more than singular—rightly, I should always be using the plural "literatures," as these texts and traditions are far too diverse and multifaceted to neatly fit the presumptions behind the idea of the monolithic category of "literature."

This book is focused on works written in English. This is due to my own rather traditional English Studies training as a literary historian and critic in the field, and my admittedly narrow linguistic range as a largely monolingual English speaker (a smattering of French and even less Cherokee notwithstanding). Yet it bears explicit acknowledgement that these texts, for all their imaginative scope, beauty, and function in the world, are only one small part of a *much* broader expressive archive in many languages and forms. Indigenous peoples have always communicated ideas, stories, dreams, visions, and concepts with one another and with the other-than-human world, in whatever media have been most

convenient and meaningful at the time. Alphabetic literacy, while never neutral in its power, is at its best an extension of these practices, not a replacement. As Penny van Toorn argues in reference to Aboriginal writing in Australia, a context not entirely dissimilar to that of Canada or the US in this regard:

Traditionally based Indigenous practices of alphabetic literacy that emerged over 200 years ago in the late 18th century continued in the 19th and 20th centuries, and are still manifest in the authorial practices of Aboriginal writers today. The persistence of these practices suggests that they are not part of an insignificant, transitory adjustment process on a path that leads to “literacy proper.” Instead, they are evidence that reading and writing have been reinvented, and that under certain conditions Aboriginal communities have been able to develop and adapt their own new and distinct cultures of literacy in a manner that perpetuates traditional, orally grounded social structures and values.

van Toorn is quick, however, to point out that “there is no denying that in many parts of Australia important traditional Indigenous life-ways have not survived the introduction of literacy,” and ties that destruction to the ideological apparatus that accompanies literacy—namely, missionization and the “civilizing” work of white settlers, who actively dismantled and suppressed the pre-existing and more sustaining Indigenous cultural and linguistic contexts. When Indigenous peoples have been able to put these technologies to use in ways that affirm the sovereignty of Indigenous purpose, not subjection to white supremacy, they tend to uphold traditional practices, not erode them. To this end, then, our literatures include a wide array of other kinds of texts, such as cane baskets, wampum belts, birchbark scrolls, gourd masks, sand paintings, rock art, carved and painted cedar poles, stones and whale bones, culturally modified trees, and so on. While serving many cultural and

ceremonial purposes, these items also communicate stories and ideas, and while the conflation may be controversial to some, it doesn't seem much of a stretch to think of our literary traditions as being broadly inclusive of all the ways we embody our stories in the world.

In expanding our definitions, and mindful of van Toorn's cautionary note, we must also be careful and understand that these other sorts of texts aren't only diverse literary forms, but that they perform other kinds of vital functions in their respective cultures, many of them ceremonial, ritual, and spiritual. And there are internal interpretive methods that are specific to Indigenous languages, oratorical practices, and cultural protocols that don't necessarily fit well with Eurowestern literary criticism; indeed, they're often fundamentally different in mode and purpose. These diverse textualities and interpretive traditions generally require particular kinds of extensive specialized training that are most often limited to specific community members, with specific linguistic and cultural knowledge, who are charged with community responsibilities. Outsiders who approach them as simply a different form of writing are likely to misread them or, worse, misuse them, with often quite negative results. For example, we can read wampum belts as political documents, which in some ways they certainly are, but they're far more than that, as they also physically embody and articulate the deep relationships of rights and responsibilities between peoples, and there are complex protocols and rituals that accompany and enliven their social function. Language matters here, too, as the erosion of fluency in Indigenous mother tongues has also impacted the deeper understandings of wampum within their specific cultural milieus. We therefore risk profound misinterpretation and even trivialization if we remove those belts from their most meaningful contexts and simply read them in English as documents the same way we'd read a desacralized parliamentary bill that's completely alienated from the physical, spiritual, and symbolic lives of the peoples it



ostensibly concerns. The similarities matter, but so, too, do the profound differences between them.

The words of Lee Maracle (Stó:lō) on this point are important to consider here: “Although our knowledge was scattered, it was not destroyed.... To study this knowledge in a systemic way we must first gather, synthesize, and transfer this knowledge. Both of these processes are vital to our survival. This systemization of knowledge is required before writers can write from within their culture.” She goes on to call all of us doing work in the field to account, to be mindful about the limits of our experience and knowledge, especially those of us without deeper cultural grounding in the languages and traditions from which so many of these works emerge:

Today we have many scholars studying Indigenous writing, many of them Europeans or with a European education, armed with colonial definitions and post-colonial theories. These scholars are not expected to pay attention to the study of the original culture from which the authors they study arise. Certainly, they are not expected to concern themselves with original oratorical principles of study. In contrast, an Indigenous graduate of literature automatically becomes an expert in Salish, Ojibway, Oji-Cree, Iroquoian, and Cherokee writing, without having to know much about the nations and the national story or oratorical traditions of those nations. Few Indigenous writers are in a position to comb through the oratory, story, drama, and poetry in their original forms in order to glean the principles of Indigenous story creation.

While the works I discuss here speak certain truths of their own, they’re not the totality of Indigenous oratorical, literary, or artistic expression or experience, and there are limits in the kinds of insight they can provide—just as there are limits to any insight I

can give to the works discussed herein. They're just one part of a much larger, much more diverse and dynamic expressive and critical archive, yet another important reason for folks to read widely and with broad interest.

It's also good to remember that not all things are meant for all people. There are boundaries to some forms of knowledge; to insist that all things should be available without limit to everyone is to exercise a particularly corrosive kind of universalizing colonialist privilege; claiming entitlement to all peoples' knowledge is, after all, just one of the many expropriating features of settler colonial violence. Fortunately, even while respecting necessary boundaries on certain knowledge, there is still an ample and growing archive available for all of us to read, experience, share, and understand together, and it will be to those works and contexts that I direct my attention in these pages.

One more caveat: every time we privilege the literary, we run the risk of doing violence to the specific relational contexts of the oral. Reading can be a very isolated and isolating experience; sharing stories orally is done in the context of living, dynamic peoplehood—one reason why it's so significant to Indigenous communities, where so much knowledge is transmitted between living people, not mediated by objects like books. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson offers a vital caution on this point, which I quote at length:

The relationship between those present becomes dynamic, with the storyteller adjusting their “performance” based on the reactions and presence of the audience. The lines between storyteller and audience become blurred as individuals make non-verbal (and sometimes verbal) contributions to the collective event. The “performance,” whether a song, a dance or a spoken word story, becomes then an individual and collective experience, with the goal of lifting the burden of colonialism by visioning new realities.

While this is now also accomplished by Indigenous artists through the written word, spoken word, theatre, performance art, visual art, music and rap, film and video, it is most powerful in terms of transformation in its original cultural context because that context places dynamic relationships at the core. When mediated through print or recording devices, these relationships become either reduced (technology that limits interactivity) or unilateral (as in print, film, or video, when the creator cannot respond to the reaction of the audience). Then the process, to me, loses some of its transformative power because it is no longer emergent.

It's no surprise, therefore, that Simpson is a spoken-word performer and musician, as well as a writer; many Indigenous writers take up more dynamic, audience-focused forms in addition to more conventional literary practices. While acknowledging its shortcomings, Simpson is clearly not dismissing the power of writing as only a "Western" imposition, as I've heard from some community members and even some writers. We must acknowledge the inevitable limits of the literary, while also acknowledging the diverse ways that story, community, and belonging continue in both oral and inscribed forms. To honour our literary traditions is not to say that *only* those traditions have value, nor is it to adopt the hierarchy of value presumed by settler societies and structures. But Indigenous literatures do something good and important in the world, and that's my focus here.



**This book takes up these stories of presence** and how they enliven our lives and imaginations and consider the complications of historical and contemporary Indigenous experience in these lands. The structure of the book is intended to be invitational, to welcome dialogue

and even debate, rather than insisting on a singular way of understanding the works or the issues under consideration.

Four critical questions form the core chapters of this book, questions that continue to shape much of my approach to Indigenous Studies generally and to Indigenous literature more specifically. While the historical and political work of the broader discipline is vitally important to give context and content to the work of literary scholars, I fundamentally believe that the study of Indigenous writing offers us something different, a complementary but distinctive way of thinking about Indigenous belonging, identities, and relationships. Though born and raised in Colorado, connected by heritage, kinship, friendship, and ceremony to Oklahoma, and formally trained in Indigenous literary studies and history in Nebraska, I have been in Canada since 2002, where I've learned from and shared intellectual and interpersonal nourishment with Musqueam, Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, Cree, Inuit, Mi'kmaq, Métis, Lakota, Kwagwiltz, Tahltan, and Dene people, among many others. In my Indigenous Lit and Indigenous Studies courses, in conference rooms, community centres, and around the kitchen tables of family and friends in Colorado, Oklahoma, Texas, New Hampshire, Michigan, Georgia, Ontario, Manitoba, Alberta, British Columbia, Australia, England, and elsewhere, our discussions have often come back to the challenges, possibilities, and complexities of kinship and belonging, as much in our relationships to one another as to the world we share.

The questions that structure the core of this book have emerged from these conversations and considerations, and offer what I think to be particularly productive and provocative ways of approaching this diverse body of work. I'm suspicious of claims of universal values between all Indigenous peoples around the world, as such broad assertions too often gloss over real and meaningful distinctions between communities, regardless of whatever else they may share. These claims are all too easily weaponized in colonialist authenticity

debates against Indigenous individuals and groups. Yet these four questions do seem to me a good way of getting to some of the more widely held ideas about relationship, kinship, respect, and responsibility that Indigenous peoples articulate, separately and together. Examining them *as* questions makes room for the specificities of our diverse experiences. It also, I hope, keeps us humble, since considering these as processes leaves room for learning, growing, changing, and remembering. They're not fixed in time or place, but help us maintain better relations to both.

The book's four guiding questions are:

1. *How do we learn to be human?* What are the experiences, customs, traditions, and ceremonies that define our humanity? How do we realize the full potential of our physical and imaginative human embodiment with healthy bodies, hearts, and minds?
2. *How do we behave as good relatives?* What are our relational rights and responsibilities to one another and to the other-than-human world? How do our literatures help us realize these relations in meaningful ways?
3. *How do we become good ancestors?* How do we create the kind of world and relationships that will nurture those who come after, and give them cause to thank us rather than curse or grieve our destructive selfishness? And what does literature do to help guide this work?
4. *How do we learn to live together?* What are the social and intellectual structures, conventions, and considerations that reduce or manage conflicts and encourage harmonious relations across our varied categories of difference? How do our stories offer helpful models for those efforts?

The concept of the “good” noted above deserves a bit of attention here. “Good,” in these questions, isn’t a prescriptive measurement presuming a singular state of moral rightness, but is rather a concept intended to be expansive. Yet I do believe that considering the status of our moral relations is important, and I hope that the associated discussions and readings may offer multiple approaches to the “good” through consideration of those ideas, behaviours, and relationships that are healthy and affirming of human and other-than-human dignity, while challenging those that are toxic, violent, and demeaning.

There are no specific answers to any of these questions; or rather, there are many answers, depending on contexts of culture, community, land, and history. They’re broad questions, but significant ones, which ask us to attentively consider our relationships to one another and to the world. Each question engages our uniqueness as individuals and as peoples while embedding that uniqueness in a larger context of consideration. And in the context of each of these questions, through poetry, prose, image, performance, song, and story, Indigenous writers offer insight, challenge, and possibility to our understandings of how we live in the world—and how we might do it better.

For those familiar with Indigenous literatures, my choice of texts and writers may seem a bit unusual or unconventional. I’m more interested in the ideas communicated than in aesthetic techniques, but both are important in balance. Simply put: I like these works, and I wanted to write about works of art that interest, compel, challenge, and inspire me. Most of my discussion is on fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction, not because these are the only genres that matter but because they’re the ones I’ve studied and taught the most. I don’t focus too much on whether or not these are canonical or critically lauded works; I’ve tried to give the bulk of my attention to texts that are underrepresented or less widely recognized, or to those that deserve a broader international readership. Indigenous

children's and young-adult literature are notably under-represented, but this is a result of my own knowledge gaps rather than any reflection on these important works; I've included quite a few such writers and works in the Appendix.

In light of the disproportionate attention given to straight male Indigenous voices in the public sphere, especially in Canada, I've also prioritized the work of Indigenous women and queer/two-spirit writers of multiple genders. When I do attend to the corpus of more famous writers, I generally engage their more obscure or underappreciated works. This is both a result of my own idiosyncratic literary interests and a deliberate choice. We're in the remarkably fortunate position of living in a time when there's simply too much good work being produced by Indigenous writers in Canada and the US for us to keep up, not to mention the growing body of excellent scholarship about that archive. Too often, critics and readers act as though we only have a handful of Indigenous writers whose work is worthy of consideration or support—what I've elsewhere called the “noble nine,” more as a critique of the critics than of the fine work of the writers themselves. As a result, these few stories, voices, and perspectives take up what little space exists in public discourse, thereby displacing or entirely obscuring the many other writers not market-friendly or fortunate enough to be at the centre of consideration. It's detrimental to the entire field of Indigenous literary studies, it's demoralizing for emerging and established but underappreciated writers who struggle to make a living and have their work published, and ultimately it's bad for all of us, as it simply reinforces the idea that Indigenous imaginations are limited in scope, range, and diversity.

Yet I should also note that the absence of a writer here shouldn't be read as evidence of their lack of significance in the field or beyond it. That may sometimes be the case, as there are certainly some writers whose work I don't find particularly engaging, interesting, or aesthetically or politically compelling, but it's not a uniform rule. Quite

simply, it's just not possible in a book of this length and focus to include every writer, critic, or work that I believe to be meaningful or worthy of consideration. I therefore had to concentrate on the ones that seemed best to address the book's thematic concerns and to be the most provocative and generative of discussion and debate for this specific purpose. A different approach would necessitate different choices. But I'm confident that there's something here to interest most readers, and hope that some of these works will spark a long-burning interest for future reading, study, and appreciation.

This book draws on a diverse array of voices coming from many communities, perspectives, traditions, territories, and eras. I hope it inspires readers to seek out some of these writers and their works, and experience their imaginative possibilities for themselves. This is particularly the case because of the overlapping relevance of the structural questions to one another: after all, we can't understand what it is to be human without also considering our interrelationships with those around us, or how to get along with one another across and through our differences.



**This book is part of a much bigger conversation**, one in which I've been blessed to be able to participate formally for most of my life, and there are many people of many backgrounds and affiliations who have worked for many years to articulate why Indigenous literatures matter, often under very trying circumstances, often at great cost to themselves and their careers, often with little recognition or even outright rejection, but always—*always*—with the hope that the future would be better, that our lineal and social descendants would have a worthy inheritance awaiting them, that the People and the stories would go on. To those writers, scholars, readers, teach-



ers, and students, past, present, and future, who make these conversations possible, and who work for a better, more just, and more generous world through the transformative power of story, my heartfelt thanks.

And that includes the readers of this book, too. Wado nigada. ❖