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Sôhkêyihta: The Poetry of Sky Dancer by Louise Bernice Halfe and Why Indigenous Literatures Matter by Daniel Heath Justice

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Literature as Conceptual Bridge

***Sôhkêyihta: The Poetry of Sky Dancer* by**

LOUISE BERNICE HALFE

Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2018

\$18.99

***Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* by**

DANIEL HEATH JUSTICE

Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2018

\$19.99

Good literature (and scholarship) force us to question ourselves, the ways we read, and even what we read. Two recent publications explore the ways in which literature in a broad sense can capture the contemporary Indigenous literary imagination. Overall, Louise Bernice Halfe's *Sôhkêyihta: The Poetry of Sky Dancer* and Daniel Heath Justice's *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* are highly recommended for those interested in the richness and diversity of Indigenous cultures and literature. As such, these publications provide the stuff for breaking out of Eurocentric modes of thinking, or challenging our views of literature at a time when climate change demands new ways of seeing and writing about the world. These books also reveal the richness of Indigenous literatures today, from the lyrical to the critical.

Sôhkêyihta: The Poetry of Sky Dancer is an ambitious collection of poetry that engages the reader on a mysterious journey through the Indigenous mind through semi-autobiographical poetry. David Gaertner's useful introduction to the collection locates Halfe's poetry in the context of white culture and colonialism, though it does not fall into the common trap of righteous condemnation common in some postcolonial and decolonial criticism. Essentially, Gaertner shows us the ways in

which Halfe carefully navigates between whiteness and indigeneity. Published by Wilfrid Laurier University Press, the collection of poetry attempts to work through the traumas of colonialism and the strength of native peoples to hold onto their stories. Through her poetry, Halfe thus reminds us of the importance of resilience: to have courage, to be brave, and to be strong. Such traits are necessary now as we face of unprecedented climate change.

The speaker of the collection, it can be said, is the "Turn-around Woman," who takes the reader on a journey through inherited stories, the desperation of an Indigenous family with deep problems, and the tenderness of words that can be used to soothe a deep historical ache. The result is at times sad, heart-rending, and even comical. However, while the poems are wide-ranging, there is a genuineness to Halfe's poetry that is refreshing. The authenticity and poignancy of Halfe's poetry are some of the defining strengths of the collection.

The larger questions that the book forces us to ask are the timeless questions that resist an easy answer. While the collection does not suggest direct solutions to environmental crises nor does it advocate collective action, it does provide an alternative view of the world. The inclusion of a Cree glossary is very helpful in this respect, since it provides new vocabulary to describe the natural world. If we are to envision a truly better tomorrow, we need to escape the confines of the English language to find new terms, new concepts, and new ways of seeing the environment. Such a development would parallel transnational shifts within the environmental humanities that "[recognize] ethnic and national particularities and yet [transcend] ethnic and national boundaries"

(Adamson and Slovic 6). As such, *Sôhkêyihta: The Poetry of Sky Dancer* provides conceptual poetic windows into another culture, which is an essential component if we are talking about the possible development of a truly global environmental ethos.

While Halfe's *Sôhkêyihta: The Poetry of Sky Dancer* brings the reader into contact with Indigenous literary voices, Daniel Heath Justice's *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* instead provides both a survey of Indigenous literary scholarship and a provocative call for more critical work. The book is structured around four essential questions: How do we learn to be human? How do we behave as good relatives? How do we become good ancestors? And how do we learn to live together? The investigation of these important questions leads to interesting conclusions that challenge the reader's common assumptions about Indigenous literatures. Justice asserts that Indigenous writers engage these questions to force us to rethink about the relationships between colonizers and the colonized.

Why Indigenous Literatures Matter is written for a generalist audience. Published by Wilfrid Laurier University Press, it will be most interesting to those working in the

often radical and always interdisciplinary fields of enquiry that called themselves 'studies'[:] Gender, feminist, queer, race, postcolonial and subaltern studies, alongside cultural studies, [and] film, (Braidotti 15)

since concepts are easily shared and adopted across these often-overlapping fields. *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* is

both a justification and call for further study into Indigenous literatures. Justice asserts:

By virtue of their very existence, Indigenous literatures affirm Indigenous experiences, presence, and possibility. (208)

While I find *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* daring and provocative, I am less convinced by the polemical tone of the book, which unnecessarily diminishes what would otherwise be a rich critical study into another ideological text. However, given the relative lack of study into Indigenous literatures globally, perhaps a manifesto is what is needed. *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* certainly succeeds in providing a solid survey of the field as well as frame the contemporary discussion about Indigenous literatures. As such, it is a valuable contribution to the field. Minor gripes about the book include the polemical tone, which will be too provocative for a conservative academic audience. The inclusion of a bibliographic essay at the end of the book also seems unnecessary. These minor complaints, however, do not detract from what is a very interesting critical discussion.

Together, *Sôhkêyihta: The Poetry of Sky Dancer* and *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* provide a glimpse into the breadth and diversity of contemporary Indigenous literatures today. From the lyrical to the critical, these works successfully engage in the contemporary Indigenous discussion. Indigenous forms of knowledge and non-western epistemologies can provide much material for the movement towards sustainable cultures. As such, these books are highly recommended.

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CHAD WEIDNER teaches English and creative writing at University College Roosevelt, an undergraduate faculty of Utrecht University, in the Netherlands. He has presented his research in Africa, Asia, North America, and throughout Europe. Chad is author of *The Green Ghost: William Burroughs and the Ecological Mind* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2016). He co-edited a special issue of *Comparative American Studies* on the Beat Generation (2013), and has various projects in the works. He serves on the Executive Board of the European Beat Studies Network.