
J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, ed. *Speaking of Indigenous Politics: Conversations with Activists, Scholars, and Tribal Leaders*. University of Minnesota Press, 2018. 369 pp. ISBN: 9781517904784.

<https://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/speaking-of-indigenous-politics>

As a polyvocal chronicle, critique, and catalyst at the intersections between global and local Indigenous politics, Kanaka Maoli scholar J. Kēhaulani Kauanui's collection is a reinvigorating contribution that limns the ongoing importance of the topics discussed within, even "[a]s the dominant culture continues to marginalize Native issues" (xxi). As such I want to make clear that *Speaking of Indigenous Politics* is vital.

Kauanui's radio show *Indigenous Politics: From Native New England and Beyond* ran between February of 2007 through until July 2013. The broadcast generated almost two hundred conversations with a diverse panoply of voices, all of whom are individually acknowledged at the end of the editor's introduction. Although this book was limited to a selection of twenty-seven perspectives (twenty-eight including Kauanui herself,) I urge readers to take the time to explore the rich catalogue of programmes (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/indigenous-politics-2011/id623837802?mt=2>) for which this collection bears a splendid standard. Keep in mind, however, that the act of putting together a collection of this type is not a straightforward process of curation and conversion from audio to print. Or, rather, this process of curation and conversion is not straightforward. The late Susan Berry Brill de Ramírez employed the term "listener-reader" to evince a relationship of active participation between reader and text (1). Whilst her formulation pertains more specifically to Native American fiction, the concept is salient here too. The position of reader-listener is one that Kauanui places herself in throughout, parsing the particularities of legal cases, critical concepts, and history in such a way as to "become a co-creative participant" in their transmission (Brill de Ramírez 131). Under her guidance, the local remains distinctly local, yet also resonates out into a wider discursive context of Indigenous sovereignty. Consequently, *Speaking of Indigenous Politics'* audience is entreated to follow suit; each reader positions themselves in that same space of active listener-readership.

One might be excused for failing to identify a clear organising principle around which Kauanui situates the myriad discussions presented in this collection. Settler colonialism emerges as the prevailing process of oppression confronting the various Indigenous peoples represented here, but beyond that the tone is loose. The interviews do not unfold chronologically, nor has Kauanui elected to cluster them in thematic subsections. A 2009 interview with Kathleen A. Brown-Pérez (Brothertown Indian Nation) concerning her tribe's continuing pursuit of federal recognition seems as though it would gel cohesively with a pair of discussions with Chief Richard Velky from 2007, in which he diagnoses the chicanery of commercial lobbyists as central to the federal government's withdrawal of acknowledgement for the Schaghticoke Tribal Nation. Despite the evident commonalities, though, these interviews appear at opposite ends of the book. Moreover, the collection's lack of an index prevents interlocutors from cherry-picking isolated soundbites germane to their own research.

Of course, this could be frustrating for some (just show me a scholar who can honestly say they have never taken three index-sourced pages as undergirding for an argument,) and yet these editorial choices are carefully and critically made in order to resist conceptual

compartmentalisation. Kauanui’s refusal to arrange *Speaking of Indigenous Politics* based on easy divisions of affiliation, geography, theoretical field, or indeed along a chrononormative timeline highlights the intermeshed nature of the countervailing colonial forces that continue to suppress Indigenous sovereignties worldwide. As Jessica Cattelino points out in her interview on Seminole gaming, ‘sovereignty’ is a definitionally frustrating term, and this conceptual malleability pulses through the contradistinctive ways in which Kauanui’s dialogists talk through sovereignty. Hone Harawira (Ngāpuhi Nui Tonu) explains that for Māori people “*tino rangatiranga* is absolute chieftom or absolute sovereignty over lands and people” – a concept that was subjected to a calculated differentiation from sovereignty by the English for the purposes of dispossession (137). Elsewhere, Aileen Moreton-Robinson (Quandamooka) emphasises that “Indigenous sovereignty is not necessarily configured through the discourse of rights” despite the importance of Indigenous recognition within the settler-colonial matrix of sovereignty “which is very much shaped by the social contract” (217). Of course, it is precisely this fluidity that renders sovereignty such a significant ideological lodestone for politically and culturally diverse peoples. The troubling of settler classifications of sovereignty, which are entrenched in a monotheistic epistemological history of Eurocentricity, is one facet of what Vizenor terms “shadow survivance” (63), whereby the dominant discourse and its acolytes are confronted with an Indigenous political presence that is neither familiar enough to absorb nor alien enough to expunge. This informs “the anxiety of settler-colonial societies regarding the persistent Indigenous sovereignty question” (Kauanui 355) and each distinct formulation that comes out of these discussions contributes to the “*sui generis* sovereign[ies]” that Vizenor identifies in *Fugitive Poses* as being entangled with transmotion (15).

Robert Warrior (enrolled member of the Osage Nation) speaks with Kauanui about his seminal notion of “intellectual sovereignty” and it bears remembering that, as sovereignty resonates through multivalent registers of expression, so too does settler colonialism. The settler colonial project hinges, in part, on the successive compartmentalisation of Indigenous populations to progressively diminishing and dislocated spaces as part of a multifaceted campaign of erasure against Indigenous sovereignties. Kauanui positions these co-generative discussions on Indigenous sovereignty in a constellational array that abjures such a partitioning of issues. We listener-readers, therefore, are issued with a clarion challenge to trace the vectors that connect the issues and opportunities voiced by the radio show’s (and subsequently this collection’s) contributors. These are conversations that dovetail with one another, but not always in obvious ways. The reader must navigate the pages with agility, reading back – and forward – to understand the multivalent patterns of Indigenous resistance that subvert “the contradiction, the erasure, the invisibility” imposed by settler states (250).

Kauanui speaks with scholars, activists, and leaders from Indigenous communities around the world, spurred by the conviction that “indigeneity is a counterpart analytic to settler colonialism”, and yet her critiques do not fall prey to a homogenising narrative of ubiquity in Indigenous politics (xiv). Kauanui’s queries, prompts, and sparse interjections are generally concise, seldom running for more than three lines of text, and these contributions are characterised by an impressive specificity and a crucial depth of localised understanding. Although the book is suffused with an ethic of coalitional Indigenous solidarity, the interviews are treated “in their immediate context through a global approach to addressing the ongoing nature of settler-colonial domination and Indigenous resistance” (xxiii). For this methodology to remain sufficiently robust, the interviewer must dextrously thread between the local and the

global to avoid synecdochic generalisations. Furthermore, they need to demonstrate acute insight into the specific historical and contemporary forces that confront the interviewee. In *Speaking of Indigenous Politics*, these discussions span varied pressure points including Zionist desecrations of “the oldest and probably the most venerated burial ground in Palestine” (172), Wampanoag language revitalisation efforts in Massachusetts, and the intricate complexities of the late James Luna’s (Luiseño) ironic installation art. Even with such a breadth to contend with, Kauanui pivots unerringly with her guests’ discursive styles, which, given their heterogenous perspectives and backgrounds, are anything but uniform.

Warrior notes in his foreword that Kauanui’s radio show “harnessed [a] subversive energy at a particularly opportune moment, just as international Indigenous politics was coming to a critical juncture” in the wake of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which was adopted in 2007 (ix). And yet one of the attendant perils to any such point of political apogee is the difficulty of nourishing that ‘moment’ and then impelling it into a palpable sense of momentum. This is particularly true when a relatively hypervisible piece of legislation like UNDRIP comes along and courts the risk of eclipsing community-specific Indigenous issues. Tonya Gonnella Frichner (Onondaga Nation) was involved in the drafting process of the UNDRIP, and she warns in *Speaking of Indigenous Politics* that, “for all the wonderful language we have in the declaration”, it must not be taken as sovereignty realised nor justice served. A tremendous synthesis of effort, attention, and acumen is required to sustain the momentum of watershed moments, and the subsurface labour that Kauanui poured into this endeavour deserves recognition. To prepare herself to present, produce, engineer, and direct *Indigenous Politics*, Kauanui undertook a range of training to equip herself with the requisite skillset. This diligence is palpable, conveyed in the lucidity of the discussions presented in *Speaking of Indigenous Politics*.

The publication of this collection six years after *Indigenous Politics*’ final episode and nearly a decade after the majority of the interviews contained within constitutes yet another challenge presented to the attentive listener-reader. Although Kauanui provides a brief update of most of the issues discussed in the interviews’ prefaces, she takes care not to let these primers dominate the conversations that follow. This is in service of more than just the avoidance of spoilers. As I moved forward, backward and all ways in between across the collection, I also found myself exhorted to follow up, compelled to find out what became of and, more importantly, what is still becoming of these situations. In some instances, such as when Kauanui presents two conversations with Margo Tamez (Ndé Konitsaaiigokiyaa’en) concerning Indigenous legal activism against a U.S.-Mexico border wall, the contemporary political ramifications are quite immanent. Others entail longer searches – particularly for geographically and culturally distanced readers like myself – as evidenced by the developments since Kauanui spoke with David Cornsilk (Cherokee Nation) about the range of influences affecting the precarious citizenship rights of Freedmen descendants of African American slaves within the Cherokee Nation. To be sure, the rigamarole of publishing is not famed for expediency, and I don’t mean to hijack Kauanui’s intent here. Nevertheless, whether tactical or epiphenomenal, the timing of this publication could hardly be bettered inasmuch as it reflects and reifies the unabating momentum of these political relationships and struggles. Jean M. O’Brien (enrolled citizen of the White Earth Ojibwe Nation) argues within that settler-colonial polities are characterised by a systematic enterprise of “putting Indians in the past” to “subtly seize indigeneity for themselves”, and her critique applies to Indigenous oppression writ large (245). Kauanui, then, has

accomplished something significant by exploding these political conversations across time, thereby limning their ongoing presence and eschewing historical closure.

The commonalities that Kauanui teases out of these interviews from around the Indigenous world gather in ideological creases. These creases are coalitional sites of multivalent sovereign resistances, that, through Kauanui's adroit editorial efforts, emphasise solidarity in a fashion that still rebukes the kind of toxic equivalence we see come out of reductive settler colonial narratives that decoct Indigenous peoples into indigenous people. As I claimed at the outset, *Speaking of Indigenous Politics* is vital, and I mean that in all connotations of the word.

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Works Cited

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