

# Teaching Indigenous Literatures for Decolonization: Challenging Learning, Learning to Challenge

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*This paper examines the significance of colonial contexts that influence the teaching of Indigenous literatures. It draws upon conversations I held with Indigenous writers and with secondary educators, in which we discussed the relationships between Indigenous communities, Indigenous literatures, and classroom teaching in Canada. In dialogue with teachers' and authors' perspectives, this paper argues that, when Indigenous stories are told and taught, readers are invited to challenge colonial understandings and are implicated into challenging classroom experiences. The pedagogical experiences precipitated by Indigenous literatures can be difficult for teachers and students, leading to unsettling dynamics, but are importantly decolonizing.*

*Cet article examine la signification des contextes coloniaux qui influencent l'enseignement des littératures autochtones. Il puise dans des conversations que j'ai eues avec des écrivains autochtones et des enseignants du secondaire au cours desquelles nous avons discuté des rapports entre les communautés autochtones, les littératures autochtones et l'enseignement en classe au Canada. S'appuyant sur les perspectives des enseignants et des auteurs, l'article soutient que lorsqu'on raconte ou qu'on enseigne des récits autochtones, on invite les lecteurs à remettre en question des perspectives coloniales et à participer à des expériences stimulantes en classe. Les expériences pédagogiques précipitées par les littératures autochtones peuvent s'avérer difficiles pour les enseignants et les élèves, et une dynamique perturbante peut en découler, mais leur rôle dans la décolonisation est important.*

Transforming education in Canada to address the impacts of colonialism is no easy task. For direction in this complex work, I myself, as an Indigenous scholar and educator, turn to the Indigenous literary arts for learning, guidance, and inspiration. As prominent Indigenous scholar and Mi'kmaw educator Marie Battiste (2013) has argued, artists are knowledge makers who provide a vision for the future: animating Indigenous humanities is one "tremendous step forward in advancing cognitive and knowledge pluralism" (p. 117). Over the past decades of my engagement in teaching, research, and community, I have worked to connect the powerful artistry and sovereignty embodied within Indigenous literatures to the decolonization and transformation of education in this place we call Canada, particularly in my home province of Alberta.

In this article, I focus on the challenges entailed in teaching Indigenous literatures in Canadian classrooms, specifically how teaching Indigenous literatures entails confronting the contexts that surround, pervade, and create them: namely, the social, cultural, political, and historical contexts of settler colonialism. As part of this examination I also consider how this work

of confrontation can be challenging for teachers and learners in schooling contexts that are largely non-Indigenous. To advance these examinations, I draw upon findings from a study I carried out on the significance of Indigenous literatures to communities and to learning (Hanson, 2017b), in which I drew insights from teachers working with Indigenous literatures, as well as from Indigenous writers.

From the conversations I held with these two groups, and from the body of scholarship in Indigenous literary arts and education, I understand that, when Indigenous stories enter pedagogical spaces, the challenging dynamics that ensue can be opportunities for decolonization and resurgence or, conversely, for the perpetuation of colonial misrepresentations and domination. Understanding *resurgence* as the regeneration of Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing from strong roots into strong futures, in defiance of colonial forms of erasure, I attend to work by Indigenous writers and thinkers who see Indigenous artistic practices as embodiments of resistance, survival, and celebration (Hanson, 2017a, 2020; Justice, 2018; Simpson, 2011, 2017; Smith, 2012). Elsewhere (Hanson, 2012, 2017a), I have contended that, for Indigenous literatures to nourish Indigenous resurgence, educators must work in relation to careful decolonizing frameworks and pedagogies. Here, I develop this broader contention by arguing that teachers and learners must work through the challenges that arise when Indigenous texts bring them to confront colonial contexts. Listening to Indigenous writers' perspectives on why the literary arts matter to Indigenous communities deeply enriches these considerations (Hanson, 2020).

Before proceeding, I provide a brief introduction. I am a member of the Métis Nation of Alberta and a person of both Métis and Euro-settler ancestry. I am a faculty member in education in the Treaty 7 region of southern Alberta, which is also part of the Métis homeland. To my explorations here, I bring my background as a scholar of Indigenous literary arts and Indigenous education, as well as prior experience as a teacher in the K-12 system in Alberta and Ontario. I see my work as spanning across disciplines, fostering better understandings and relationships between studies in Indigenous literary arts and education, as well as between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people through the arts.

From my perspective, I see how Indigenous artists are engaging in resurgent creative processes that are significantly (re)storying their communities. Understanding the resurgence of Indigenous literary expression in this light, I see Indigenous artistic practices as acts of resistance, survival, renewal, and celebration that are vital to the self-determination of Indigenous communities. The arts can be a powerful site of sovereignty, as people work to understand and represent themselves and their communities. Engaging with Indigenous texts can consequently open up powerful opportunities for readers. Teaching Indigenous literatures can allow educators to counter the "limited, and perhaps distorted and unbalanced, curriculum about Aboriginal histories, cultures, and identities" that are so harmful to Indigenous people (Stelmach, Kovach, & Steeves, 2017, p. 12). However, it is essential to ask what challenges arise when Indigenous literatures are brought into classrooms where teachers and learners are largely from non-Indigenous backgrounds.

In my scholarship, I centre my work in Indigenous arts and communities: for instance, in a recent article, I carried out a Métis-centred reading of a Métis text (Hanson, 2019). In my view, it is vital for Indigenous scholarship to focus on the priorities of Indigenous communities. However, in my work in education, I often focus on the learning of non-Indigenous people, to consider for instance what learning is required for them to step into enacting good relations with Indigenous people and communities (Hanson, 2018). Along those lines, I largely address non-Indigenous

learners here (whether they are positioned formally as teachers or students) in order to call readers into the work of challenging settler colonialism. Facing these challenges is, I argue, a necessary part of teaching and learning with Indigenous literatures.

I begin by providing an overview of the study that led to this article. Next, I work through an interpretation of perspectives from teachers and writers, focusing, first, on the necessity of confronting colonial contexts when engaging with Indigenous literatures, and, second, on how working with Indigenous literatures can create challenging classroom experiences. I conclude by emphasizing that it is necessary for non-Indigenous learners to undertake these challenges in both senses: learning to challenge colonialism, and experiencing challenging learning. When readers confront this work, we can begin to enact our responsibilities—as educators, as learners, as readers of Indigenous texts, and as human beings living in relation with Indigenous communities and with this land.

### **Overview of the Study**

The broader study (Hanson, 2017b) from which this article emerges is an Indigenous and interpretive exploration of Indigenous literatures, resurgence in Indigenous arts and communities, and how learning is entailed in those relationships, experiences, and processes. At the core of the study were conversations held with people who care about Indigenous literatures: namely, with professional writers who create literary texts and with teachers who bring them into their classrooms (Hanson, 2017b, 2020). Specifically, in 2015 I held semi-structured, in-depth interviews with seven Indigenous writers living in (south-)western Canada and with seven secondary humanities-focused teachers working in schools in the Calgary area, one Indigenous and six non-Indigenous. These conversations delved into their experiences and learning, their beliefs and priorities, and the nuances of their work. The central research question was: *How do Indigenous literatures matter to the resurgence of healthy Indigenous communities?* Elsewhere, I have drawn from this study to argue that Indigenous literatures can call readers into relationships that foster learning (Hanson, 2018). I have explored the significance of such learning in relation to contemporary calls for Truth and Reconciliation (Hanson, 2017a). I have also focused on writers' perspectives to illuminate the connections between literatures and communities (Hanson, 2020). Now, I want to recall what teachers and writers shared with me in order to explore some of the challenges that need to be faced when teaching Indigenous literatures.

In what comes next, I share perspectives from the writers and teachers who took part in my study: specifically, perspectives on the colonial contexts and resulting challenges that impact pedagogy in relation to Indigenous literary arts. When I quote from our conversations, I simply refer to participants by name.<sup>1</sup> I provide only nominal introductions here. The writers I interviewed were Richard Van Camp (Tlicho Dene), Jesse Archibald-Barber (Cree/Métis), David Alexander Robertson (Cree), Katherena Vermette (Métis), Warren Cariou (Métis), Sharron Proulx-Turner (Métis), and Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee). Identified by self-chosen pseudonyms, the teachers I interviewed were Angela Varila, Rachel Baker, Alice Curtis, Robin Green, Suzette Williams, Francesca Rawson, and Danny Bill (an Indigenous woman). Notably, the participant categories are not discrete, in that the writers I spoke with also speak as educators; all of the writers have previously worked or currently work as educators in various contexts. Because interview questions were open-ended and stories were fundamental within my framework, participants were able to speak from whatever experience was significant to their

perspectives on those questions.

My approach to sharing perspectives from participants is one of conceptual and textual weaving. The interpretive work proceeded through *métissage*, understood as an Indigenous and hermeneutic research sensibility (Donald, 2012). Based upon respect for “ethical relationality” (Donald, 2012, p. 543), *métissage* allowed me to bring diverse perspectives—from different disciplines, professions, identities, communities, cultures, etc.—together into conversation and relation, exploring points of affinity and dissonance (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009, p. 9), while continuing to respect how those perspectives were distinct. In listening to my conversations with participants, I identified significant threads, figuratively speaking, which I proceeded to weave together (textually and metaphorically) in order to generate understandings within the study. Quotations from writers and teachers, then, are woven into my analyses. In this process of interpretive weaving, I considered how colonial contexts may present challenges for educators when they try to engage respectfully with Indigenous artistic expression in classroom settings.

### **Confronting and Challenging Colonial Contexts**

Going into my study, I felt that there was a wide distance between what I had seen happening in Indigenous literary studies and in secondary classrooms. My aim has been to connect these spaces and to bring them into conversation with each other. I feel both hope and concern: so much is possible with learning through Indigenous literatures; however, is that possibility being realized in classrooms? When Indigenous literatures are being taught, is that teaching and learning work meaningful and responsible to Indigenous communities? Is there a reasonable balance between the beauty, artistry, and inspiration possible in this learning on the one hand and, on the other, the difficulty of grappling with the impacts of colonialism on generations of Indigenous people? To put it another way, is reconciliation still being paired with truth (Regan, 2010)?

Listening to many of the teachers’ perspectives gave me a sense that there is a tremendous disconnect between what their day-to-day working realities ask of them and what teaching Indigenous literatures asks of them. A kind of turbulence accompanies the introduction of Indigenous texts into classrooms. Of course, whether and how this turbulence occurs very much depends on an almost infinite number of variables encompassing classrooms, schools, teachers, students, places, leadership, times, contexts, and so on—but generally speaking, teachers in this study identified difficulties that arise when they teach Indigenous literatures. As I listened to them, I aimed to attend to their experiences and to draw out the insights they share, but also to address the disconnect mentioned above: to make connections between the particularities of their experiences and the related contexts, including the considerations offered by decades of scholarship in Indigenous literary studies.

Given my own positioning and experience, I see the need for a stronger connection between teaching contexts and the broad and deep critical contexts that call for Indigenous-centred, decolonizing, and Nation- or culture-specific approaches to Indigenous literary texts within and beyond the classroom (Balzer, 2006; Blaeser, 1993; Episkenew, 2002, 2012; Fagan, et al., 2009; Hanson, 2012, 2017a, 2017b, 2020). The work of teaching Indigenous literatures is not as simple as introducing an Indigenous text into a teacher’s plans, within existing approaches and structures. Disconnects between texts and contexts tend to exacerbate the turbulence that teachers and learners experience. Many of these teachers face a genuine challenge when they try to bridge their classrooms and the literary work of creating community.

One of the unique contributions of this study is that I interviewed teachers in 2015, the same year that the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was released (TRC, 2015a). Although much debate surrounds how reconciliation work has been advanced, it is clear, several years later, that the work of the TRC has had a strong public presence across Canada and has propelled changes within education systems (Aitken & Radford, 2018; Battiste, 2013; Fee, 2012; Hanson, 2017a; Henderson & Wakeham, 2013; Poitras Pratt, Louie, Hanson, & Ottmann, 2018; Regan, 2010; TRC 2015a, 2015b). One such change is an increased call for teachers to engage students in learning about Indigenous Peoples and about the colonial policies that affect our communities and Indigenous ways of being, knowing, and doing. In my province, for instance, the professional practice standards to which teachers and educational leadership are held now state explicitly that educators must develop and apply foundational knowledge in these areas.<sup>2</sup> It is important to know that, at the time I interviewed teachers, these institutionally mandated changes were years away.

To generalize, most of my participant teachers felt that their professional role did not require them to teach Indigenous literatures: that call was not included in provincial programs of study (curriculum), in professional standards, in their school culture, or in their leadership messaging. Rather, they had their own reasons for wanting to teach Indigenous literatures—often a sense of responsibility sparked by awareness of colonial histories, by relationships with Indigenous people, or by personal positioning as Indigenous teachers—and often felt that they were going against the grain in doing so. These teachers were fighting to be allowed to do the work. By contrast, for the average teacher in Alberta now, the struggle is in acquiring knowledge and competency quickly enough to meet the new professional requirements—or to respond to their own sense of being “called to action” (TRC, 2015b). In my interviews, then, I caught a tiny snapshot of teaching practice around Indigenous literatures at that moment in our province, which is fascinating because things are changing so rapidly at present. Another contribution is that identifying challenges faced by teachers before they were strongly mandated to teach Indigenous literatures will help systems to mobilize the work now that the mandate is in place.

Within the professional settings I have targeted, then, I found that teachers identified challenges they faced in trying to teach Indigenous literatures.<sup>3</sup> Many of the teachers with whom I spoke expressed concerns that they did not feel prepared to teach Indigenous literatures or said that they could use support in terms of developing their critical background or locating resources and generating teaching ideas. Alice offers one explanation for such feelings of insufficiency when she points out that teaching Indigenous literatures is not the same as teaching canonical texts, because the context shaping those texts is not the same: she says, “There is more to it than just throwing in a short story or talking about a poem. There’s more ... emotional investment, more background knowledge.” She suggests that many teachers do not have the “comfort level” needed to teach Indigenous literatures. Rachel echoes this point: “I have just enough criticism”—meaning literary critical knowledge—“to make me cautious and afraid, but not enough to make me confident.” These teachers suggest that a lack of background knowledge can lead to a lack of confidence when they engage with texts that are new to them.

Colonial contexts, and particularly Eurocentric education systems, contribute to the difficulties that teachers may face in engaging with Indigenous literatures. Even for a text-based examination of aesthetic or figurative elements—which are often seen as neutral or apolitical (King, 2003)—Indigenous literatures offer challenges to readers if they seek to understand them through established critical practices. Reading from the centre of the discipline of English literature means reading through a Eurocentric lens. Jesse points out that Indigenous literatures

have “a different aesthetic altogether.” Danny, likewise, identifies particular stylistic and narratological characteristics of Indigenous texts when she suggests that such literature “shows a different way of writing ... that story-telling, that non-linear type of story.” Culture and context influence communication and artistry, even at the level of rhythm, simile, diction, metaphor, and tone, and even when the writing takes place in the colonial language of English (Blaeser, 1999; Maracle, 1994; McLeod, 2014).

Language carries culture and worldview, and reading language involves seeing what is therein expressed. One example of this point is that Indigenous writers often inflect or infuse the colonial language (English, French) with Indigenous knowledges and languages (Blaeser, 1999; Maracle, 1994). Cree scholar Tasha Beeds (2014), for instance, looks at “the poetics of ancient sound” (p. 70) in relation to Cree writers who “lay down the pathways between the oral and the written” (p. 61). She says, “These writers have ‘re-fused’ traditional European based literary constructs and boxes with *nêhiyawiwîn* (Cree-ness). In *kistêsinâw/wîsahkêcâhk*’s style, they re-Cree-ate English with *nêhiyaw-itâpisiniwîn* (Cree way of seeing/world view), shape-shifting English textual bodies” (p. 61). Beeds (2014) here articulates an understanding that Indigenous literatures emerge from particular communities—with particular ontological, epistemological, linguistic, and aesthetic systems. This understanding exposes the incompatibility of Eurocentric approaches to reading. Many teachers may genuinely struggle to read Indigenous literatures because their training was based in a Eurocentric discipline and does not fully open up understanding and appreciation of Indigenous texts.

Several of the writers with whom I spoke point to what happens when readers—including critics, publishers, and those who adjudicate literary prizes—do not recognize that Indigenous literatures must not be evaluated using Eurocentric measures. These insights are necessary for teachers to hear and reflect on. Katherena comments that, “From the perspective of Indigenous literature, for so long it’s been looked on through a European lens and then it’s been considered bad.” Sharron makes a similar statement, saying that “Non-Native people’s expectations of Native writing are generally extremely myopic.” She suggests that the evaluative standards within the literary industry originate in Eurocentric education when she points out, “In some ways you can’t fault people for that, because they are trained that way.” Changes are needed in education, because “Western education is limited,” and teaches people primarily about “wealthy white men and women,” leaving out Indigenous people. Sharron expresses her frustration at the lack of change: “My grandkids are reading the same books I read ... 50-something years ago.”

Richard, too, pushes for shifts in what students are reading, questioning the texts he read in school, and lamenting the lack of connections between those texts and his community. He gives an example of how, when teaching Shakespeare, teachers might have invited students to retell the stories through local characters. If their teacher had started their study with a lead-in like this, he says—“You know how in Fort Smith there’s two families that hate each other?”—the students would have wanted to “get to the bottom of” the story. Much better, he insists, is that Indigenous writers create their own stories, and community members “can see themselves in” those stories. He explains, “That’s the beauty of Indigenous literature: we can tackle those big themes in our own work and in our own languages.” Returning to Sharron’s point about people assessing literature in publishing, prizes, and other literary work, she acknowledges the lack of education readers may have, but she also calls them to responsibility, suggesting that they “really should know” better if they are sitting on prize juries. Again, using Eurocentric standards is not an appropriate way to gauge the merit or meaning of Indigenous writing. Learning how to recognize the artistic value of Indigenous literatures is vital for teachers, who are showing young people

what is meaningful in the world around them.

Reading Indigenous literatures entails recognizing and countering colonial contexts that affect readers' understandings, including (but also far beyond) educational settings and structures. Although some critical approaches within English literary studies push readers to interpret texts apart from their contexts—such as aesthetics- and form-focused approaches descended from New Criticism and Formalist movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—I contend that teaching Indigenous literatures responsibly means engaging with the histories, politics, people, and places with which they are interrelated. This contention emerges from decades of scholarship in Indigenous literary studies (Balzer, 2006; Episkenew, 2009; Justice, 2018). Daniel makes a strong point that is central to this contention: Indigenous writing, he argues, “enters a world where we are presumed to be already be erased or where we are expected to disappear.” Context matters because Indigenous literatures have the ability to disrupt such erasures and expectations.

Also integrated into the work of teaching Indigenous texts is the task of challenging misrepresentations, or missing representations, of Indigenous communities. Educators teaching Indigenous literatures need to know that colonialism and racism have contributed to a set of conditions in which many non-Indigenous Canadians have not been able to build accurate or affirming understandings of Indigenous communities. When teachers engage with Indigenous texts with learners in good ways, they are undoing those oppressive conditions. Unlike so many learners in the past, their students will, ideally, be exposed to Indigenous self-representations through literary voices.

Representing Indigenous Peoples in classrooms by teaching Indigenous literatures is only part of the work of substantial decolonial change. As Tuck and Yang (2012) remind us, “decolonization is not a metaphor” (p. 1); rather, decolonization entails challenging and dismantling settler colonialism. The issue of understanding and representation is only part of “the wider framework of self-determination, decolonization and social justice” (Smith, 2012, p. 4) that concerns scholars across Indigenous studies: issues around treaties, governance, land, violence, and social and economic disparities, for instance, call attention to that broader framework. Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017) distinguishes between cultural and political resurgence, for instance, arguing that cultural resurgence can “take place within the current settler colonial structure of Canada” or even be co-opted by its mechanisms, whereas “political resurgence is seen as a direct threat to settler sovereignty” (p. 49). Along the same lines, I understand from Yellowknives Dene scholar Glen Coulthard (2014) that recognition—for instance of Indigenous rights within the Canadian nation-state—is not a sufficient goal for Indigenous movements because being recognized fails to challenge settler colonial structures, and rather reinforces the primacy of those structures by turning to them for recognition. From the above formulations it would be fair to extrapolate that representation of Indigenous literatures or voices within mainstream schooling systems, on its own, will not undo colonialism. Teaching Indigenous literatures, in isolation, in this view, fails to challenge the colonial structures underlying schooling, curricula, educational policy, and funding mechanisms.

Taking these critiques into consideration, I insist that teaching Indigenous literatures within provincially mandated education must not be the only avenue for decolonizing education. However, when it comes to Indigenous literatures, self-representation is a salient issue: “telling our own stories” (Valaskakis, 2000, p. 78) is a form of intellectual sovereignty that is a close cousin of political sovereignty (Smith, 2012; Womack, 1999). Indigenous writers are representing and celebrating Indigenous presence, and their artistic practices are decolonial and resurgent (Battiste, 2013; Simpson, 2017). It is possible that when learners engage with Indigenous texts,

they build understandings that help to shift relationships and understandings between non-Indigenous and Indigenous populations (Hanson, 2017b, 2018). Attending to Indigenous texts, with care, is essential work within Canadian schools.

When readers engage with Indigenous literatures, they can begin to challenge their own misrecognition of Indigenous people, which is a necessary aspect of grappling with colonial contexts. Useful in this regard is Lenape and Potawatomi scholar Susan Dion's (2009) argument that many of her non-Indigenous education students take on "the position of 'perfect stranger' to Aboriginal people" (p. 179). When asked about their relationship with Indigenous people, she describes their response as "something like 'Oh I know nothing, I have no friends who are Aboriginal, I didn't grow up near a reserve, I didn't learn anything in school, I know very little'" (Dion, 2009, p. 179). Dion (2009) shows how this positioning is "a form of protection against having to recognize their own attachment to and implication in the history of the relationship between Aboriginal people and Canadians" (p. 179). She pairs this articulation of the "perfect stranger" relationship with an analysis of the dominant mode of (mis)understanding Indigenous people as a "romanticised, mythical, victimised, or militant Other" (Dion, 2007, p. 331). Indigenous people are mentally relegated to other places and time frames—pushed out of the here and now, and tied instead to static images like buckskin and feathers (Dion, 2007, 2009; King, 2003). Ignorance about Indigenous people is not only about lack (of accurate information, for instance); rather, more active processes are at work to excuse and disguise settler colonialism (Dion, 2007, 2009).

Critical education scholar Roger Simon's (2000) analyses help to show how ignorance is not simply about missing knowledge. Acquiring knowledge is actually insufficient to shaping a response, Simon argues, when "the force of a testimonial address ... puts ourselves into question" (p. 74). Ignorance actively "prevents us from hearing" (p. 75) what Indigenous people say, such as their testimonials of dislocation and violence, and is an active process that requires a different response. Finding Dion's and Simon's formulations helpful in this regard, I turn similarly to settler scholar Keavy Martin's (2009) thinking on reconciliation and amnesia.<sup>4</sup> Martin cautions that the discourse of reconciliation relies dangerously upon a teleological imperative to move on, suggesting that not-knowing is not a passive state:

reconciliation ... involves an eventual forgetting, even as its processes [e.g. the TRC] ask us to remember. Indeed, the "amnesia" that is promised in the discourse of "moving on," or of "putting the past behind us," is, I believe, a major part of what made the idea of reconciliation so appealing to Canadians on 11 June 2008.<sup>5</sup> It seemed to offer the possibility of starting over or of absolution. (p. 57)

Forgetting is an action. The sense of amnesia that Martin invokes here, tied to absolution, is not benign: it is a way of not-knowing that is willingly entered into by a Canadian consciousness that benefits when it does not understand or challenge the ongoing structures of settler colonialism. Seeing the context around reading Indigenous literatures in such ways helps to illuminate some of the challenges that teachers face in approaching Indigenous literatures.

In our conversations, Daniel makes the point that "if you don't understand that context, you're going hurt people." Writing is powerful, he argues, and can cause hurt if not wielded well. This point offers important implications for reading and teaching Indigenous literatures. For instance, this attention to context is also a response to a question that Francesca asks about why it matters for Indigenous literatures to be flagged as Indigenous, specifically in her teaching: "Why am I always framing it," she wonders, as "I'd like to have more FNMI literature? Maybe I'd just like to



have a more diverse range of Canadian literature, [Canadian] content, in my classroom.” I see several layers of meaning and experience tied up in this question. However, a provocative response might be to take Francesca’s question at face value and answer it with Daniel’s perspective, like this: why does it matter to recognize and emphasize the presence of Indigenous texts, specifically, in the classroom? It matters because, if you don’t recognize the context of colonialism that shapes how Indigenous presence is understood in Canada, you’re going to hurt people—by perpetuating harm or erasure, for instance, or by obscuring the distinct experiences of Indigenous communities throughout that context. Francesca’s question, and the intentions behind it, also point to other concerns. For instance, she highlights the potential for tokenistic inclusion of Indigenous texts.

Challenging presumptions of erasure, in Daniel’s words, brings a political charge to Indigenous writing as it challenges these colonial constructs. Katherena shares an anecdote about discussing a story at a writing workshop that is illustrative here. Her story was simply about two women discussing relationships, she explains, but the conversation at the workshop revolved around the identity of her characters: one reader felt that the Nativeness of the two women was a surprise at the end of the story. Katherena describes how, through that conversation, her writing became politicized: “I was just writing a story about two people ... but it was striking to me ... how that completely non-political story ... was political.” Examples like this strengthen Katherena’s suggestion that “just to have any sort of cultural pride, cultural experience, in and of itself, is a political act.” Jesse, similarly, states that “most Indigenous literature is inherently politicized to begin with.” Jesse suggests that, “when you teach Indigenous literature, you’re teaching about all of the pressing social issues that we’re dealing with today, like residential schools.” Expressions of Indigenous presence are politicized because they challenge the erasure of Indigenous people and perspectives. Further, portrayals of Indigenous experience are often politically charged because they represent the difficult truths of colonial violence. The necessity of confronting these contexts when reading Indigenous literatures is a crucial dimension of how Indigenous texts can be challenging for classroom teachers.

### **Unsettling Readers, Challenges in the Classroom**

Indigenous literatures cannot be read (responsibly) outside the context of Canadian colonialism because that context has influenced what it means to live as an Indigenous person in this place (Episkew, 2009; Smith, 2012). Reading Indigenous literatures involves recognizing how texts embody the resistance and resurgence of Indigenous communities in defiance of colonial erasures (Justice, 2004, 2018; Simpson, 2011; Womack, 1999). This context can make for some difficult reading experiences. Emotional difficulty can lead to challenges for teachers bringing their classes to discuss Indigenous texts, as Jesse suggests when he says, “I almost feel like there’s an extra level of energy needed to teach Indigenous literature, because you’re having to negotiate all of these feelings and issues.... It creates a lot of tension in the classroom.” This tension, as Jesse points out, can arise from questions of audience or classroom demographics. For instance, he has seen Indigenous students become “self-conscious” and non-Indigenous students struggle with “guilt.” Learners engage with Indigenous texts differently depending on their positioning, and teachers need to navigate students’ responses as they work to support learning. A growing amount of scholarship thinks through learner positioning and the unsettling work that can be entailed for non-Indigenous readers as they engage with Indigenous topics and texts (Battiste, 2013; Johnston, 2013; Regan, 2010; Rodríguez de France, Scully, & McIvor, 2018; St. Denis, 2007).<sup>6</sup>

Indigenous literatures can be unsettling for non-Indigenous readers when Indigenous self-expression challenges their prior understandings of Indigenous Peoples. As Sharron importantly says, “People learn about Indigenous Peoples from Indigenous literature,” but they may not realize how this is different from “reading the ‘classics’” and “learning about (mostly dead, male, British/American) white people.” Engaging with self-representation through literature can counter ignorance. Many participants express a high degree of hope for the capacity of Indigenous writing to change what readers know. Suzette, for instance, says, “Aboriginal literature ... creates a space for appreciation, and where ignorance gets pushed to the side.” David also believes that engaging with Indigenous writing can counter ignorance: “Ignorance gets spread by dialoguing between each other about things that we don’t know about. So, if we know about them, then we learn more positive things.” Spreading knowledge in this way, he says, “is my whole goal in writing the stuff that I do.” If ignorance is not a passive state, but rather an active one, caught up in readers’ identities and worldviews, then challenging ignorance is not necessarily going to be an easy process.

Francesca captures this uneasiness most clearly. To begin with, she reflects on her own feelings of discomfort when teaching Indigenous texts: “I feel awkward talking about the appropriateness of—I don’t want to appropriate; I want to use.” She describes working with an Indigenous education resource person in her school jurisdiction as “an uneasy dance.” Francesca is clearly working, with ever-present self-reflexivity, to question her investments and to confront her uneasiness. For example, she recognizes how “different” her Indigenous students are from herself. She interrogates herself, asking, for instance, whether that difference is “part of the awkwardness” she feels. In our conversation Francesca reveals her discomfort, but she also holds herself open to the alterity of her students. She respects that her feelings require some working through, rather than opting to erase difference out of a refusal to experience discomfort.

Understanding can arise from uncomfortable recognitions of alterity, as hermeneutic thinking suggests (Gadamer 1960/2004; Jardine 2000), and as Francesca emphasizes when she considers her own students’ learning later in our conversation. She describes her hopes that the literature she teaches will have a positive impact on her students:

To be uneasy, at looking at a piece of literature, and to not get it, I think that’s fine. I don’t think we should always be reading stuff that we immediately sync with. Who else is going to expose a child to that? I think that’s our job, to help our kids navigate that process of feeling uneasy when you look at literature that doesn’t quite jive with the way you fit the world.

Learning is not just about feeling comfortable and having your prior understandings of the world reinforced; rather, discomfort can be a sign that learning is taking place. Jesse describes how, in his teaching, students feel discomfort, but “the response to that is not to avoid it, but to face it head on.” Robin, similarly, says, “Discomfort isn’t a bad thing. I think if someone was uncomfortable you could have a conversation about that and figure out where to go from that.” Being unsettled by the difficult or different representations in Indigenous literatures can lead to further learning; it does not need to shut learning down. Points of discomfort can in fact be used “as entry points to deeper self-awareness, rather than as exit points from further engagement” (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2014, p. 14).

Analogous to these struggles with uneasiness are teachers’ articulations of fear or anxiety around making mistakes. Rachel provides a clear example here when she shares thoughtful hesitations around teaching Indigenous literatures. She points to intimidation when she says,

“For Indigenous literature, there are a lot things to be careful of ... You don’t want to misstep.” In explaining why she feels intimidated, Rachel points squarely at the significance of context:

It’s only intimidating because it matters. It matters because of Canada’s colonial history, and the damage that has been done, and all of the work that’s still being done to help communities flourish, and help make it possible for communities with different histories and often contrasting priorities to be able to coexist and live together.

Recognizing that teaching Indigenous literatures has an impact and that “it matters a lot to get it right”—or “not to get it wrong”—Rachel reflects upon her feelings of intimidation and her desire not to misstep. Connected to this kind of intimidation are sentiments that several teachers mention—including Rachel, Alice, and Suzette—that when they have Indigenous students in their classrooms, they do not want to negatively impact those students, or even “step on their toes,” in Suzette’s words.

On the one hand, Rachel’s misgivings here echo useful cautions against non-Indigenous teachers jumping too confidently into teaching Indigenous texts. Critics have argued that there is a real potential for the teaching of Indigenous literatures to harm Indigenous people, for instance by perpetuating misunderstandings or stereotypes. Such critics have called for appropriate, decolonial pedagogical approaches (Episkenew, 2002, 2012; Hanson, 2018; Proulx & Srivastava, 2002). Rachel’s hesitations are deeply considered and offer a useful note of caution to any non-Indigenous teachers who might not be ready with a critical repertoire, and might be quick to engage in superficial, decontextualized ways with Indigenous texts—reading them entirely through Eurocentric aesthetic understandings, for instance. As Angela warns in her conversation, not every teacher is ready to take on ethically engaged work. She shares experiences of encountering other educators who are not “sensitive,” even though they regularly “work with [Indigenous students].” It is possible for teachers to cause harm in teaching Indigenous texts and topics. However, despite the fear of making mistakes, non-Indigenous teachers need to find a way to jump in to this work, as Robin attests.

Robin acknowledges that many other teachers feel fearful about doing Indigenous education work and that there is a fair amount of “preparation involved” in learning how to teach Indigenous content, “but it’s a different kind of preparation,” she says: “It’s preparation around land, and story, and culture, and so many things that I think people would be interested in, and I never really felt fearful about that.” Robin explains how she was ready to take on that preparation, outlining the strategies she used to build her capacity, but also specifically discusses her willingness to learn from her mistakes. She says, “I always thought that someone would tune me in if I was doing something wrong ... and I always felt that if I overstepped a line or if I had some questions, that I could ask someone.” She tells the story of an incident when she did make a mistake, but was able to address it and move forward in a good way. That experience gave her confidence, although it was uncomfortable at the time.

Robin connects with Indigenous people around her—knowledge keepers, resource people, and community members—learning from and collaborating with them. This is a strong way for her to be in relation. Robin has experience and relationships that support her in tackling any challenges or missteps that arise. Additionally, she has increased her own capacity because of her passion for and investment in the work:

I think because of some of the connections I've had to the land, and when I thought about "sign posts" in my life, what I've read, some of my experiences, and people I've talked to and engaged with, I just thought it was good work to do.

Her self-understanding and self-motivation enable her to feel confident enough to keep learning and to overcome any missteps.

Despite the potential for teachers to make mistakes, none of the writers I spoke with suggested that non-Indigenous teachers should not be teaching Indigenous texts. Rather, they reiterated that teachers need to find their own way forward, because there is a great deal of work that needs doing. The responsibility for that work cannot sit entirely on Indigenous shoulders, as Daniel puts it. In response to Rachel's and Robin's perspectives, which I described to Daniel, he says that mistakes are an inevitable part of teaching. I asked him what he would say to a teacher afraid of making mistakes, and he responded like this:

You're totally going to screw up. Just like Indigenous teachers screw up. That's the nature of the beast ... Part of it is to own your imperfection. No one expects that they're going get it right on other stuff all the time.

Further, Daniel offers some reassurance when he says that teachers' mistakes are not likely to cause extreme harm: "You're going screw up, but you're probably not going destroy your students." He suggests that "keeping things in perspective" will help teachers let go of their fear about making mistakes. Furthermore, he cautions that fear can be disabling: "fear of it being perfect can lull teachers into a sense that the fear is the work."

Daniel, Jesse, Sharron, Warren—several of the writers speak out against fear and guilt, warning that it is problematic for non-Indigenous people to get stuck in those feelings. Getting trapped in fear or guilt means remaining unable to work toward some kind of response or responsibility to the knowledge that prompted those feelings in the first place (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2014). As Warren points out, stories fortunately can foster empathy and connections that inspire learners to engage, but teachers need to give readers the "opportunity and the tools to deal with this emotionally." Otherwise, he cautions, "There's a psychology of guilt there and people just respond by shutting that [learning] out completely." Confronting colonial contexts makes for challenging learning, but it is essential work in which we all must engage.

### **Conclusion: Challenging Learning, Learning to Challenge**

Indigenous literatures are creative expressions of Indigenous presence, reflecting and storying diverse communities and connecting artists and audiences through and around the art. Because the Indigenous literary arts in Canada arise in the context of settler colonialism, an unsettling dynamic is always at work. Readers are compelled and invited to confront colonial relations between the nation-state and the Indigenous Peoples of this land, including assimilative policies that have sought to erase Indigenous presence. In conclusion, I connect back to the central research question: How do Indigenous literatures matter to the resurgence of healthy Indigenous communities? I have argued that Indigenous literatures matter because Indigenous literatures are challenging the workings of colonialism that restrict the self-determination and well-being of Indigenous communities. Indigenous literary expression engages with the context of Canadian colonialism, opposing barriers to Indigenous resurgence. Reading Indigenous literatures can also

be challenging, creating difficult teaching and learning situations for educators and students. Teaching Indigenous literatures is not neutral, as it brings educators to grapple with the ideological and material manifestations of Eurocentrism and racism, as well as with their own and their students' positioning in Indigenous and non-Indigenous relationships. Reading Indigenous literatures, learning in relation with Indigenous Peoples, requires educators and students to confront these politicized contexts.

Teaching Indigenous literatures in Canadian classrooms can be challenging, unsettling readers, prompting difficult emotional responses, and sparking discomfort and tension in learning environments. These challenges arise from the necessary connection between text and context. Readers are made to confront their own positioning, as well as their relations with each other, with the author, and with the author's community(ies), when they engage meaningfully with text and context. As Danny argues, "It's bigger than just literature ... this is a huge issue." It is a social justice issue. Danny makes this point while acknowledging that teaching Indigenous literatures entails hard work and that teachers doing this work need to support themselves and each other: "I wish I could say it's going to get easier, but ... since the TRC has come out with the report, there's been a lot of backlash." The real-life contexts from which Indigenous literatures are inextricable influence the challenges that educators inevitably face as part of the difficult and inspiring work of teaching Indigenous literatures. With educational policy mandates in place in many parts of this country, teachers are now required to face these challenges. I conclude by asking simply—how will teachers be supported in doing this work well?

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## Notes

1 I say “participants” for clarity and concision, but it is important to my study that writers and teachers were co-creators of meaning who “taught me, showed me things I needed to find, influenced and shifted

what I was doing, theorized and interpreted with me, and generally came together with me to create understanding” (Hanson, 2017b, p. 69). Along the same lines, much more detail and nuance on the original framing of this study can be found in my 2017(b) text, along with longer self-introductions from teachers and writers. Full conversations with writers, as well as contextual framing, can be found in my 2020 book. I refrain from providing page numbers of other citational information for quotations out of respect for the oral and relational nature of our conversations.

2 The Teaching Quality Standard, Leadership Quality Standards, and Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard for the Province of Alberta were signed in February 2018 and are effective as of September 2019 (Government of Alberta 2019).

3 I want to note that it was not within my purpose or approach to criticize the teachers I interviewed—to critique their practices, classrooms, schools, etc., or to assess their degree of skill or knowledge with Indigenous literary studies. Engaging respectfully and appreciatively rather, I focused on understanding the perspectives they shared. My full study (Hanson, 2017b) articulates a wide range of challenges experienced by teachers, such as mandates and permissions; background knowledge; access to resources; leadership; resistance from students, colleagues, parents, etc.; risks linked to employment; and Indigenous literatures being perceived as controversial.

4 Martin’s (2009) thinking here occurs amidst early critical engagement with the emerging discourse of reconciliation, which was partially influenced by the then-Conservative federal government. The work of the TRC was just beginning.

5 This is the date on which Prime Minister Stephen Harper issued Canada’s statement of apology to former students of Indian Residential Schools.

6 It is important to note that Indigenous vs. non-Indigenous is a false dualism and that positionality is complex: for instance, the question of who is a settler opens up much discussion (Rae-Thomas, 2019). However, in this short space I accept the oversimplified term “non-Indigenous people,” although it fails to articulate any nuance or diversity among people’s racial, cultural, and other intersectional identifications; ancestral histories of forced displacement, migration, or settlerhood; or varying degrees of power and privilege. Many of my arguments are more aptly aimed at Eurocentrism and white supremacy than at non-Indigenous people as a whole. It is important to me to name these dynamics but also make space for alliances and solidarities among all receptive learners.

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