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The Transit Of Empire: Indigenous Critiques Of Colonialism (First Peoples: New Directions Indigenous)



Synopsis

In 1761 and again in 1768, European scientists raced around the world to observe the transit of Venus, a rare astronomical event in which the planet Venus passes in front of the sun. In *The Transit of Empire*, Jodi A. Byrd explores how indigeneity functions as transit, a trajectory of movement that serves as precedent within U.S. imperial history. Byrd argues that contemporary U.S. empire expands itself through a transferable "Indianness" that facilitates acquisitions of lands, territories, and resources. Examining an array of literary texts, historical moments, and pending legislations—from the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma's vote in 2007 to expel Cherokee Freedmen to the Native Hawaiian Government Reorganization bill—Byrd demonstrates that inclusion into the multicultural cosmopolis does not end colonialism as it is purported to do. Rather, that inclusion is the very site of the colonization that feeds U.S. empire. Byrd contends that the colonization of American Indian and indigenous nations is the necessary ground from which to reimagine a future where the losses of indigenous peoples are not only visible and, in turn, grievable, but where indigenous peoples have agency to transform life on their own lands and on their own terms.

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Customer Reviews

What does it mean to be in transit? To be made to move? Through tracing the concept of "Indianness" as it travels across settler colonial contexts, author Jodi A. Byrd takes on these questions and much more in her critical reading of colonialism and imperialism in the "New World." Byrd, a citizen of the Chickasaw Nation of Oklahoma and professor of American Indian studies and English, has produced an intricate analysis of the workings of U.S. empire that invites readers to think differently about indigeneity and race in settler colonial contexts. In Byrd's reading of global systems, racialization and colonization work together to secure Anglo-American state dominance. But *The Transit of Empire* takes up concerns beyond identifying the workings of power that define colonizer and colonized. Byrd decenters this vertical axis to examine horizontal relationships between Indigenous peoples and racialized peoples (including those she calls "arrivants," borrowing the term from Kamau Brathwaite: people of African descent whose presence on Turtle Island is a result of the transatlantic slave trade). Importantly, Byrd works to reject the notion that these horizontal relationships must be primarily be read as a zero-sum competition for position within the colonial power structure. To do this expansive work, Byrd's methodology of "cacophony" reads across points of place/location and points of time. This reading rejects the notion of singular, linear histories and stories. Instead, Byrd takes on the detailed work of showing the contested purposes to which histories, theories, and narratives are directed. Byrd grounds her study in critical Indigenous thought, putting existing authors in this field (including Gerald Vizenor, J. Kāhulani Kauanui [Kanaka Maoli], and Jean M.

I completed this book and took a breath, for a moment, with gratitude. As an Anishinabe person, an aspiring scholar, I am deeply encouraged by Jodi Byrd. It is powerful to take in the work of this text, the work of a Chickasaw woman intricately theorizing in conversation with critical theory. I am encouraged by Byrd's call for Indigenous voices to be central to this conversation, particularly in critiques of colonialism on our own lands. While this kind of theoretical work is not for everyone (and by this I mean it is dense and challenging), its heart and meaning are essential to life. *The Transit of Empire* is an offering. It is a journey that complicates time and place, relying on literature, legal, political and cultural production to examine how the construction of "Indians" and "Indianness" have served the relentless drive of U.S. empire. Byrd carefully demonstrates how projects of empire-building have not rested, despite the indolence fed by liberal

multiculturalism's myths of postcolonial and/or postracial life. The theft of Indigenous lands is not a discrete historical moment that can be looked upon regrettably; indeed, the workings of empire are tenaciously and ceaselessly committed to create, use, and erase "Indians" for their own purposes. The texts, times and places that are drawn in to this text may feel disparate or disconnected. Yet Byrd urges us to read differently, considering constellations of relationships among histories and geographies in very complex ways. It is a challenge. It is confusing. But this approach, it feels old, like remembering. And somehow, at the same time, listening to or welcoming in multiple ways of seeing the world is also proposing something new.

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