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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, grieveable, but where indigenous peoples have agency to transform life on their own lands and on their own terms.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Theoretically rich, and broad in its intellectual scope, *The Transit of Empire* puts Indianness at the center of American histories that are not only national, but explicitly imperial and colonial. Jodi

Byrd's brilliant critique of contemporary multicultural liberalism places American Indian and Indigenous studies in close dialogue with postcolonial scholarship, transforming both in the process. It is a work of power, complexity, and commitment, and should not be missed by anyone in these fields." Philip Deloria "The Transit of Empire is a sophisticated and groundbreaking work of indigenous critical theory in which Jodi Byrd reveals and explores the cacophonies of colonialism in literary, historical, and political settings." Kevin Bruyneel, Babson College

Jodi A. Byrd is a citizen of the Chickasaw Nation of Oklahoma and assistant professor of American Indian studies and English at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

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. The concept of transit is difficult to clarify, it keeps the reader in a state of questioning and flux. This is what it feels like, to be unsure, to have meaning displaced. Or to have meaning taken from you, held out of reach. Byrd generously weaves Indigenous thinking (from

many nations) into the book, offering a kind of root system, a grounding beneath dense brush. Byrd complicates the relationship between the colonized and colonizer, or the Indigenous person and the settler. This relationship may be seen as the essential, perhaps the only relation involved in the equation of settler colonialism. This binary relation is insufficient as it erases other peoples forced onto stolen lands by projects foundational to the empire-building of European nations as well as the United States. These projects include the transatlantic slave trade, which also cannot be seen as a moment in the past to look back on with regret or worse, to forget. Referencing poet Kamau Brathwaite, Byrd offers 'arrivant' as an addition to the Indigenous/settler relationship. This move is helpful insofar as it guides us towards acknowledging a more complex set of relationships. But it still does not feel sufficient. To have arrived somewhere and to have been forced there are two very different things. The term does not attend to the depth, the horror, the ongoing resonances of these experiences. Its use seems inconsistent with the generous care taken throughout the book, in how language is used and how connections are interwoven. Overall, Byrd has given us a gift. It is an encouragement and a challenge. Her work calls attention to the future now, what might otherwise be possible. At the center is land and life, integrity and generosity. I am grateful for the tracks left here for others to follow, or, to pick up and take in other directions. This book is critical reading for those interested or invested in postcolonial studies and Indigenous Studies, history and the future.

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. Kāhālani Kauanui [Kanakanaka Maoli], and Jean M. O'Brien [White Earth Ojibwe]) into conversation across texts and disciplines. Using examples from literature ranging from William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* to Wilson Harris's *Jonestown*, law and politics in North America/Turtle Island and beyond, and moments in culture from the birth of the blues to performance art, Byrd produces a multi-layered critique of liberal multicultural democracy. Still not sure if this book is for you? Who (else) should read this book? If you work with contemporary Western social and political thought, you will find familiar points of reference here. Byrd places her theorizing in conversation with many popular Western theorists (an A-to-Z of Agamben, Bahktin, Deleuze and Guattari, Hardt and Negri, Rancière, and Žižek, to name just a few) and invites new critical engagements with their work. Readers of postcolonial theory (Bhabha, Said, and Spivak, for example) will also find this material revisited here. The bottom line: Byrd reminds us that the work of decolonization must be grounded in Indigenous knowledges and relationships to land. *The Transit of Empire* relays this message through an impressive work of critical Indigenous theory: broad in its scope, interdisciplinary in its methods. Given the rich variety of material covered in this book, I think it is a good one to read with others and discuss together, if you have the option to do so. This is a book that asks for your engaged and focused reading, and it offers to reward that attention with a blossoming of thought and ideas. Where will this notion of transit take you?

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