

“THIS BOOK IS OURS. THIS BOOK
BELONGS TO ALL OF US.”

*A Conversation on Why Indigenous Literatures
Matter with author Daniel Heath Justice*

INTERVIEWED BY SMOKII SUMAC

Why Indigenous Literatures Matter

Daniel Heath Justice

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Smokii Sumac is a proud member of the Ktunaxa Nation located in what is currently southeastern British Columbia. He is a PhD candidate in Indigenous studies at Trent University, where his research centres on “coming home” stories and reconnection to Indigenous identity/community as an adoptee and a two-spirit person. Over the past four years Smokii has taught Indigenous literature and creative writing at Trent, and he has also recently begun teaching “KTUN 100: Intro to the Ktunaxa People” at the College of the Rockies. Smokii identifies as queer, transmasculine, two-spirit, a poet, an uncle, an auntie, and a cat person. He accepts he/him/his or they/them/theirs as pronouns. Smokii’s work has been published in *Write Magazine* and, under his former name (he is a man of many names), in *Canadian Literature*, *Aanikoobijigan// Waawaashkeshi* (a project by Anishinaabe/Métis artist Dylan Miner), and on coffee sleeves in local Peterborough coffee shops as one of the winners of the e-city lit artsweek contest in 2014. Smokii currently lives in Nogojiwanong (Peterborough, Ontario) with his cat Miss Magoo, and he plans on returning to ʔamaʔis Ktunaxa in the summer of 2018.

Daniel Heath Justice is a Colorado-born Canadian citizen of the Cherokee Nation. He currently holds the Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Literature and Expressive Culture. He is the author of *Our Fire Survives the Storm: A Cherokee Literary History* and, most recently, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, as well as numerous essays in the field of Indigenous literary studies. He is co-editor of a number of critical and creative anthologies and journals, including the award-winning *The Oxford Handbook of Indigenous American Literature* (with James H. Cox)

and *Sovereign Erotics: A Collection of Two-Spirit Literature* (with Qwo-Li Driskill, Deborah Miranda, and Lisa Tatonetti). He is also the author of *Badger* in the celebrated Animal series from Reaktion Books (UK) and the Indigenous epic fantasy novel, *The Way of Thorn and Thunder: The Kynship Chronicles*.

Daniel's current projects include a collection of essays titled *This Hummingbird Heart: Indigenous Writing, Wonder, and Desire*, a collection on Indigenous responses to settler colonial land privatization (co-edited with Jean M. O'Brien), and a cultural history of raccoons.

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THE FIRST TIME I MET Daniel Heath Justice, I was invited to a dinner with him by my honours supervisor Deanna Reder, who was trying to convince me to apply to graduate school. As we visited, it came to a point where Deanna told Daniel, "Please help me convince Smokii to go do his master's degree."

"Oh, I don't tell anyone to go to grad school," Daniel said, to Deanna's horror. He went on to explain how difficult the grad school experience can be, before adding, "But I'll always support anyone who makes this decision." Of course, his honesty did not stop me from going. I applied for, attended, and completed the master's that Deanna suggested, and have now continued on into my PhD, but I was always grateful for his honesty. Perhaps it gave me a little more preparedness going into that MA year which I have deemed now "the worst year of my life." In any case, if it wasn't for folks like Deanna and Daniel, I would not be here today, beginning the task of producing a dissertation in the field of Indigenous literary studies.

Daniel and I have connected a few more times over the years, and while we haven't spent too much time face-to-face, I am happy to call him a friend, a mentor, and, most recently, a member of my PhD committee. When Dave Gaertner asked me to interview him for the launch of his latest book *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, it was an immediate "Yes." Daniel mentioned his Toronto launch, and I decided to drive in to meet him at Glad Day Bookshop, the world's oldest LGBTQ bookstore, which also serves as a cafe and community space, where I was able to book the back room for our interview. It felt a fitting space for two queer Indigenous folks to share stories for an hour.

The day before we met in Toronto, Alek Minassian drove a rented van into a crowd of pedestrians, killing ten people and injuring sixteen.

Before I met Daniel, the news of Minassian's identification as an "Incel," or "involuntary celibate," was coming out, and the world learned that he had specifically targeted women. It became clear that this act of terrorism was a violent form of misogyny. Unable to ignore this as we met only a few neighbourhoods from where it happened, this is where my conversation with Daniel started:

SS: I feel like context matters, and I feel like we're in Toronto, and this thing just happened in Toronto, right? There's this conversation happening right now, that I think, something that I've been thinking about so much is masculinity, and so one of the places I want to start ... Do I want to start here? ... So ... Sherman¹ is in your book.

DHJ: Yes ... I struggled with including Alexie, and this was before the big revelations. Well, before I was aware of the extent to which his impact was catastrophic for so many people. So, I struggled about putting that in there, and my gut was telling me not to, but I did it anyway, which I'm still questioning.

What was interesting is that the distributors in the States really wanted a blurb from a recognizable name and they suggested Alexie, and I said no. Again, this was all well before the big revelations, but there were enough things we all already knew so that I didn't feel comfortable having his name attached to a book that was about generosity.

And you know? I'm not particularly praising of his short story ... But the reality is that any book is going to be dealing with problematic personalities, because we have a lot of problematic personalities in the field. And because a lot of us are problematic in different ways, right? And I think there is also an honesty in that. I mean there are certain people I didn't include, because I know too much about their damaging impact. But there are also people in there who, you know, they're problematic and they're challenging, and they're difficult in some ways, but they're also doing some really astonishing stuff. Now that we know more, I think the story is a lot more telling about Alexie's particular gendered attitudes, and it's much more disturbing as a result. So, maybe that's an important thing to acknowledge as well.

¹ Sherman Alexie has recently been accused by multiple women of sexual harassment. In this question, I am referring to a section in the chapter titled "How Do We Become Good Ancestors" in *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, in which Daniel examines Alexie's story "The Sin Eaters." (132-35)

SS: Definitely. As someone who is beginning to do a dissertation, I'm really interested in your methodology. I can't believe how much stuff I have not read that is in this book, and I've been doing Indigenous literature for a long time. I think that's very exciting. And I think you do outline it within the text, that you are specifically focusing on people and texts that deserve more attention.

DHJ: As long as I've been in the field I've always been drawn to outliers, and to works that were a little bit weird, and non-canonical or just really astonishing, and I never understood why they weren't getting taken up. As long as I've been teaching, I've always made sure I was never teaching just the canonical works, but works that deserved attention, or odd works that didn't quite fit in particular parameters that students would maybe be expecting, because I learned very early on that most of the Indigenous writers students are going to encounter are going to be the same handful of names. That's the last thing they need from an Indigenous lit class that's focused on Indigenous literature, right?

So early on, as a graduate student, my determination was to just mix it up, and now, lo these many years later, I actually am in a very privileged position that I can write a book and just say, "*I'm writing about these texts because I want to.*" I don't feel a particular pressure to write about a particular canon of works, and in retrospect I could have done even more weird stuff, and weird not in a derogatory way, but just unexpected works.

I just wanted more voices out there, and part of it is I've had the very great fortune of knowing and working with so many great writers and watching their work wither on the vine because people aren't reading them. Or just kind of watching them struggle with brilliant work that is so far beyond the canonical stuff, but for whatever reason, maybe because they were queer, or maybe because they were more urban, or maybe because they were different kinds of stylists, or maybe because they had what some people thought was an inconvenient identity, or maybe because they were more historical, or maybe because they wrote in a particular genre. A lot of folks can't do their art because they can't make a living at it and they have to work full time to be able just to put food on the table, and one thing I never wanted my classes or my scholarship to do was to replicate particular problematic power dynamics. You can't completely extricate yourself from that, because also you have to introduce your students to some of the canonical names ...

SS: Do we?

DHJ: Well, I think if you're going to go on, you kind of have to know who some of these folks are, but you have to know more than that. Because our field is so much more than the big names – there are other incredible writers who deserve more attention. So yeah, I think it's important that people know who Leslie Marmon Silko is, but I think people also need to know who Joanne Arnott is. We need to know who Richard Wagamese is, but we also need to know who Smokii Sumac is, right?

SS: [laughs]

DHJ: But seriously. I think these are the things we have to think about.

SS: If we're mirroring that canon, that's a problem, right? Because it's a colonial concept. And I think what you talk about in the book is that the power comes from settler colonialism: the power to make those decisions. It's sort of what happened with Sherman Alexie. There's some really great articles out there saying,² you know, all of these teachers are going, "So what text do I teach now?" And the real question is, "Why were you only teaching one text?" right? So, I think bringing in the new pieces is really important, and I also think that connects to concepts of kinship and relationality. I think one of the understandings that I have of this, that I think is not necessarily directly in your book, but I think about if we're talking about students, in general, there's a relationship there, and so how do we mentor our students in the same way that you're talking about [in the book]. How do you create relationships in your classroom?

DHJ: I think the big thing is a pedagogy of ... enthusiasm. The reason I'm in the field is that I love this work, and I think so often in our studies we are encouraged to strip love and passion and excitement and just fannish delight out of the work we do and get this kind of distanced relationship, but it's that connectedness that brings us in and keeps us here. So one thing I encourage my students [to do] is "follow your bliss." And you know, it's not always going to be happy. Some of the works that we connect with are gut-wrenching and painful but they speak to

² <https://www.indianz.com/News/2018/03/12/jacqueline-keeler-why-reading-sherman-al.asp> and <https://electricliterature.com/what-do-the-allegations-against-sherman-alexie-mean-for-native-literature-70ed9eb2df?gi=eb5cd431da59>.

us, they speak to our truths in ways that other works don't. Follow that instinct. Go to that.

SS: I have to thank you, because I've been teaching ... and I don't know if you knew this, but my final paper for the course the last two years has been "Why does Indigenous literature matter?" and I've always talked about how this question comes from you, and I assign the blog that this book comes out of, but the interesting thing for me is that I say to them: "Why does Indigenous literature matter *to you*?" ... And I think, when we think about that, "follow your bliss," our students are coming in ... and they're like, "I have to talk about myself?" ... and it took me, I mean, I'm still struggling, it's taken me to this level of graduate work to be able to actually feel that it's valid work. And I think you've done that so well ... How do you trust that voice? How do you trust that story?

DHJ: Well, I think you just have to go where people are. And some students aren't going to have a lot of context, and so they're gonna go with what's really comfortable and what's really familiar, and that's okay. And then other students are going to be ready to just hurl themselves into the unknown, and some are going to be like, "I don't like to read, but I like graphic novels" ... well then, let's get you a graphic novel, right?

I think, like our stories, our stories teach us very different things depending where we are in our lives, and so does our literature. I think, if I have a student who is very much an English lit nerd, and really, they like very canonical style "literary" novels and poetry that has lots of deep symbolism with formal stanzas, then we find them that work, and I introduce them to some work that maybe pushes a little bit on the boundaries, and then, you know, they'll read it, and they'll read a little bit more. I've never had a student who engaged these works in these ways, who, if something caught their attention, didn't want to keep going.

Because I was a terribly snobby student as an undergrad. Profoundly. I was exactly the kind of student people would have hated. Because I believed that there was high "Literature" and low-, *lowbrow* art. Now, I would still read the lowbrow art, but secretly and furtively, right? But I really believed in this class structure because of my own class anxieties. I didn't read a work of Indigenous literature until my last year of undergrad ... I remember going to a student conference and Joy Harjo was the speaker and I didn't want to go to her talk. And in retrospect I am mortified and horrified by that. But that was where I was.

I was going to go into Gothic lit, and I shared my graduate statement with a professor [who taught Latinx literatures] ... and all of the sudden I heard him laughing and laughing and he came over and he said, "Son, let's have a talk," and it was like, "Oh no!" And he said, "Daniel, I just want you to answer me one question: What can you bring to Gothic literature?" And I didn't have an answer for him. He said, "Son, Why don't you go into Native literature? You talk about how you want to connect more with that? Why don't you go into Native lit?" And I actually said, "Can you do that?" I had no idea. This was my fourth year in university. I was an English major, and I had no idea.

So I was that student. I was a detribalized Indigenous student who wanted to be apart from that as much as possible. So when I see my students who are in the class who are really struggling with preconceptions, I'm like, you know what? You be where you need to be and I'm going to introduce some things and you may pick them up, and you may not, but you *will never be able to say you didn't know*.

SS: I'm sort of laughing because I feel like I told the exact same story to my students constantly. I came to study Shakespeare ... and then I'm laughing about the Joy Harjo moment, because Daniel ... I HATED *Kynship*!³ I did not want to read *Kynship*, I did not want to read fantasy. I was so like, "I am not a nerd." And it's hilarious because now *Kynship* is probably the book that I give out to most of my students ...

So, what is Indigenous literature?

DHJ: It's whatever we create to carry our stories and understandings of the world outside of ourselves. It's inscribed, it's embodied, it's in various media. I think we have to trouble our concept of literature. But, it is the material content/context or the stories, songs, and other expressive experiences of our lives. It's anything that we use to communicate who we are in the world, outside of our own selves. And that's in all of our languages, it's in various media, it's in various forms.

SS: So we have to trouble what literature is, and we have to trouble what Indigenous is. I think one of the important conversations happening in this book is combatting the conversation that settlers (and you also trouble the concept of settlers) are getting about Indigeneity. You talk about Joseph Boyden, and you talk about these sorts of discussions, and

³ Daniel's book *Kynship* is the first book in his trilogy *The Way of Thorn and Thunder*, published by Kegedonce Press, 2005.

yet, one of the biggest things that happens, that I fear ... is the student who comes into my classroom and who is apologetic because they don't know who they are, they don't have their connection, and those insecurities that get brought up whenever we, I mean, we've cancelled Boyden, and so what does that do in our communities, right? ... And how do we complicate that so that we're still opening doors?

DHJ: Well, this is something I think about a lot because we see it all the time. We see it on social media, we see it in our communities, the call-outs, the questioning of peoples' identities, you know, sometimes for very good reasons like with Boyden and then oftentimes just for really shitty, petty reasons, and I think what worries me is that it's so often a very flattened out and reductive conversation that presumes complexity as the exception rather than the rule. Everybody's got a complex story. And as I said in the book, you know some people are really fortunate to have their family stories passed from cradle to grave, but most of us aren't that lucky. And I'm very fortunate that my lineage is pretty clear, but I wasn't raised knowing that, it's been a process of learning as I've grown older. I think we have to challenge appropriation while leaving space for those complicated stories, but I think we also have to leave space for the people whose families have been connected and have been able to hold on to those things and pass them down, who often get displaced when we're focusing only on the stories of those who weren't connected, right? So, I think we need it all. And ultimately, *I think we have to be a lot kinder to one another.*

SS: And also, it's that thing of, you know what? We've been critiquing people like Sherman Alexie and Joseph Boyden for a long time based on their work.

DHJ: Right!

SS: An assignment in my class is that they have to go out and find a piece of Indigenous literature on their own, and the majority of them come in with Joseph Boyden, which now I have to say, "This is why we're not teaching that," and I've had W.P. Kinsella come in ...

DHJ: I'm not surprised.

SS: ... and Sherman Alexie. These are the books that their parents have on the shelves. These are the only books, right? So, but I think I keep going back to this, because I think what you did here was you are combatting that in a very clear way, by saying I'm not going to talk about the stories that are on the shelves. And I think you also seek to include conversations that are really necessary right now. If you can speak to some of these conversations, like you're talking about 2SQ folks and the importance of our inclusion.

DHJ: ... I'm just tired of not having queer and two-spirit Indigenous people as part of the baseline conversation, but always needing to be supplemental ... The field is figured in masculinist terms even now, even though most of the work is by women, and increasingly queer and two-spirit folks of multiple genders. So, there's a weird disconnect between the reality and the perception, and we have to be able to challenge that. We have to be able to engage that in ways that are honourable and just.

I thought that it was really important, and to have that in multiple chapters, you know? We're not just gonna talk about queerness in one chapter, we're gonna talk about queerness in another chapter, and we're going to drop books in throughout, because *we belong here*. We are part of all these conversations.

SS: Yeah, Indigenous queer normativity! Like Leanne writes about.⁴

... Another thing I always have to thank you for is that, as a Canadian scholar ... I mean ... As a *Ktunaxa* scholar [laughter] living in what is currently Canada, I always learn from you. Because that colonial border is so strong, and so I know so little about Cherokee history, and between you and Qwo-Li,⁵ I feel like I have a tiny little window in. You taught me about Freedmen,⁶ which, you know, I'm ashamed to say ... there's this sort of this periphery that I have, but I think it speaks to the fact that I've been studying Indigenous literature and Indigenous studies for this long, and you addressed the anti-blackness and the erasure that happens within our communities in this book.

DHJ: Well, and part of that is also to hold myself accountable, because there are also real gaps in my own knowledge and understanding and

⁴ Leanne Simpson's *As We Have Always Done*.

⁵ Qwo-Li Driskill, a non-citizen Cherokee descendant poet and scholar.

⁶ In the "Introduction" to *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, Daniel discusses "The Freedmen," who "are descendants of Black people (including many Black Indians) enslaved by members of the 'Five Civilized Tribes'" (15).

experience. And you know I'm part of that erasure as well. I've spent much of my career not engaging blackness in a substantive way, and that's on me, right? When we're talking about Indigenous literary studies we also need to talk about those erasures, right? And, it was before I knew this that I was writing about this, but also to find out that I have very clear familial ties to chattel slavery in the Cherokee Nation. I should have known that would be the case – I was hoping not, but I was thinking about this before there was that personal connection. Because *you don't work towards justice only when it affects you*. Not if you're sincere about it, right? But, I think we have to deal with that. We have to address that.

And also address the fact that we have a whole lot of Black Indian relatives who are part of our conversations, too, many of whom don't talk about their Indigeneity because they've been shamed, or they've had violence perpetrated against them for that reason, and there are a lot of connections we can make between all of these different communities, and we *have* to make [them] if we're going to have any integrity in the work we do. But, especially for someone like me who is light-skinned. In many places it's a lot easier for me as a Cherokee Nation citizen to claim Indigeneity than it is for a Black-coded Cherokee Nation citizen to do the same ... And we have to be dealing with that in our literature as well. I'm still trying to find more Freedmen writers to cite and engage, and that's also illuminating. *We have a lot of work to do*.

SS: Right. I think one of the best panels I've been on was at Canadian Festival of Spoken Word, and it was, there was six of us, all Black and Indigenous women and LGBTQ folk, and the panel was on love poems. So, it wasn't on us being Black and Indigenous and queer, it was just letting us talk about something else. And I think making that space is so important, and I'm grateful for that conversation happening in this text as well.

One of the things that I teach about Indigenous literatures, and I think that you're talking about it throughout this text, is that *we write out of love*. We write out of care and kinship and all of these relationships and this web. And I find that so ... it's ... it shouldn't be revolutionary? Not to us, I feel like it's not *to us*, but I feel like to settler folks, deconstructing the "angry savage" stereotype, is something that's so hugely ... I mean, my students are surprised when I teach love poems, or love stories, they kind of come expecting something different.

DHJ: I think it actually is radical, for even our own. I mean, it took me a long time to love my family, in that way, in all our complicated humanity. Like, I loved my parents deeply, but I had a lot of internalized shame. It took me a long time to love myself, where I'm from, and love my body, and to think of myself as having a body that could be loved and was loveable. And now I just want to love all the time.

SS: All the love!! [laughter]

DHJ: I think it is revolutionary for us, too. And that says a lot to me about how we've been trained by settler-colonial society. And you know, that's for straight folks as well as queer/2S. Our bodies are widely marked as sites worthy of violence but not kindness, not tenderness, not care, so that's, that's a horrible thing. That's a horrific legacy, but it's the reality for us as Indigenous people, even now. And so I think that is one of the things we have to do in the field, is just to affirm love. It doesn't have to be a romantic love. It can be all kinds of love, but that baseline of care. Also, love for the other-than-human relatives that we have in the world. A love for the world, for the land, for the waters, for the air. A love that is bigger than us, but includes us.

SS: When I'm thinking about this revolution of love, I think you also are actively not focusing on texts that I would say are ... "trauma porn." You've talked about this publicly before, of the field. I think my students come in expecting that.

DHJ: Oh, of course they do. Of course they do! And this is the twisted thing in this larger society, is that *trauma has become the authenticating factor for Indigenous experience in this country*. So that people are looking for the traumatic narrative, and if they don't find it there's something wrong with your Indigeneity. And I find that to be such a soul-deep sickness. Because what it requires is the continuing re-infliction of trauma on generation after generation after generation in order to be Indigenous. That Indigeneity is somehow figured as trauma. What a fucking horror.

But, our students are marinated in this concept of trauma as authenticity, and so they look for it, and they can't help themselves sometimes, and you have to kind of push actively against that. And you don't go to the flipside and say, "well everything is happy and wonderful and lovely" but what you can do is complicate those narratives and say "okay, yes, there's a lot of really awful stuff happening here, but it is not what determines peoples' being." It can't be, because if it is we don't continue.

If we're nothing but trauma, there's no future. *We can experience trauma, and not be made of it.* But our students, I mean so often they are looking for that story, because that's the only story they ever hear.

SS: Yeah, and it seems to me that that is the story that then justifies the, um, I can't remember the term you used, now ... but us being lesser than ...

DHJ: The deficit.

SS: "The deficit," right. So I find that's the first place they want to go, it's the simplification of the story, right? If the stereotype is drunk Indian, they aren't willing to combat the stereotype ... they don't get there right away that there's, like well, actually there are more sober Indians than there are sober white people if we look at percentages, but they want to go to, "Okay well, yes, there are drunk Indians, but it's drunk Indians because of residential school," right? And they get sort of stuck in this ... How do we explode these sort of concepts?

DHJ: But again, I think it's this idea of being marinated, right? Like, they don't know there are alternative narratives, and they think they're doing a good thing, right? "Well, but they're drunk because of residential school, and residential schools were bad," you know? And that's the extent of it rather than, well, they are more than just drunk. Even the people who are very, very damaged by this experience have other aspects of their lives beyond that, and I think that's one thing that our literature helps us do is to humanize all of those complexities ... Because another flipside with that trauma narrative is it requires settler-colonial violence. *If the only way to be authentically Indigenous is to be traumatized within colonialism, then you have to have colonial violence to be Indigenous, which maintains this relationship in perpetuity.*

SS: Right.

... There's a moment in the book where you talk about our editor, Dave Gaertner. You say that he kept you going, saying, "Yes. You should do this project." For me what stood about that was: you needed Dave to tell you to keep going on this book? What? Like ...?

And I ask that because I think about, I mean, I know that my work is important and yet I'm constantly struggling with this voice of like, is this? ... Should I keep going?

DHJ: No book emerges out of singularity. Every book is a community effort to some degree. And that is absolutely the case of this one, it's entirely a community effort – I mean, this book is the result of a lifetime, or a career at least, of conversations. And teachings I've received and learning that I've done and I've learned from my students, and I've learned from my junior colleagues and from my senior colleagues, and I've learned from my peers and from writers, and my family, and, you know, people who didn't necessarily like me, and you know I've learned from all of this, all of these people.

One thing I wanted to do was honour and acknowledge the community I'm a part of, the many communities I'm a part of, but especially the Indigenous lit community because this book is *them* in so many ways ... Yeah, my name is on the cover, but *this book is ours*. *This book belongs to all of us*. And where I've screwed up? That's my responsibility. You know, I'm acknowledging the influences and the work, but the choices in this book are my choices. They are my responsibility.

SS: And I'm thinking about the ways that those sort of reciprocal things ... our ceremonies, our communities working together, you touch on this throughout ... it is about consistently learning, and then whenever you learn something, it's your responsibility to honour that by giving it, by passing it on. To seek out people who know a little bit more than you to ask those questions, and to continue teaching people who may not know as much about this specific thing.

DHJ: Right.

SS: Do you have a favourite part of the book?

DHJ: You know I actually think the bibliography. In a weird nerdy way, I'm really happy with it, just because it's a very different kind of bibliography. Also the "Reading the Ruptures" chapter, the family chapter. The book wasn't quite complete and that was not a planned chapter, so it was one of those kind of flashes, like, "Oh, that's what's missing. I need to ground this in a different way as well." So I think that, for me, was an important chapter to write.

SS: I appreciate that because I think it was the first time that I was like, "We're getting a little bit of Daniel, Yaaay!," and you know, not that you don't ... You give so much consistently, but I think this was the first

time that I got a little bit more into that space, and I think that's where our field is heading, right? Grounding these things in our experiences.

DHJ: One of the reasons why I thought that was an important piece to write was it's really easy to write a book like this as a voice of authority, even with all the caveats going through. And I think one thing that chapter does is complicate the authority because it makes really clear that I was not raised in community, and it makes really clear the challenges of, you know, both me and my dad in coming to a deeper knowledge of who we were as Cherokee people, as Cherokee Nation citizens, so I'm not coming to this work with a deeply grounded cultural knowledge from having been raised in northeast Oklahoma. That's not my story. I'm learning, too ... I'm still learning about my family, I'm still learning about our legacies and lineages and histories. I'm learning the language now, I'm taking language classes ...

SS: So exciting.

DHJ: ... and I'm terrible at it, but I'm learning, right? And I think it was also important to thwart the potential that readers would have of reading me as a Cherokee authority, as a cultural authority, because I'm determinedly not. I'm a learner, too. And that was a scary chapter to write, in some ways.

SS: I'm really grateful for that grounding, and I think it's really important that we all continue, because by telling your story in it as well, we all continue to complicate, right? To complicate that ... whatever anyone thought of Daniel Heath Justice, Cherokee writer, now you've validated your own story, and complicated it in a way that is important.

What didn't make it in the book? What's the one text you wish you included – do you have one?

DHJ: Ugh! There are so many that didn't make it in. I wish I would have brought at least one children's book in. And I think the one I wish I would have found a way to talk about is Joy Harjo's *For a Girl Becoming*, which I think is just one of the most stunning books ever written. That's a big gap in the book, in retrospect. And you know? That's for somebody else to write. I mean, right now I feel like this is my final statement on Indigenous lit for a good long while, because I want to start moving into creative work.

SS: Yaaaay! I was going to ask that! What's coming next? please!

DHJ: Yes! So I've plotted the first book in a new dark fantasy trilogy, I just haven't had time to write it, and then I do have a sequel to *The Way of Thorn and Thunder* in mind and it's the generation that follows Tarsa and Toby and it's actually an allotment story. *The Way of Thorn and Thunder* was a removal story and this one's going to be an allotment story that also takes up slavery.

SS: I was just talking to someone, you know, "I'm meeting up with Daniel," and they were like, "Oh! that's so exciting. I'm savouring *Kynship* right now. I don't want it to end." And so now I have to redeem myself, because I've reread it now, and I love it now, you know it's so nice to break out of that shame into self-love. I can love the fact that I am a total nerd, now. So I said to them, "Tarsa is my forever crush. Like forever." [laughter]

Okay, so there's so much work and it's hard to keep up, I have to ask: What are you reading now? What eight books did you pack with you?

DHJ: You know me too well!

SS: [laughing] 'cause I do the same thing.

DHJ: I'm waiting for Rebecca Roanhorse's *Trail of Lightning*, which is a post-apocalyptic Indigenous fantasy novel that's coming out soon.

SS: Oh, my god. Amazing ... my next is *Johnny Appleseed*.

DHJ: You will *love* that book.

SS: We've made it to the final question. Why should they read your book?

DHJ: Because they will engage with the most astonishing array of Indigenous creative minds and they will find multiple people there whose work they want to follow. The reason to read it is just to engage with some really, really stunning writers, and this is kind of my love letter to the writers who've inspired me, and I want more people to love them and buy their works and support them so they can continue to create amazing worlds and welcome us into them.