



Why Indigenous Literatures Matter

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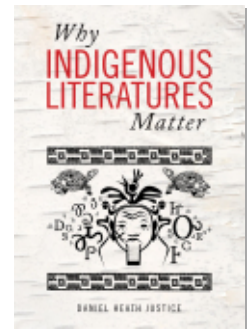
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Preface



Notes for the Long Rebellion

... our stories are unending connections to past, present, and future. And, even if worse comes to worst and our people forget where we left our stories, the birds will remember and bring them back to us.

—LEANNE HOWE (CHOCTAW NATION),
“THE STORY OF AMERICA: A TRIBALOGGRAPHY”

This is a book about stories and some of the ways they matter. It’s about the many kinds of stories Indigenous peoples tell, and the stories others tell about us. It’s about how these diverse stories can strengthen, wound, or utterly erase our humanity and connections, and how our stories are expressed or repressed, shared or isolated, recognized or dismissed. It’s about the ways we understand that vexed and vexing idea of *literature*, and how assumptions about what is or is not “literary” are used to privilege some voices and ignore others. It’s also about how, in spite of various challenges

and catastrophes, Indigenous writers, scholars, storytellers, and knowledge keepers have, since our earliest ancestors emerged as distinct peoples, worked to articulate lived truths and imaginative possibilities through spoken, written, and inscribed forms and project them into a meaningful future.

More specifically, this is a book about Indigenous peoples' diverse literatures and why they are (or should be) important to Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers alike, although perhaps for different reasons. The arguments here begin with that fundamental premise: that Indigenous literatures *matter*. The why and the how of that claim will be tested against a range of literary works produced in territories now claimed by Canada and the United States, with occasional relevant forays among the writings of other Indigenous peoples elsewhere in the world. And these will, in turn, be placed into the larger historical, political, and social context of colonialism in North America and elsewhere. Context is vital to understanding these matters, especially given how colonial government policies have combined with widespread popular stereotypes and everyday enacted practice to degrade and attempt to entirely eliminate Indigenous peoples and our cultural, artistic, and intellectual productions. Colonialism is as much about the symbolic diminishment of Indigenous peoples as the displacement of our physical presence. If there are no more people there can be no more stories; without our stories, we're reduced as peoples and as individuals. Marie Annharte Baker (Anishinaabe) says it most powerfully in reflecting on one of her own motivations for writing:

I have my mother to thank for her spirit of resistance. I remember my mother and others talking about running away from residential school. I have talked to others about inheriting the anger and rage of our mothers. Her generation was silenced. I cannot help but consider a need to document and bear witness to the treatment of First Nations women which comes from what I

see as the blood price paid for any of our cultural productions to have survived the onslaught of 500 years of domination and attempts to wipe out our spirituality, our land base and oral literature/language.

Our literatures are just one more vital way that we have countered those forces of erasure and given shape to our own ways of being in the world. Our mindful stories, in all their forms and functions—and whether vocalized, embodied, or inscribed—honour the sacrifices of those who came before us and who made it possible for us to continue the struggle today as specific peoples in relation with the world. They help us bridge the gap of human imagination between one another, between other human communities, and between us and other-than-human beings. Fundamentally, they affirm Indigenous presence—and our *present*. That our nations do indeed have a vibrant present gives us hope that we'll have a future, too.

Yet while Indigenous writers have confronted that oppressive context and created a richly expansive literary tradition that engages with colonialism, these traditions are in no way determined *by* colonialism. Indigenous texts are by and large responsive, not reactive. They are at least as concerned with developing or articulating relationships with, among, and between Indigenous readers as they are with communicating our humanity to colonial society, if not more so. Indeed, I'd go so far as to argue that *relationship* is the driving impetus behind the vast majority of texts by Indigenous writers—relationship to the land, to human community, to self, to the other-than-human world, to the ancestors and our descendants, to our histories and our futures, as well as to colonizers and their literal and ideological heirs—and that these literary works offer us insight and sometimes helpful pathways for maintaining, rebuilding, or even simply establishing these meaningful connections.

This book is avowedly political, in that it affirms the fundamental rights of Indigenous peoples to the responsible exercise and

expression of our political, intellectual, geographic, and artistic self-determination. It's part survey of the field of Indigenous literary studies, part cultural and family history, and part literary polemic, and asserts the vital significance of our literatures to healthy decolonization efforts and just expressions of community resurgence. Politics without art moves quickly toward efficient dehumanization and intellectual myopia; art without politics descends swiftly into self-referential irrelevance. I look to the formidable Menominee poet Chrystos for guidance here: "I assert that poetry without politics is narcissistic & not useful to us. I also believe that everything is political—there is no neutral, safe place we can hide out in waiting for the brutality to go away." To argue for and produce Indigenous writing *as such* is necessarily to engage in political struggle and to challenge centuries of representational oppression. This book is just one of many volleys in that long rebellion.

A more accurate title for this volume would perhaps be *A Few Reasons Why I Believe Indigenous Literatures Matter Based on My Own Subject Position and Idiosyncratic History and Relationships*. This project doesn't try for comprehensiveness, nor distanced objectivity, although my perspective is, I hope, supported and informed by extensive personal experience as well as professional practice. It comes from the entirety of a professional career learning, studying, teaching, and writing in the field of Indigenous literary studies in Canada and the US, as well as a lifetime of trying to understand the stories that have shaped and influenced me, my family, and my various communities of affiliation and kinship. Other writers and scholars have different ideas about these matters, some complementary, some not; this book is only one of many equally relevant ways of approaching these works. I hope the book helps to expand and complicate these conversations, and that it might inspire readers to take up deeper study in the field, as we are always in need of smart, courageous, and committed thinkers to push our understandings further in challenging and compassionate ways. I very

well might come to different conclusions about these works in the future based on new experiences and further research, but for now, this book will have to work with these particular concerns and considerations.

Many of the arguments in this book won't be particularly controversial to most readers, but others are more provocative. I take full responsibility for both. Ultimately, this book is intended to prompt meaningful discussion and even some debate, but with the larger goal of expanding the circle of welcome and making our ongoing relationships stronger, more honest, and more just. Challenge is not the same thing as rejection or dismissal; we can and must have the hard conversations if we have any hope of a better future. We can have sharp, even contentious arguments, but still return to the conversation and to our relationships when we're done; in other words, we can hold each other to account as we hold each other up—they needn't be mutually exclusive practices. We are sorely in need of more accountable kindness in our critical work as well as in our relationships, and it's my fervent hope that this book holds that principle firmly at its centre.

But kindness shouldn't be mistaken for docility. It's not a kind act to allow problematic or even destructive ideas to pass unchallenged, but we can do so with generosity and empathy, even in the fiercest argument. Sometimes the hardest struggles are with those we love and respect the most. And even when we do struggle, even when we debate and challenge and tussle, we can still love them. It's not and shouldn't be the approach all Indigenous writers take, and it hasn't always been mine, but this is where I hope my contribution might now be most meaningful.

I owe a particular debt of gratitude to the writers, students, teachers, family members, friends, elders, community members, and mentors who have shared their knowledge over the years, who taught, argued, challenged, and struggled with and alongside me through so many conversations, in person, on the page, and on the

screen. Whatever strengths are present in this book are here as a result of their generosity; I take full responsibility for any errors, omissions, or misunderstandings. ❖