HOW SHOULD WE TEACH AND LEARN FROM INDIGENOUS LITERATURES?

Position papers by Teachers, Students, and Life-Long Learners

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PART 1
RESPECTING DIFFERENCES: APPROACHING INDIGENOUS LITERATURES

SOPHIE MCCALL, INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2019, I was teaching a graduate course at Simon Fraser University (SFU), English 870: “Visual Sovereignty in Indigenous Film and Film Adaptations,” on the unceded, ancestral territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil Waututh Nations in Vancouver, British Columbia. I am a Scottish-descended, settler scholar and director of SFU’s Masters of Arts for Teachers of English (MATE) program. The aim of the MATE program, with its specialization in Indigenous literatures, is to help teachers gather resources and engage with current critical debates in Indigenous literary studies in order to responsibly teach and do justice to the complexity and diversity of Indigenous literary arts in their BC school classrooms. While the students enrolled in English 870 were non-Indigenous, they came from different backgrounds and nationalities, including white European settler, Asian, Black, immigrant, second-generation, and multiple-generation-Canadian, American, and dual British-Canadian. In addition, they hold different identity markers relating to gender, sexuality, ability, ethnicity, religion, class, community ties, and age, as well as uncountable differences in experiences, life choices, preferences, and personalities. We have included their biographical statements at the beginning of their position papers as a way of highlighting a key tenet in Indigenous studies: our
positionality is a determining factor in how we decode the world and, in turn, how we interpret texts.

The following position papers, written by the participants in English 870 (many of whom were a part of the MATE program) grapple with the central question: “How should we to teach and learn from Indigenous literatures?” In October 2019 we were honoured with a class visit from Kicya7 (Joyce Schneider), Ucwalmicw scholar, who provided us with useful strategies on how to respectfully practice Indigenous (specifically Ucwalmicw) pedagogies and protocols in the classroom and beyond. She stressed that acknowledging the territories under our feet, as a daily practice, and as shaping all of our thinking and doing in every aspect of our lives — “walking the talk,” as she put it — is one of the most important first steps in building better understandings of our responsibilities and roles as teachers and students in Indigenous literary studies. She introduced us to a selection of the twelve Indigenous Protocols that she argues should be practised—including respect, responsibility, relationship-building, reciprocity, humility, and humour, among several others. For Kicya7, enacting Indigenous Protocols are “ways of seeking, making, and sharing knowledge” in order to “disrupt and transform mainstream understandings of Indigenous education.”

The influence of Kicya7’s Protocols extends into the position papers and the articulation of the three sections of this multi-voiced article. In Part 1: Respecting Differences: Approaching Indigenous literatures, the authors place “respect” at the heart of their questions. Scott Lowrie begins with the Stó:lō invocation, “your work is about to begin,” in making the case for a “local approach” inspired by his school’s and community’s close ties with the Stó:lō Nation. Monique Boyden-Munroe unpacks the cumulative effects of a lack of exposure to Indigenous literatures in educational systems, and, by drawing parallels between Indigenous studies and Black studies, argues for the importance of Indigenous self-representation. Both Jessica Shin and Jaron

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1 Kicya7, “Indigenous Pedagogies.” Keynote Address at the Indigenous Literature and Film Festival. English 870: Simon Fraser University, Vancouver BC. 25 October 2019. I am grateful to Kicya7 for giving me permission to cite her lecture (based on my notes).
Judkins confront the colonial legacies of the Canadian educational system. While Judkins draws attention to the potential irreconciliability of State models of education and Indigenous knowledges, Shin’s goal is to arm her students with critical tools to confront and transform the very educational system in which they are learning.

In Part 2: Reciprocating Knowledges: Positioning Ourselves, the authors argue that one way to practice the Indigenous Protocol of “reciprocity” is to honestly self-examine one’s own positionality. While Robyn Roukema, Alison Wick, and Jane Frankish argue that turning inwards is an essential step in a larger process of understanding settler roles and responsibilities in living on unceded, ancestral Indigenous territories, Naomi Stewart cautions that this inward turn should not become an end in itself. All four authors engage with Tuscarora writer Alicia Elliott’s powerful collection of essays, A Mind Spread Out on the Ground, with Stewart, Wick, and Frankish experimenting with dialogic forms of essay-writing inspired by Elliott’s “interactive” or “participatory” essay, “Extractive Mentalities.”

In Part 3: Building Relationships: Challenges of Implementing BC Curriculum, the authors emphasize the importance of building relationships across Indigenous-settler divides in order to critique the homogenizing concept of “the Aboriginal Perspective” embedded within BC Curriculum. For Lorne Scott, foregrounding the unique visions within, and the artistic excellence of, Indigenous literatures is the best way forward, while for Hussan Riasat, Indigenous Nation-specific approaches are essential in order to demonstrate the plurality, dynamism, and complexities of “Indigenous Perspectives.” For Matt Brandt, Indigenous literatures are an essential tool for Social Studies teachers to correct the misrepresentations within mainstream narratives of Canadian history. We conclude with Alexandra Glinsbockel’s overview of her recently designed high school course, English First Peoples 12, which builds upon the protocols of responsibility, reciprocity, and relationships, and beautifully exemplifies how to put into practice many of the arguments presented in these position papers.
The students expressed the strong desire to make these position papers available to the wider public, specifically to other teachers, to provide focused, practical, yet theoretically nuanced advice to teachers wishing to learn more about how to include Indigenous literatures and how to use appropriate critical approaches. With their many unique voices and perspectives it is clear that there is no singular way to proceed. Our hope is that these position papers find their target audience and that the debates they provoke provide useful starting points for teachers, students, and life-long learners to engage with the beauty and brilliance of Indigenous literatures.
SCOTT LOWRIE

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE:

I am a proud father and husband who lives and teaches in Mission B.C. I have been a teacher since 2004 and currently teach AP English, Honours English and creative writing. I love being a teacher and am passionate about instilling an enthusiasm for literature and a compassion for others in my students. I would like to thank my instructors Mary Anne Gillies, Deanna Reder, Sophie McCall, Ronda Arab and David Chariandy for challenging me and providing excellent instruction. I am excited to complete my graduate studies and am grateful for the opportunity to learn so much in the MATE program.

TEACHING AND LEARNING INDIGENOUS LITERATURES: A LOCAL APPROACH

At Stó:lō cultural gatherings,

the Spokesman lets guests know

that it is time to pay attention

to the activities by saying,

“My dear ones, our work is about to begin.”

— Jo-Ann Archibald (Stó:lō), Indigenous Storywork

I have been a teacher with the Mission school district for the past eleven years. My high school has over 300 Indigenous students and Indigenous culture has a strong presence in our hallways and classrooms. On any given day, local Elders visit to tell stories to English classes, drum building workshops are conducted and basket weaving is taught. In the morning announcements, the Halq’emeylem greeting “El Swayel” is shared and
during Remembrance Day assemblies the Stó:lō prayer song is presented to memorialize fallen Indigenous soldiers from the community. On Orange Shirt Day, our students and staff walk down the street to the site of St. Mary’s school, the last Residential School to close in the province. In this context, it seems fitting that my approach to teaching Indigenous literature emphasizes local Stó:lō culture, experiences and wisdom.

In the Halq’emeylem language, “Stó:lō” means both “river” and “river people”; thus, the Indigenous people of what is now commonly known as the Fraser River are inextricably tied to the geography of the region. In a chronicle of the Leq’a:mel Nation, a member of the Diablo/Thompson family states, “There is no separation from us to the land. Everything we are and do is an extension of the land we call home” (62). Moreover, there are records of the Stó:lō peoples’ continuous inhabitation of the Lower Fraser Valley from north of Yale to the Strait of Georgia for the past 10000 years (Carlson and McHalsie 2). The land of the Stó:lō is an abundant territory containing a wealth of natural resources including cedar, salmon, and sturgeon that have been key elements of local Indigenous culture for millenia. An understanding of the land is central to understanding the Stó:lō people. It is with this worldview in mind that I attempt to bring Indigenous literature into the classroom and it is my hope that my teaching will faithfully represent the culture of the Stó:lō people by exemplifying the relationship between its people and the land.

I base my pedagogy on three fundamental tenets: engaging students through authenticity, promoting critical thinking in the classroom, and teaching empathy. When students must reckon with work that is relevant to their experiences and place in the world, and when students see that what they are learning is connected to the larger world, true engagement occurs. By providing stories about the places that students are familiar with, I hope to provide a meaningful story experience for English students. An example of this can be found in the teaching of the Sxwó:yxwey mask story. This story, about a boy who is afflicted with lesions, jumps to his death in desperation, and is ultimately saved by water people, is important to Stó:lō culture and has been widely
recounted in many early twentieth century anthropological texts. In each of these versions, the mask is inaccurately portrayed as just another shamanic token and the story is mythologized. However, in the telling of the story by Stó:lô Elder Anges Kelly which I share with my students, the story becomes a declaration of Stó:lô identity. The most striking difference lies in Kelly’s confirmation of the boy’s humanity when she points to a particular place at Kawkawa Lake, outside of Hope, and says: “That boy, he jumped from the cliff over there” (Bolton 118). For me, stories like the Sxwó:yxwey mask story lose their opacity when they are contextualized within a particular place and human experience that our students can identify with.

In our world which celebrates the availability of digital information, the ability to assess and evaluate information and convert it to knowledge is highly valued. But how do learners access and ethically respond to Indigenous works? The dilemma that many English teachers currently face is that they are professionally responsible to teach Indigenous literatures in their classrooms but are not fully aware of the ethical protocols or other important cultural knowledge required to respectfully engage with the learning. Compounding this dilemma is the fact that a lot of relevant knowledge cannot be readily accessed in ways familiar to settler scholars. As my colleague Peggy Janecki has told me about Stó:lô culture, “Some knowledge has to be earned” (Janecki). In this regard, I have found that one key to ethically working with Indigenous texts is to foster relationships with the local community and to deal with material in a respectful, reciprocal manner.

Lastly, I believe that my main role as a high school English teacher is to build empathy about other people through stories. Simply put, stories allow us to imagine the possibility of a better world. Stories allow us to connect with our fellow human beings. In experiencing the richness and beauty of Indigenous cultures, and by becoming aware of the injustice and erasure of culture which has occurred in our communities, students may be able to affirm the value of justice and culture in the lives of others and their own.
So you want to teach Indigenous literatures? I think you should. For too long, we have ignored the cultures of Canada’s First Peoples. For too long, we have disenfranchised the original and rightful occupants of this country. And yet, there is great wisdom for us all to receive if we are earnest in our endeavour. Take a look at the land under your feet and find out its stories. Seek out the people from your community and listen to their perspectives.

To borrow the Stó:lō invocation,

“Your work is about to begin.”
I am an immigrant scholar and educator based in Vancouver, British Columbia. I am also a longtime/lifelong student Simon Fraser University, where I completed my B.A. in 2008, my B.Ed. in 2012, and where I will complete my M.A. in Spring of 2020. I was born in Seoul, South Korea in 1985. In 1990, my family and I immigrated to Canada. Without a fluent English-speaking parent, I turned to books to inform my understanding of my new English-speaking world and to negotiate where I fit into the schema of the Canadian social landscape. Unfortunately, I seldom found representations of her Korean-Canadian identity amongst the books borrowed from the public library. Growing up, I enjoyed literature written by settler authors such as The Little House on the Prairies and Anne of Green Gables novel series. For most of my life, the only Canadian writers I read were Lucy Maude Montgomery and Margaret Atwood, and other canonical authors pushed onto me by the public education system. The discovery of a wealth of literature authored by Indigenous and minority writers during my adult years has been revolutionary and affirming for me. I endeavour to share my discoveries with my high school students and hope that they will leave my class with an understanding that there is always more than one version of any given story.

POSITIONALITY AND TEACHING INDIGENOUS LITERATURES

The colonial imposition of “order,” whereby Indigenous peoples’ reality was reconstituted within Western frames of reference (political, legal, economic, social, ideological),
created a cultural disorder

that disconnected people from
their land, their languages,
their knowledge, and
their histories.

—Isabel Altamirano-Jiminez and Nathalie Kermoal,

*Living on the Land* (112).

Most Canadian students will graduate high school with a limited understanding of their country’s history and the people that populate it. They cannot be faulted for this shortcoming, for their formal education airbrushes the “founding” of their country by European settlers, whose efforts to “civilize” the New World are portrayed as honourable and even heroic. Indigenous people are seldom mentioned in this narrative and when they are, they are presented as passive (non)entities who quietly acquiesced to the usurpation of their lands and calmly receded into obsolescence. This version of Canadian history has done untold damage. When I started teaching Indigenous literature, I knew that I needed to start a process of unlearning a skewed and unbalanced history of Canada and foster open-mindedness and curiosity among my students.

While my high school-aged students have been taught to be respectful and engaged from a young age, many seem to struggle with curiosity and open-mindedness toward things that are not part of their lived experiences. For many of them, Indigenous literature is not a part of their lived experiences and neither are the contexts and people that it stems from. What little students know about Indigeneity comes from their Social Studies textbook, and it is from the perspective of what Janice Acoose calls “white-
canadian-christian patriarchy” (8). A section from the Canada Revisited (1992) textbook reads:

To control the newly claimed lands, colonization was essential.

Colonization involves one country (historically called the mother country)

bringing another separate region under its direct control.

This was often accomplished by establishing permanent settlements in the new region. These new settlements were expected to develop the region’s resources and supply the European country with inexpensive raw materials and products.

(Clark and Mckay 27)

Colonialism is merely described as a tool through which the European agenda could be achieved. There is no mention of how the original inhabitants of “The New World” responded to the seizure of their lands and systematic cultural genocide that persists to present day. The absence of Indigenous perspectives in the story of colonization suggests that these perspectives do not matter. This is damaging not only because this contributes to the (continued) colonial erasure of Indigeneity but also because this gives students the impression that this is the only story of colonization.

The European assumption of easy and lawful lands in America, reinforced by missionary rhetoric,
provided the foundation

for post-Enlightenment colonialism in North America,

engendering processes, such as treaty-making

under John A. MacDonald’s Conservative government

in the late nineteenth century, intended to transfer

vast areas of interest and control of lands

from Aboriginal people to settlers.

—Paul W. DePasquale (Mohawk), Natives and Settlers, Now and Then (xxiv).

Unlearning a damaging history is, of course, no simple task and certainly not one I can accomplish within a semester. What I can do is to introduce students to the notion that there is more than one version of every story. In her 2009 Ted Talk, Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie warns us of the dangers of a “single story.” It seems that educators can sometimes forget “how impressionable and vulnerable we are in the face of a story, particularly as children” (Adichie). Students who learned Canadian history through Canada Revisited only know the story as presented by the colonizer and they are not even invited to consider other perspectives.

[The] colonizers believed so fervently

in the veracity of their own

mythology that they did not consider

that there might be another perspective on history.

Furthermore, the colonizers . . . considered it their responsibility

to eradicate pagan superstition
and replace it with “truth.”

The Canadian myth does not acknowledge

that the nation was founded on

a practice of psychological terrorism and theft.

—Jo-Ann Episkenew (Métis), Taking Back Our Spirits (5)

I felt compelled to read Richard Wagamese’s Indian Horse with my English class when I learned that the history of Canadian residential schools was covered only in a brief, perfunctory paragraph in my students’ textbooks. This novel was a deeply moving experience for my students, who were able to see that there were histories that were not told and continue to live in the shadows of settler narratives. Through the perspective of Saul Indian Horse, my students encountered a country that was fraught with systemic injustices and inhospitable to the original inhabitants of it. It was a country that was unrecognizable to them, yet the very one that they were born in. Through Saul’s harrowing account of his residential school experience, my students were able to understand the insidious effects of colonization on Indigenous populations and that colonization has never truly ended. For these Catholic school students who learned unsavoury truths about their church as well as country, the residential school accounts hit far too close to home. One student wrote in her reading log:

We Canadians pride ourselves in being kind peacekeepers.

We’ve got a fantastic reputation for the most part.

Because of this, we’re especially uncomfortable when things come up that are contrary to this golden ideal.

People have bravely shared their stories of the residential schools, however, they are met with denial and skepticism as we’d rather ignore the fact
that this ever happened than take responsibility for such a terrible thing.

On top of that, the fact that it wasn’t just at the hands of some crazy cult,

but rather our very own government and Catholic Church,

makes things even harder to swallow.

I do not know if this student continued her process of unlearning the darker side of Canadian history, but what I do know is that she can no longer be sated with a singular narrative.

Admitting that their prosperity and privilege

is built on Indigenous people’s sufferings

would injure the collective self-esteem

of the majority White settler population.

In Canada, this is unacceptable.

One of the unearned privileges that White-skinned people enjoy

is that of denying any evidence

that calls into question their right

to a guilt-free existence.

—Jo-Ann Episkenew (Métis), *Taking Back Our Spirits* (6)
MONIQUE BOYDEN-MUNROE

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE:

I am a Jamaican-Canadian first-year Master’s student in Simon Fraser University’s English program with research interests in speculative fiction and black literature. I was born and raised in Toronto, being the second-generation in my family to attend post-secondary school. Although I do not practice today, I was (briefly) raised in the Catholic church, and attended Catholic schools for most of my schooling. I completed my B.A. in English and Psychology at York University, where I was initially exposed to different perspectives of literature, which sparked my interest in speculative fiction and why there are so few black writers of dystopian or fantasy fiction. After graduate school, I hope to enter into a career of Publishing and to advocate for the creation and exposure of diverse literatures.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO LEARN AND TEACH INDIGENOUS LITERATURES?

This graduate course, “Visual Sovereignty in Indigenous Film and Film Adaptations,” is the first university course that I have taken that focuses entirely on Indigenous lives, authors, and stories in Canada. The lack of Indigenous Literature courses or even texts included on syllabuses in other courses speaks to the exclusion and erasure of Indigenous literature in Canadian post-secondary institutions. Having an educational background with black literature and being a visible minority myself, I understand the difficulty to position oneself appropriately as a learner or teacher of literature or film written by and about marginalized, oppressed, and abused racialized populations, when you exist outside of that realm of marginalization. However, when discussing Indigenous Literatures and assumed audiences, it is important to note that Indigenous identities have been inaccurately represented since the beginning of film, and Indigenous writers and theorists are only now (as in the 20th-21st century) gaining inventory and exposure in literature. Because of this, I believe that to be an active learner of Indigenous
literature is to blur the line between reading to inform oneself of Indigenous culture and reading to understand why the author chose to share their interpretation of experience with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers.

The single story creates stereotypes,

and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue,

but that they are incomplete.

They make one story become the only story.

—Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

As with Black/Caribbean/African/African American literatures, Indigenous literatures feature a plethora of cultures and identities that should in no way be understood as one culture, lineage, or set of traditions. Because of this, when learning about Indigenous literatures, it is important to seek out a wide variety of secondary scholarship on the author—and to prioritize the perspectives of Indigenous scholars [?]. As a student having recently read Indigenous literatures, I believe further criticism and interpretation of certain texts can guide the direction of thought a reader can take. When beginning the discussion on how to teach Indigenous literatures, it is important to think about what kind of content the students will be exposed to and how (possibly sensitive) content can alter their interpretation and understanding of Indigenous lives and stories in Canada. For instance, in Betty: The Helen Betty Osbourne Story, Indigenous author David Robertson, displays the brief life and murder of Helen Betty Osborne, a young Indigenous woman who, after recently leaving residential school, was murdered by four white men. The content in this graphic novel includes sexual assault, crude language, racial slurs, and murder. While the story is important because it reveals the experiences Indigenous people have had when living amongst white Canadians and introduces the history of missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada, the content may be sensitive to students. When approaching a novel like Robertson’s trigger words and situations are evident. It can be helpful to have a prior
discussion with students about the sensitive subjects featured. Does the intention to both inform students of the prejudices of white Canadians towards Indigenous Canadians exceed the possible emotional harm of exposing the details of the brutal murder of a young Indigenous woman?

As learners of Indigenous literatures, we can expand our understanding of the stories we are consuming by accepting the diverse forms they are presented in. For instance, if one were to work with Tanya Tagaq’s *Split Tooth*, it would be necessary to also listen to the audiobook, since it features Tagaq’s throat singing. Without the audiobook, an essential part of how Tagaq practices her cultural traditions would be missed. To continue expanding on my relationship with Indigenous literatures I must recognize my position as a student who was taught through a Westernized Eurocentric lens.
JARON JUDKINS

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE:

I grew up in a conservative religious settlement on the traditional territories of the Shoshone and Bannock nations claimed by the United States as Southeast Idaho. Growing up, I had little consciousness of my position on Indigenous land. Now that consciousness informs my current writing, I strive to apply the question articulated by settler scholar Keavy Martin of how decolonization “might...be enacted within Indigenous literary studies,” to the context of the community I was raised in. As a queer person, critical thinker, introvert, and expatriate, I bring to that work the complications of not fitting well into the community I want to speak to. He/them.

TEACHING INDIGENOUS CURRICULUM IN A SETTLER-COLONIAL CONTEXT

State education systems...

are primarily designed to produce

communities of individuals willing

to uphold settler colonialism.

– Leanne Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg), “Land as Pedagogy”

Recent changes to K-12 curriculum in British Columbia, which mandate the inclusion of “Indigenous perspectives” in the classroom, are intended to take some of the focus off Western ways of thinking in order to make room for Indigenous ones. In many ways, this is an exciting change. But it is important to note the antagonism inherent in expecting
government-run public education to “provide the proper context” for Indigenous knowledges—something Leanne Betasamosake Simpson argues it “does not and cannot” do. This, she points out, is because Indigenous knowledges arise from and make sense in the context of Indigenous freedom and sovereignty, whereas state education arises from and makes sense in the context of settler colonial rule. Simpson's reasoning is consistent with Foucault's argument that state education is essential to upholding class dynamics and state power. If, as Simpson suggests, “State education systems...are primarily designed to produce communities of individuals willing to uphold settler colonialism,” it seems worthwhile to consider what educators can do to resist that, as well as what remains outside of their control.

One way state education reproduces the dynamics of settler colonialism is through the encouragement of guilt. “Guilt,” Kanien’kehá:ka scholar Gerald Taiaiake Alfred writes, “is a monotheistic concept foreign to Indigenous cultures” (86). Getting students to feel guilty for Canada's treatment of Indigenous peoples might seem like a reachable goal, but it actually discourages students from participating in further dialogue. Teachers can show students how to question structures like settlement, whiteness, or Christianity without the need to feel shame because they may (or may not) be settler-descended or identify as white or Christian. Administrators can support them by remaining cautious of sensationalism or guilt-encouraging rhetoric when planning school-wide events, assemblies, or programs like those held on Red Shirt Day.

Another way state education reproduces the dynamics of settler colonialism is through the twin forces of repetition and inconsistency. According to my classmates teaching in BC schools, students in some of their schools have complained about having to learn about residential schools “again,” while in other schools, they have never been taught about them. Though teachers may value the freedom that comes from non-standardized curriculum and testing, they need to be aware of the ways repetition and inconsistency can alienate students. They can do much to prevent this alienation by thoughtfully preparing and carefully coordinating their curriculum in advance and with
the support of administrators. If Indigenous curriculum is not well coordinated, students may feel it is being imposed upon them or that it is not valuable to their educations. They might then come away feeling resentful of Indigenous presence and uncaring about Indigenous ways of life.

While students, teachers, and administrators grapple with these challenges, it is important to acknowledge the even more fundamental antagonism inherent in teaching Indigenous curriculum in the context of state education. To make this antagonism apparent, I pose a few basic questions: What is Indigenous curriculum? Whose curriculum is it? Is it something that can be taught by teachers employed by the BC government? Do they generate it? Do Indigenous people generate it? If so, for whom?

Rather than imagining Indigenous curriculum as the property of the multicultural mainstream, which can be taught within the knowledge systems of the colonial state, Indigenous curriculum should be understood as the knowledges of Indigenous peoples which are necessary to their ways of life. Simpson suggests that for the actual teaching of that curriculum to occur, the Canadian state must recognize “Indigenous Knowledge systems and intelligence on their own merits.” At this time, when decolonization is supposedly on the table, I ask this question: When will the Canadian state return the sovereignty over Indigenous curriculum to Indigenous peoples?
RODIN ROUKEMA

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE:

To me, life is a series of stories: from the stories read to me as a young child and the historical fiction I devoured as a teenager, to the writing, reading, and acting I did in my undergrad where I dedicated my entire existence to the communication of slices of life through story on the page and stage, to the intriguing and relevant stories I now share every day with my students. I am a teacher and learner who was raised a Christian child of immigrants from the Netherlands. I am a writer, actor, feminist, liberal, comic, explorer, and basketball coach. I am a daughter, sister, aunt, cousin, and friend.

INTERVIEWING INTO POSITION WITH ROBYN ROUKEMA

I now think of myself as a perpetual visitor –

both to the literatures I teach

and to the homelands in which I teach them.

– Allison Hargreaves, “‘The lake is the people and the life that come to it’:

Location as Critical Practice” (109)
In the context of approaching Indigenous literatures and orature, I am a settler scholar. I acknowledge that all the work and play I do in my daily life is done on the unceded territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh, and Tsawwassen Nations. I acknowledge that the Indigenous peoples living on this land were stripped, not only of their land, but also of their culture, religion, and basic rights. I acknowledge that I have benefited from the wrongs done by the policies crafted over generations by settler politicians in Canada. I acknowledge that I have a long way to go when it comes to fully comprehending the Indigenous narratives and nations I study. I am working toward understanding kinship, location, tribal-specific identities, the impact of oral story-telling, and the historical and cultural context within these stories. I have been graciously offered a seat at the table and I know I need to be careful and loving as I navigate literature and culture that is not my own. I know I need to turn away from the ways of my ancestors, avoiding recolonizing by learning new ways of thinking and being and doing, by transforming my epistemology to understand the stories. Rather than the other way around.

**How to teach Indigenous literatures in high school or university today?**

To me, non-Indigenous scholars and teachers must always be aware of our positionality. Within this, we need to ensure that we have the permission and privilege to access and distribute the Indigenous stories we come across. Once we are certain of this permission, we need to inform ourselves of the complexities of the story and the context so as to not simplify it or provide misinformation to our students.

Many settler teachers today use Indigenous content to check a box. In that case, it would be better to exclude it altogether. Including First Nations stories as an “Add-on” is an act of colonization all over again. It is the misuse, mistreatment, and underappreciation of something that does not belong to settler teachers.

*Much of my writing has a political bent; even my poetry and novels....*
Even when I don’t intend to be political,
the direction I come from makes my work sound political.

– Lee Maracle (Stó:lō), My Conversations with Canadians (21)

Ultimately, one must recognize that teaching Indigenous literature is inherently linked to activism. It is impossible to teach the works of Maracle or Katherena Vermette (Métis) without discussing the context in which they were written and its impact on the characters portrayed. It is in this way that educators can contribute to decolonizing Turtle Island. Not only by Indigenizing our curriculum, but also by decolonizing the school system and the mindsets of our students. Through this, we begin to equivocate epistemologies, no longer only prioritizing European ways of knowing.

If you can’t write about us with a love
for who we are as a people,
what we’ve survived,
what we’ve accomplished
despite all attempts to keep us from doing so;
if you can’t look at us as we are
and feel your pupils go wide,
rendering all stereotypes a sham, a poor copy, a disgrace –
then why are you writing about us at all?

—Alicia Elliott (Tuscarora), A Mind Spread Out on the Ground (30)

When reading/listening to storytellers like Maracle, Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee), and Richard Wagamese (Anishinaabe), we see the effects of the still living and breathing colonialism over and over again. We see racism (external and internalized), we see the
long-lasting and intergenerational trauma of residential schools, we see the impact of displacement. In our classrooms, we are given the opportunity to expose the genocide inflicted on Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island, and the opportunity to discuss it, find our role within it, and to encourage our students to do the same. It is activism through literature, and this must be approached with love. When we find ourselves beginning with love, we will, as a result, approach Indigenous literatures with respect, empathy, a critical eye, and a desire to learn.

Should “Indigenous literatures” be taught as part of “Canadian literature,” or separately?

I don’t organize any of my units using this kind of category. If I did, I would potentially put the stories in the categories of “Turtle Island Stories.” No matter what, I would not include it in “Canadian Literature” because some Indigenous authors living within the borders of Canada do not identify as “Canadian.” Nor does Indigenous literature stop at the arbitrary and colonial border between Canadian and United States. Rather, I would introduce the literature in relation to the nation the story and/or is author is from. Nation-specific readings can be a decolonizing method because it takes the story back to the land and people from which it originates.

Nation-specific understandings of Indigenous literatures also avoid tokenism. It is crucial to inform oneself about the nation and the culture and context before teaching the story. This is not easy. It isn’t meant to be. James Niigaanwewidam Sinclair (Anishinaabe) points out that responsible and ethical criticisms of Aboriginal narratives need to recognize the humanity of the Indigenous peoples that are written about, situating real people in specific times, places, and contexts to avoid the generalization and dehumanization of Indigenous peoples that is so prevalent in colonial criticism and literature.

There may well be no such thing as an Indian....

[It] is the invention of the European.
—Daniel Francis, *The Imaginary Indian* (141-2)

Responsible and ethical criticisms of Indigenous literatures need to acknowledge that intellectual traditions and stories are free to change. He cautions against writing and reading with focus on aspects such as blood quantum, rather he is in favour of political, social, and spiritual resistance rooted deeply in the “relationship of the People to one another, to their histories, their futures, and to the rest of creation” (367). Essentially, he is talking about kinship.

The principles of kinship

can help us be more responsible and, ultimately,

more useful participants in both

the imaginative and physical decolonization

and empowerment of Indigenous peoples

through the study of our literatures.

– Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee), “‘Go Away, Water!’” (357)
NAOMI STEWART

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE:

As a White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, living and working on Indigenous land as an immigrant to Canada from England, I am well aware of my position as uninvited guest. My family is British for generations back, until we reach the original origins of my last name, “Stewart”, which comes from Scotland and the Stewart clan. What I know of my family is a history of white and blue-collar workers, mothers, household staff, fighter pilots, and working-middle class Brits. Having personally experienced a move to a new country (Canada) at a relatively young age (eight years old), and then returning to the original country (England) as a young adult, before ultimately moving back to Canada, I have an odd connection with my two homelands, and the feeling of not quite belonging to either. As the daughter of an Anglican priest and a self-proclaimed Christian, I am also aware of the church’s historical role in the mistreatment of Aboriginal peoples, and the deep need for acknowledgement and reparation. As a teacher, I am deeply aware of the responsibility I possess to respectfully remind and guide my students into an acknowledgement of their place and position in an ever-changing world, and their task to make it a better one.

WHAT NOT TO DO IN RESPECTFULLY APPROACHING INDIGENOUS CONTENT

Knowledge can be attained.

Neither unproblematically, of course, nor completely,

and certainly not with the depth

of a lifetime of experiential learning

through simple academic study,

but those non-Native critics
willing to put in the time and effort in terms of research, dialogue, social interaction, and community involvement can approach valid cultural understandings. (In fact, to my mind, it is our responsibility to do so if we desire our work to be relevant.)

— Sam McKegney, “Strategies for Ethical Engagement”

For me personally, the word ‘position’ has always had a unique connotation. As someone who grew up heavily invested in the world of dance, when I hear the word position, I immediately leap to first, second, third, fourth and fifth position with feet and arms, my muscle memory kicking in. This, I think, speaks poignantly to the ways in which our upbringing, influences, social practices and background shape our “location” and being (Kovach 95) as it exists today. It is also important to note, as with these positions in dance, that this notion of “positioning” is a foundation on which to build. This is not an ending, but a starting point. It is a discipline that is important to begin and to continue, especially as teachers, as we ground ourselves in the truths, bias, and origin that have and continue to mold and create us. As Plains Cree / Saulteaux scholar Margaret Kovach describes, in Indigenous research, self-location means “cultural identification” (96). For non-Indigenous or ‘settler’ scholars and teachers, this act is crucial. As teacher or as student, this act of self-locating allows us to “examine our [...] purpose and motive,” as well as keeping us “aware of the power dynamic” (97) between researcher and researched or teacher and content/ history / context. As settler scholars and settler teachers, we have an especially large responsibility to model for our students what it means to be self-aware. However, as aforementioned, self-positioning should not be an end in itself. What is more important is putting the work into learning something from Indigenous scholars, writers and perspectives and step out from allowing ourselves and our knowledge to remain the primary focus.
Throughout this essay, questions will be written in italics as an opportunity for you to reflect on key points. Inspired by Alicia Elliott’s work in *A Mind Spread Out on the Ground*, this format is known as an ‘interactive essay’.

*When you think of the word ‘position’, what comes to mind for you? What is your ‘position’ when it comes to teaching Indigenous content? Has it shifted or evolved?*

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*How do you think positioning yourself might shape your teaching practice for the better?*

________________________________________________________________________

One of the biggest fears teachers have in approaching the teaching of Indigenous literatures is that of doing it the ‘right’ way. Most educators are aware that there is a need to discuss, explore, and incorporate Indigenous content. The issue is not ‘if’, but ‘how’. These same educators are seeking the right stories, the right lesson plans, the right questions, the right terminology to use in their classrooms. But what we find when we delve into the world of Indigenous literatures and ethical engagement is that while there might be certain ‘wrong’ ways to approach it, there is no one clear ‘right’ way. As settler scholar Sam Mckegney discusses, there are a few things to be aware of as a non-Indigenous scholar or teacher when approaching content. The first, do not retreat into silence. By doing this, settler scholars are again taking “focus away, willingly failing to heed the creative voices of those adversely affected by the legacy of colonial oppression” (Mckegney 81).

*Have you ever ‘retreated into silence’ in your fear of tackling Indigenous content properly? What happened?*

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28
Though his advice might be specifically referring to scholars, teachers can take the same advice. In fear of either “misunderstanding” or “recolonizing” (Mckegney 81), the temptation is to simply move on to other topics, other content, other units. This is fatal, as it once again relegates Indigenous authors and content off the table because it is deemed acceptable to simply avoid it. Mckegney’s second caution is to avoid an excessive inward focus. While it is important (even necessary) to situate oneself in relation to the content, it is equally as important not to make yourself the centerpiece. As he writes, “Yes, scholars need to be aware of their own limitations, and yes, they must be self-reflexive, but no, they do not need to make themselves the stars of their studies” (82).

*What might this look like to you? Do you have a tendency to become the star of the study? How do you balance the need for self-reflection while still engaging with points of view and experiences that are different from your own?*

The next ‘wrong’ way to avoid involves “Deal[ing] in the purviews of non-natives” (82). For me, this means being aware of the voices we choose to highlight, and specifically not valorizing settler scholar voices discussing Indigenous content, over Indigenous authors and critics themselves. Just because you might feel you can better cope with an ‘outsider’s’ view of an Indigenous community than engage fully with the community yourself, do not seek quick and easy Google Search answers to your questions.

And finally, we should consciously avoid “Present[ing] only tentative, qualified, and provisional critical statements” (83). Again, while it is key that you yourself are aware that you are learning, that this process of respectfully incorporating authentic Indigenous voices and content in your classroom is a slow and perhaps hesitant one, do not do a disservice to both your students and your chosen writers by constantly calling yourself and your attempts into question. “Correct me if I’m wrong”, “I’m not an expert here”, “I’m going to butcher this pronunciation”, “I haven’t actually studied this myself”,
“I’m new to this”, might all have their place and time, but in the classroom they can often be used as an excuse not to engage fully, or to explain and free yourself from “attempting to gain that knowledge” (84). Take your own awareness of the truths of some of these statements as an “incentive to learn” more, rather than an easy cop-out.

Have you used any of these statements before? What was the outcome? How did your students respond?

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There are so many questions to ponder when attempting to ethically and respectfully incorporate Indigenous literatures into our classroom. But when we come to terms with the fact that there are many different ways to go about it, so long as we are being critically self-reflective, attempting to do our best to understand our limitations and yet make an effort to move beyond them, and to be bold in engaging with authentic Indigenous voices, we will make a start.

Knowing what you know now about engaging with Indigenous content, what is one simple step you could take to actively engage more with Indigenous works?

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ALISON WICK

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE:

Alison Wick is a settler scholar born and raised on the occupied territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh peoples. She continues to work, learn, and live on these territories and benefits from their ongoing occupation. As a third year student studying First Nations Studies and Publishing at Simon Fraser University, she is particularly interested in looking at the role of settlers in dismantling settler-colonialism and capitalism on unceded territory.

SELF-REFLECTION AND TEACHING ABOUT RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS THROUGH LITERATURE

Specifically within Indigenous inquiry...

location is important. . . .

Self-location anchors knowledge within experiences,

and these experiences greatly influence interpretations.

Sharing stories and finding commonalities

assists in making sense of a particular phenomenon,

though it is never possible (nor wise)

to generalize another's experience.

—Margaret Kovach (Cree / Saulteaux), Indigenous Methodologies (111)

“All” the names of children who died in residential schools was released on September 30th, 2019. September 30th is Orange Shirt Day, the day of awareness and education
about the Indian Residential School system. In many ways, especially at its beginning in
2013, its purpose was and is to fill the gap in public historical knowledge that the
canadian school system creates. I graduated from high school less than five years ago
and almost everything I know about residential schools I learned on my own. Even when
my english class studied The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian in grade 10, we
had little to no conversations about the intergenerational effects of residential schools
and how this system, and its sister system in the states, was connected to the writing of
people like Sherman Alexie (Spokane/Coeur d'Alene). This was also the first Indigenous
author that we had studied in school, and possibly the first work by an Indigenous
person I had ever read. Like my classmate Naomi, I am inspired by the interactive essay
in Alicia Elliott’s A Mind Spread Out on the Ground to prompt the kinds of self-reflection
I am arguing for:

*When did you learn that there were 6,000 recorded deaths of children in residential
  schools?*

_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________

*How long were you unaware that in 1907, Dr Peter Bryce, a medical inspector for the
  Bureau of Indian Affairs, reported that these schools had a 30-50% mortality rate?*

_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________

*Knowing that, do you believe the first number?*

_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________

My great Aunt Dorothy was a second grandma to me as a child. She died while I
was still young but I still remember giving away books of her poetry at school and
visiting her in her house. She was my mother’s friend, and was heavily involved in labour politics. Years after she died, I learned that she had actually been a teacher in a day school.

On October 1st, 2019 I saw a tweet that read “Next year how about we release the names of the teachers and staff from the residential schools?” When I asked my mom she didn’t think it would be a good idea, for fear of the former staff members’ persecution. My understanding is that there is concern that former staff may be unfairly harassed or attacked for having worked positions in these schools when, as was the case with my aunt, many were there ‘simply as teachers’ or had little other employment opportunities. Many of these staff members were also Indigenous and former students of the school system.

*Do know anyone who taught at a residential school?*

_____________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________

*Would you want to know?*

_____________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________

*Do you think you should know?*

_____________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________

*Knowing that Indigenous people, including former students, worked at these schools, do you think that the names of staff should be published?*

_____________________________________________________________________

It wasn’t until my grade 12 year when our law teacher assigned us to do class long “presentations” on the barriers to equality for different marginalized groups in Canada that I actually learned about the history of this system and its purposes. I learned more about residential schools in 3 weeks than I ever had in any social studies or history class. I was a settler student conducting my own research on my own time and so it wasn’t until I started to study First Nations Studies in university that I began to understand my own identity in relation to this history. To see how studying history without understanding your own identity and experiences, without continually thinking of yourself in relation to this history, prevents you from actually learning.

*How much time do you spend on self-reflection when learning?*

*When teaching?*

*Do you ever ask your students to?*

My First Nations Studies degree is primarily based in literature. We study history and politics through texts and books by Indigenous authors because, as I have come to learn, the two cannot be separated. Personal testimony, stories (fictional and non-fictional), and other kinds of literature teach history and, in my experience, they are some of the best ways to learn it. Thinking about history as deeply connected to personal stories by
using literature, those connections and reflections between our own lives and these histories is unavoidable.

From the perspective of an individual settler student, it would have been significantly more meaningful and engaging had my English teacher discussed her own family history and herself, then had us do the same. Maybe then, in that class, I could have started learning about my family connection to residential schools; maybe I could have created work that I would still care about and value. Place and identity is so fundamental to so many Indigenous authors, I don’t see how you could teach them without talking about your own.

*Do you think there is value in self-reflection when teaching literature to high-school students?*

_____________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________

*As a settler teacher, what value does involving your identity bring to the class? What is the damage in ignoring it?*

_____________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________

*Do you think high school students are mature enough for this work?*

_____________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________

*Why?*

_____________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________
I was born in the United Kingdom and after my marriage, I moved to Malaysia with my husband. We had two children in Malaysia and in 2002, my family and I immigrated to Canada. In 2013 I became a Canadian Citizen. In 2016 I participated in a program for survivors of traumatic experiences that helped me address some deep troubles from my childhood. This program was empowering for me on a psychological and spiritual level. It also happened to be one of the few occasions, in my 17 years in Canada, that I was able to engage honestly with an Indigenous woman, who was also participating in the program. I was able to share my own experience with her and to learn about the level of ill treatment she had experienced. Unfortunately, she did not complete the program. I found it disturbing that I could find such solace in the program, while she felt it was not the right place for her healing. My own experience began to feel like an anomaly - an injury that I could work towards healing. Compared to this, the systemic injustices and alienation experienced by the Indigenous people seemed all encompassing and crushing.

**A DIARY OF A FEW DAYS**

My position is that as I live on someone else’s land. I want to explore the notion of being an interloper. What follows in this position paper is written in a diary format and in it I try to answer some of the participatory questions asked in Alicia Elliott’s essay “Extracted Mentalities”.

**Day 1**

I am reading Alicia Elliott’s *Mind Spread out on the Ground*. The participatory essay in the chapter, “Extracted Mentalities,” becomes a reflection on my own trauma. As I answer the questions what I believe Elliott is trying to highlight through this kind of
reflection is the fact that it is extremely difficult to index who or what constitutes an abuser or an abusive situation, when the abuse is systemic.

I read about how in 2005, the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) launched a class action lawsuit against the Canadian government seeking $12 billion for the long-lasting harm inflicted by the residential school system. In 2006, the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA) was reached by the parties in conflict and became the largest class action settlement in Canadian history.2 This settlement saved the Government of Canada from the possibility of a larger payout, had the case gone to a judicial decision.

Was abuse a normative experience for Indigenous people in Canada? Is the historical abuse of indigenous people continuing in contemporary Canada? While I do not wish to impose my own personal trauma onto my understanding of the communal experiences of indigenous people, at the very least, I have a point of contact.

Day 2

I find and read Lara Fullenwieder’s article, “Settler Biopower,” in which she writes: “residential schools worked on and through the bodies of Indigenous children to ‘kill’ their Indianness, the IRSSA worked upon and through these surviving bodies to ‘make heal’ the ‘Indian’ as a categorical testament to the benevolence and shared history of the settler state.”

While I do not wish to impose my own trauma onto the experiences of Indigenous people or on the IRSSA or the Truth and Reconciliation process, I note that every attempt I have made at ‘reconciliation’ has resulted in compromising and undermining my ‘truth’. Further, to assert this truth, I have had to leave my homeland.

2 Indigenous Foundations.
https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/the_residential_school_systems.
migrated to Canada ... a nation that is welcoming to all, but one that sits on Indigenous people’s “Home and Native Land” – not “my land.”

Day 3

In looking for a method by which to engage with Indigenous issues, I first look at my own routine - what Indigenous encounters do I have on a daily basis? On my commute to work, I see a totem pole. The pole is eight metres tall. It was carved from a 1,000-year-old cedar tree, it was raised on a collaborative project between DTES advocates, First Nations, members of the LGBTQ community, along with Japanese, Chinese and South Asian survivors of racism.³

I pay attention as I pass on the bus. I notice how the totem pole is a meeting place for the community in the DTES. The Indigenous symbols seems to exist outside of a meaningful context and seems incompatible with lived experience in the city. Although it is good to see this art in my daily landscape, its symbolic origins as well as its socio-political import remain hidden in plain sight, erased in their assimilation into the contemporary Canadian landscape.

I return to my reading of Alicia Elliott and find a quote from Leanne Betasamosake Simpson:

extraction is the cornerstone of capitalism, colonialism, and settler colonialism.

It’s stealing. It’s taking something, whether it’s a process, an object, a gift, or a person, out of the relationships that gave it meaning,

and placing it in a non-relational context for purposes of accumulation.

— Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg), qtd. in Elliott 213

Still through my own past, I recognise my own awkwardness as reflecting my ‘settler state’. I wrote this poem:

Passing

You are the First Nations, the first people.

As I was coming in you were going out,

you held the door for me and said, ‘good timing.’

I asserted, ‘Yes, indeed, good timing thank you.’

Ascending the stair, I feel my settler state.

My emphases extending everywhere,

your body, your speech, your land.

Day 4

I turn again to Alicia Elliott: “There’s no collective condolence ceremony for our people, either – those who need help to see our beauty and hear our songs and speak our language. But maybe one day there can be. Things that were stolen once can be stolen back” (12).

So I am a thief, an interloper! I left my own situation. I have gained some sense of self-determination. I wonder how the Indigenous person might also get the same relief - how they might “steal it back”?

I sign off with a question to myself: Is my freedom to move out of suffering a privilege?
PART 3
BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS: CHALLENGES OF IMPLEMENTING BC CURRICULUM

LORNE SCOTT

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE:

As a male settler scholar of Irish / Danish heritage, the MATE program has expanded my literary knowledge to include Indigenous writers in Canada that I would not necessarily have had the chance to interact with. Although I was born and raised in Surrey, British Columbia, I have spent close to a decade abroad and have travelled to many countries. I am proud to say I have both lived and experienced life in Japan, Mexico, China and Thailand. Although the MATE program has occurred in my own backyard of Vancouver, I feel that through new literature, discussion and opportunities, it has offered me the same insights into new cultures as travelling and living abroad.

NORMALIZING INDIGENOUS TEXTS TO HELP ALLEVIATE RELUCTANCE

Questions regarding the teaching of Indigenous literature have rattled around my head for the last year and a half. Currently, in teaching my own high school English courses, I am approaching Indigenous literature through the process of normalizing the literature.
What I mean by “normalizing” is teaching Indigenous literature alongside other various literatures, and embedding Indigenous texts within my curriculum with other authors of various ethnicities without first providing the biographical background of the artists. I believe this creates an equality amongst the texts, and every writer is judged upon their literary merits, not their background. Although I acknowledge and understand that normalizing literature may not be the perfect teaching technique, it works for me as I use many different texts, from all sorts of different authors, with an abundance of different backgrounds. This allows me to introduce students to a wide variety of different texts without spending a great deal of time on biographical details. Aside from time constraints, the main reason I believe this process of normalizing is important because I have noticed a reluctance from many to interact with and discuss the new Indigenous curriculum, perhaps because of a fear of approaching Indigenous topics incorrectly. Or perhaps because Indigenous literature has been long missing from the high school canon, it is difficult to try and weave in, at least without disrupting existing critical paradigms.

When discussing the issue of teaching Indigenous literature with my colleagues, I learned that the reluctance that accompanies the literature is due to a fear of seemingly teaching the literature incorrectly and/or not doing it in a respectful manner. One colleague simply stated that they did not feel Indigenous stories were their stories to tell and felt inappropriate telling them. Another colleague thought that the explanation for some not teaching Indigenous literature was quite simple, and felt that teachers have not been supported enough, nor has it been sustained from our district.

I didn’t want to start with native stories.

Once you’ve been put in the box

of being a native writer

then it’s hard to get out.
– Eden Robinson (Haisla/Heiltsuk)

(qtd. in Penner 8)

It was interesting to hear these ideas as these are the types of thoughts that are coming from teachers working in the public school system today. To each colleague, I conveyed my ideas of normalizing the literature, and steering clear of marginalizing ethnic literatures into a group. But I acknowledge that this is easier said than done, as it has become a systemic / institutionalized problem. Consider The Lesser Blessed by Richard Van Camp. The Lesser Blessed is a novel in the bildungsroman tradition, or a “coming of age,” tale about teenagers, much akin to The Catcher in the Rye or The Perks of Being a Wallflower. It has all the same content as well; sexual and substance abuse issues, swearing, fighting, relationship dilemmas, immature viewpoints, rash decisions, etc. Yet the back cover, created by the publishers but presumably approved by the author himself, features the following quotation from the Edmonton Journal: “Van Camp is as funny as Tomson Highway and Drew Hayden Taylor, but his work has more edge.” Sure, this quote is accurate but why not compare Van Camp to J.D. Salinger or Stephen Chbosky? Why is he only compared to other Indigenous Canadian authors? Furthermore, Highway and Taylor are not even primarily known as novelists, but dramatists, at least at the time that The Lesser Blessed was published (1996). By listing two other famous Indigenous authors, the publishers are limiting the scope and audience that this novel could possibly reach. Is the Edmonton Journal saying that Van Camp is only as good as other Indigenous authors? Surely not, right? Why is there a feeling of marginalizing ethnic literatures and not placing them within the context of what is considered canonical mainstream literature?

Again, this is why I feel my aforementioned ideas of normalizing the literature is a worthwhile approach, and I while I have been happy with the choices I have made thus far, I know it is not the perfect solution. For instance, if I have a short story unit in my senior English class, I may teach stories by Roald Dahl, Haruki Murakami, Alice Munro and Richard Wagamese. Will I go into great detail over the fact that Richard
Wagamese was an Ojibwe man from the Wabaseemoong Independent Nations in Ontario? Probably not, because for me, it does not change the fact that he was a writer who could reach his audience through a depth of figurative language and realistic characters. I will teach the class with minor biographical details, but I feel that is secondary to the author’s writing skill. If anything, much like Richard Van Camp, Richard Wagamese was an amazing writer who happened to be Indigenous, just like how Murakami is an amazing writer who happens to be Japanese. By normalizing the context in which we discuss the literature, the more we can appreciate the text on its other merits than the colour of the author’s skin. And honestly, by normalizing authors, it may make it easier for my colleagues to teach the literature, as it may alleviate some fears of doing the text an injustice.

However, as I have said, I know it is not the perfect approach, but it is what feels most comfortable for me currently. And I feel the reasoning can be summed up by what a mentor told me about Potawatomi-Lenapé scholar Susan D. Dion’s Aboriginal learning theories and how she applies the technique “of learning from versus learning about.” Although both aspects are very different, they work together in unison for greater understanding and appreciation. In my school, and in MATE, we discussed how Indian Residential School history is often taught as a list of dates and statistics, without grappling with the ethical questions or representation. I believe this can be classified under the umbrella as “learning about,” as we know the facts of residential schools, such as: we know why they were built, where they were located, when they opened, etc. However, the hard part is now making this a two-step process, starting with separating the tangible facts to the intangible ideas that can be included in the “learning from” aspect. As Dion states, this calls on us to “not [...] live in the past but in relation with the past, acknowledging the claim that the past has on the present” (180). Canadians can learn from the mistakes of the past to begin to heal and move forward towards reconciliation. The normalization of literature helps to open the door, but I know that more steps are needed to begin to walk through.
HUSSAN RIASAT

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE:

I come from a position that has many different layers: Pakistani-Canadian, Muslim, teacher, settler, and Southeast Asian. I have been told to go back to my country... although I don’t have citizenship or status in Pakistan, and don’t consider it my country being born in Canada. While I am a male, I don’t enjoy as many privileges as white males do (though I still do), and have often been discriminated against because of my beliefs or family history. I don’t identify with Christianity, or feel affiliated with the Church or Europeans, other than the fact that India was also colonized. This leaves me in an interesting position, one that lacks guilt for atrocities committed against Indigenous people of this land, but also puts me in a place that believes acknowledgement, reconciliation and decolonization are critical for the country moving forward. I believe the best way to do this is through education, and as a teacher, bridging gaps and teaching students how move forward with Indigenous people is a necessity.

RECONCILIATION THROUGH EDUCATION

Implementation of the latest BC curriculum has challenged many teachers to adapt to new teaching philosophies, practices, and content. Some transitions have been far easier to make than others, especially if some teachers are entering their twilight years. One aspect of the curriculum that seems to be problematic for many teachers, spanning all disciplines and age groups, is teaching with Indigenous perspectives. In a given staff meeting, where people might be sharing the innovative and progressive things they are doing in teaching, when an administrator or another teacher asks, “is anyone doing anything with Indigenous Perspectives?” the room tends to go silent. Teaching with Indigenous Perspectives is an area that most teachers tip-toe around due to what they perceive as a “touchy subject.” The most common problem with teachers is that they don’t know how to teach with Indigenous Perspective, especially wanting to be careful to not be offensive by appropriating, or sharing something that they don’t have the right to share. History teachers generally stick to teaching content from a
historical perspective, often touching only on how awful Residential schools were (rightly), but doing so every year, without teaching anything else about Indigenous cultures. This leads to people teaching Indigenous content as if it were a process of checking a box off on a list of curriculum competencies, and assuming that this meets their responsibilities in teaching Indigenous Perspective.

Essentially, the problem lies with teachers not being able to teach with Indigenous Perspectives, because, as I hope has been made clear with my introduction, teachers don’t know what Indigenous Perspectives are. In order to teach with an Indigenous Perspective, teachers need the proper education to teach it, but also to be able to define the different perspectives, rather than treating all Indigenous Perspectives with a broad stroke, which is something that the BC Curriculum has tried to do with little success. In my opinion teachers need to learn about the perspectives of their local area, and of the material they plan to teach, in order to be comfortable teaching the content with the proper perspective in a respectful and meaningful way.

The only way to really know a Nation is to visit that Nation and learn from its people—especially its writers. This is why beginning with learning from a local perspective is a good way to start learning and teaching from a particular Indigenous Perspective. For instance, in “The Hunting and Harvesting of Inuit Literature,” settler literary scholar Keavy Martin, who has devoted her research to Inuit Literatures and the Inuktitut language, recounts a time when a group of non-Inuit students went up north to visit the Inuit. When the Western-educated students were asked to eat the food that their Inuit hosts were offering them, the students refused the food, so as to not be a burden. This refusal in western culture is a politeness, whereas in Inuit culture, the “polite refusal” is not polite at all—it’s insulting. The Inuit have a special and holistic way of living with and on the land, which is why refusing the meat was offensive. To eat the meat, to consume it, is to embrace and consume Inuit culture.

Martin argues that people should treat literature the way that the Inuit treat meat. The Inuit have a special, holistic relationship with land and all that they consume.
Martin argues that this is the same way one should approach Inuit literature. The argument that people should consume Indigenous literature the way that the Inuit consume meat, with love and respect, is compelling. The approach Martin makes is powerful, because it forces a shift in perspective on something that an urban, or non-hunting culture can do when reading. This creates a bridge in understanding Inuit practices and appreciating them. Martin’s essay offers a new lens when consuming literature – an Inuit lens, and can be used to teach or analyze Indigenous literature.

While Martin’s essay exemplifies a lens one can adopt in learning and teaching Indigenous content, when is it appropriate to use an Inuit lens to approach learning and teaching? It would most certainly make sense when reading and studying Inuit literature, but is it still applicable when, say, reading a Cree novel, or a teaching a story that is Anishinaabe? Probably not. Therefore, it is critical that teachers become learners first, learning about the broader Indigenous ideology behind the specific perspective or content they wish to teach. If one is to teach a Cree novel, then one should teach it in a way that is in line with Cree practices, following protocols that are appropriate if one is a non-Cree teacher. While this approach requires greater effort on the part of a teacher, the learning that is gained by the teachers themselves, as they follow respectful, holistic, non-generalized, and responsible teaching practices, is itself an act of active reconciliation.
MATT BRANDT

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE:

My name is Matt Brandt and I am a settler-scholar, and/or a settler public school educator. I identify far more as an educator in our public system than a scholar. I am third generation Canadian from a mixed European background (mostly UK and German). I grew up on Treaty 6 territory, and currently live, work, play and benefit from the unceded, shared territories of the Kwikwitlem, Katzie, Kwantlen, and Qayqayt peoples. I had a fairly typically white, suburban, middle-class upbringing. I got decent grades and easily got into post-secondary, which was paid for. I came out of the closet when I was seventeen. Because of my support system, I didn’t face many of the challenges other youth have, and if the need arose I could (and can) retreat into a generic white, cisgender identity and all the privilege this brings. Currently, issues important to me are largely around social justice. I am concerned with gender equality and the impact that toxic masculinity has had on men generally, and where this creates inequality and misogyny in the gay community specifically. I also want to make sure that I’m creating an environment in my classes where students understand systems of power that create/encourage inequality, particularly around race, gender identity, and sexuality.

THE CHALLENGE OF TOKENISM AND LACK OF CONFIDENCE IN THE CLASSROOM

According to the new BC curriculum, teachers, on top of their own expert areas in a high school classroom, are also supposed to be instructing their students in Indigenous perspectives. According to the BC Ministry of Education website, this means “British Columbia’s education transformation therefore incorporates the Aboriginal voice and perspective by having Aboriginal expertise at all levels, ensuring that Aboriginal content is a part of the learning journey for all students, and ensuring that the best information guides the work”. (I will note that I will not be using Aboriginal in my own terminology,
as I strongly believe “Indigenous” to be the more equitable term. Additionally, respecting the wide variety of Indigenous peoples, I will also pluralize “perspectives.”) In a time of supposed Reconciliation, these large changes offer important ways to begin the processes of indigenization and decolonization. However, it puts teachers in an awkward position: most teachers, even Social Studies teachers, don’t possess a lot of knowledge about specific Indigenous peoples, and many English teachers haven’t had a great deal of experience in teaching Indigenous literatures as Indigenous literatures. By this, I mean not just adding a piece of writing by an Indigenous author to one’s syllabus, but helping students unpack all the forces at work behind the story. While I have more answers than questions regarding these challenges, I would like to grapple with two specific issues: the importance of positionality in teaching indigenous literatures and the difficulty of avoiding tokenism when adding Indigenous writing to one’s high school classroom syllabus.

In the very first Indigenous literature course I took as part of the MATE program, Cree-Metis scholar Dr. Deanna Reder asked us what being on Indigenous land meant to us. Given that I had grown up on Treaty no. 6 land, and that I had gone to an elementary school with an Indigenous name, it is something that I should have considered. However, I flippantly answered that I had had pretty much the most white, suburban upbringing possible. I didn’t say this with the intention of being dismissive towards Dr. Reder’s clear desire to get us thinking about the process of reconciliation and our individual part in it, but to acknowledge that despite my own background in teaching Social Studies and the encouragement I gave my own students to be critical of our government in this regard, I had (and still have, largely) not really given much serious thought to the issue, likely due to my own position and privilege. This is why I believe that positionality is a very important part in teaching Indigenous literatures. In order to fully understand others, we need to acknowledge the ways in which our lives have positioned us to think, feel and, react in certain ways. By seeing our influences, the issues important to us, and most importantly, our own shortcomings, we can find the ways in which we need to respectfully engage with Indigenous literatures and give them
the authentic space they deserve. We should be encouraging our students to do the same so that they don’t simply roll their eyes at “another Indigenous story” and can fully appreciate the layers of history, power, and circumstance that have created the complicated and fraught relationship the Canadian government, and more importantly, we as a society, find ourselves in with Indigenous peoples.

Which brings me to the second challenge that I wanted to address: Indigenous literatures in the classroom and the dilemma of tokenism. I believe that Indigenous literature should absolutely be taught as Canadian literature. It has just as much value and important to the fabric of our society as the historic, canonically depressing and lonely “Can Lit” stories written by white authors that take place on desolate prairie farms or beautiful but stark maritime coastal communities. The challenge that I see currently is that while Indigenous writers are surely telling a part of Canada’s story as a nation, not everyone sees it this way. Not everyone acknowledges Indigenous literature as Can Lit in the same way that many choose to brush aside movements such as Black Lives Matter with statements like, “all lives matter”. Of course all lives matter, and all literatures matter, but some have been systemically denied their value, or had their voices gated through barriers to publication, such as minority “quotas” or elitist academic attitudes towards what counts as epistemologically sound. Thus, I think for now we must teach Indigenous authors and specifically note their Indigeneity so that we can acknowledge what keeps us now from confidently calling it simply Can Lit. We allow our students to see the specific struggles faced by indigenous peoples, we ask them to name them. Else, we run the risk of tokenism by including a story by an indigenous author without giving them a full voice to show a new audience their truth. And one day, we can hope that this truth becomes one that has equal weight and space to all others.
ALEXANDRA GLINSBOCKEL

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE:

Born and raised in Burnaby, British Columbia, I have been schooled in a Western Anglo-European epistemology. With parents who are first generation Canadians and grandparents who immigrated from Central and Eastern Europe following the Second World War, I attended Catholic elementary and secondary school, and completed a Bachelor of Arts in Theology and Culture (2017) at a Catholic post-secondary institution, before widening my worldview for a Bachelor of Education (2018) at the University of British Columbia and a Master of Arts (2020) at Simon Fraser University. As a result of the trajectory of my early education, my lens is tinged with a polaristic Catholic worldview predicated on community and faith. My latter education, however, has developed upon the basis of intended objectivity and holistic analysis, with a specific focus on Indigenous Literature. An English and Career Life Connections teacher at a private Catholic secondary school in East Vancouver, in 2019 I was contracted by Simon Fraser University to design curriculum for other secondary teachers in the area of Indigenous Literature, with an emphasis on Critical Thinking. Through these experiences, my goal has become to find balance between two distinct worldviews.

ENGLISH FIRST PEOPLES 12:
AN INTRODUCTION TO INDIGENOUS LITERATURES

To see from one eye

with the strengths of Indigenous ways of knowing,

and to see from the other eye

with the strengths of Western ways of knowing,

and to use both of these eyes together.

— Elder Albert Marshall (Mi’qmaw), qtd. in Hall
Though my entire formal educational journey has taken place in the Lower Mainland, British Columbia, I was not exposed to Indigenous ethnohistory and literature until my third year of post-secondary; until 2015, I was not aware of Residential School, the Sixties Scoop, Canadian Colonization, or the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Consequent to being a settler student, my goal is to expand my repertoire of First Nations socio-cultural sources, and merge this awareness with my primary passion: literary education. In order to effectively and ethically incorporate, explore, and analyze Indigenous studies in a senior secondary English class, students need to be aware of their own worldviews, biases, and epistemologies. The new BC curriculum strongly encourages teachers to teach First Nations content while actively incorporating the First Peoples Principles of Learning into the classroom. As an educator, my goal is to contribute to this dialogue, as I believe that while students need to be exposed to the Western canon, they also need to consider the continuing effects of imperialism and colonialism in Canada through an active, sustained engagement with Indigenous literatures.

Context is vital to understanding...

especially given how colonial government policies

have combined with widespread popular stereotypes

and everyday enacted practise

to degrade and attempt to entirely eliminate Indigenous peoples...

Colonialism is as much about

the symbolic diminishment of Indigenous peoples

as the displacement of physical presence.

— Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee), *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* (xviii)
A literature course, such as English First Peoples 12 (EFP12), that accomplishes this goal exposes students to Indigenous content and Principles of Learning, and has students experimenting with composition, creative writing, literary studies, new media, and spoken language so that they grow in literacy as readers and writers. As a teacher, I strongly believe that when we read and write, we have the chance to create, imagine, and explore the tragic beauty of the past, the challenges of the present, and the possibilities of the future. Through literacy, we also build community, experience culture, and investigate values. Through literacy, doors open—not only to other worlds, but also to our own visceral, genuine past and present world. As a result of this process, students explore facets of their own individual identities. “All that we are is story,” says Richard Wagamese, an Ojibwe author and journalist based in Canada. A central theme he outlines is story, and the connection between story and identity. EFP12 builds upon this theme in order to explore the relationship between the stories of others and the stories of ourselves, between the stories we tell and the stories that we need to hear.

This course begins with articulating what is familiar: identifying the land, the culture, the language, and the protocols of where we physically and metaphorically stand in the world. Once students have an idea of their own worldviews, they can explore the protocols of others. The first unit focuses on Self Awareness: Basic Positionality, Place, Time, with the objectives, content, and competencies of this unit’s lesson sequence scaffolded so that students can, by unit’s end, be able to autonomously analyze Indigenous texts and connect them to concepts of identity. The scaffolding of sequence in the first unit begins with an introduction of concepts; students have opportunities to apply abstract ideas to practical situations, then transition into specific technical skills, to context, and finally, to meaning. As with all the units, each lesson builds upon the one before, with all lessons designed with the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to include all students and adaptations. With this sequence in mind, the second unit focuses on Social Responsibility, wherein students acknowledge the significance of context surrounding texts and individuals. They learn that up until very recently, Indigenous texts have not been supported by educational curriculum. They will
explore the stigmas attached to it contemporarily as well as through the history of colonization in Canada, while working towards an understanding of decolonization and justice. In the third unit—**Positionality, Complex Identity, Holistic Being**—students articulate and value self-awareness, identifying biases that influence worldview. The penultimate unit, entitled **Reciprocal Relationships**, scaffolds for an inquiry project, an individual project predicated on personal interest and social connection. This project follows five steps: Interaction, Clarification, Questioning, Design, and Share, wherein students explicitly consider the connections across time, land, and space, and recognize the connections between all peoples. The final unit, **Past and Present Intersect: Future Responsibility**, creates space for Indigenous epistemologies, pedagogies, and stories, while recognizing the past, current, and future impacts of colonization.

*People need to learn from the past,*

*to know our stories,*

*to be reminded of those who worked for the survival of our nations*  
*in the early years of settler colonization.*

— Janice Toulouse (Ojibwe)

These five themes each correspond with the First Peoples Principles of Learning, with a continuous emphasis placed on “learning [as] holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential, and relational (focused on connectedness, on reciprocal relationships, and a sense of place),” and “learning requires exploration of one’s identity.” Ultimately, a course like EFP12 coaches students on how to be aware of individual biases and stereotypes, and personal ways of looking at the world. Students learn to be culturally sensitive in a culturally diverse landscape, while strengthening their literacy. Through examining how all these concepts intersect with ideas surrounding justice, ethics, responsibility, and nationalism, students learn how to transfer ideals into the future. They learn how to critically and creatively analyse the question: “how do you talk about the end of the world for a people whose world has ended?”
Stories operate
as different entryways,
foundations,
beginning points...
as centers.

— Michele Lacombe

“Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's Decolonial Aesthetics”
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