

## RELATIONAL ENCOUNTERS WITH INDIGENOUS LITERATURES

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Article abstract

This paper makes a case for attending to the resurgence of Indigenous literary arts in taking up the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls to Action in teacher education. I argue that Indigenous literary arts can help to foster relational understandings between readers and Indigenous communities: stories have the capacity to open up processes of relationship and responsibility. To develop this argument, I draw upon perspectives from teachers and from Indigenous writers, with whom I shared conversations on the question of why Indigenous literatures matter. Through an interpretive process of interweaving these perspectives, this article shows that Indigenous literatures can inspire and motivate educators to take on this work and learning despite its attendant challenges.

# RELATIONAL ENCOUNTERS WITH INDIGENOUS LITERATURES

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**ABSTRACT.** This paper makes a case for attending to the resurgence of Indigenous literary arts in taking up the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls to Action in teacher education. I argue that Indigenous literary arts can help to foster relational understandings between readers and Indigenous communities: stories have the capacity to open up processes of relationship and responsibility. To develop this argument, I draw upon perspectives from teachers and from Indigenous writers, with whom I shared conversations on the question of why Indigenous literatures matter. Through an interpretive process of interweaving these perspectives, this article shows that Indigenous literatures can inspire and motivate educators to take on this work and learning despite its attendant challenges.

## À LA RENCONTRE DES LITTÉRATURES AUTOCHTONES

**RÉSUMÉ.** Cet article met en relief l'importance de s'intéresser au regain de la littérature autochtone pour répondre aux appels à l'action formulés dans le cadre de la Commission de vérité et réconciliation du Canada en matière de formation des enseignants. Je soutiens que la littérature autochtone peut favoriser l'émergence d'une compréhension relationnelle entre les lecteurs et les communautés autochtones. En effet, les histoires ont la capacité d'enclencher des processus de relations et de responsabilité. Pour développer ce raisonnement, je me suis basée sur les points de vue d'enseignants et d'écrivains autochtones avec lesquels j'ai discuté des raisons qui expliquent l'importance des littératures autochtones. Entremêlant ces perspectives grâce à un exercice interprétatif, cet article montre que les littératures autochtones peuvent inspirer et motiver les enseignants à relever le défi et apprendre, malgré les défis qui leur sont associés.

I begin this paper with the premise that the arts have the power to both propel and lure people into the work entailed in responding to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's (TRC, 2015a) *Calls to Action*. When it comes to the work of supporting teachers in developing their capacities to engage with Indigenous perspectives, I turn in particular to Indigenous

literary arts. Literary texts can catalyze an important kind of encounter for non-Indigenous readers: namely, an encounter between readers and their own relationships with Indigenous peoples. I will set out the parameters of these considerations, but first it is important that I introduce myself and what I bring to this writing.

I am a woman of Métis and European ancestry and a member of the Métis Nation of Alberta. To this writing, I bring my background as a scholar of Indigenous literary arts and of Indigenous education, as well as my background in secondary school teaching in Canada. My own perspectives on teacher education are informed by the interdisciplinary work I do around fostering better understandings and relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples through the arts. In thinking through what it means to respond to the *Final Report* (TRC, 2015b) and *Calls* (TRC, 2015a), I bring an ongoing focus on Indigenous resurgence work as a guiding framework. Taking up the Calls to Action of the TRC is work that can be done under a number of guiding conceptual frameworks — decolonization, reconciliation, or Indigenousization, for instance. In engaging with Indigenous literary arts, I find it particularly generative to look at community resurgence.

Indigenous artists are engaging in resurgent creative processes that are storying their communities in significant ways. Looking to scholars like Simpson (2008, 2011), I understand resurgence as the regeneration of Indigenous ways of being and knowing from strong roots into strong futures, in defiance of colonial forms of erasure. Understanding the resurgence of Indigenous cultural 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 in their communities. But what happens when Indigenous arts are brought into classroom spaces that are not exclusively Indigenous, or largely non-Indigenous? How might non-Indigenous teachers understand and relate to these artistic and community processes? Such sites are where Indigenous resurgence work is brought into relationship with non-Indigenous learning. It becomes important to ask how respectful relationships can be fostered between resurgent Indigeneity and non-Indigenous Canadians.

In this article, I draw upon conversations I shared with school teachers and with Indigenous writers in 2015 in order to examine varied perspectives on Indigenous literatures. Through these examinations, I show how the literary arts can enable the work of the TRC's (2015a) *Calls to Action*. Specifically, I argue that Indigenous literatures are able to call readers to relate and to respond — to draw them into a sense of relationship with and responsibility to Indigenous communities. These relational understandings have the potential to foster more respectful relationships between non-Indigenous Canadians and resurgent Indigenous peoples.

In what follows, I first outline some of the context surrounding teacher education and Indigenous perspectives — the particular setting in which I consider responding to the TRC's Calls to Action. Next, I explain the interpretive framework that shapes how I understand my conversations with writers and teachers. Following that, I introduce the conversations themselves, after which the next few sections develop the main body of my argument by interweaving perspectives that teachers and writers shared with me in our conversations. Finally, I offer a brief conclusion that sums up my arguments on Indigenous literatures and relational encounters.

## CONTEXTS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION

When I use the term “teacher education” and refer to Indigenous education in teacher education contexts, I write from my professional experience, which involves two primary tasks. One is working with pre-service teachers (Bachelor of Education students) to develop their ability to work respectfully with Indigenous people and perspectives in their future school-based teaching. The overwhelming majority of these students are non-Indigenous. The second is working with diverse graduate students (in Master's- or Doctoral-level programs) to develop their ability to interweave Indigenous perspectives into their ongoing professional practice or academic work — many (but not all) of these students are teachers or educational leaders. In this paper, I am primarily thinking of the former kind of teacher education — that of future classroom teachers — but will occasionally address broader educational settings.

Prior scholarship has investigated the complexities of bringing non-Indigenous teachers to learn about Indigenous histories, perspectives, cultures, and peoples, as well as the contexts and social issues that affect the relationships between Indigenous peoples / perspectives and formal education in Canada today. For instance, this kind of teacher education involves examining Indigenous histories, foregrounding the validity of Indigenous knowledge systems, confronting the scope of colonialism in Canada, and outlining how dynamics of racism and inequity continue to impact Indigenous peoples (Battiste, 2013; Dion, 2009; Smith, 2012; TRC 2015a). This learning can be complex and emotionally charged. Similarly, Indigenous education work involves bringing future teachers to question their own positioning and degrees of privilege, as well as engaging them in ways of knowing and doing that will enable them to build respectful relationships with Indigenous people (Goulet & Goulet, 2014; St. Denis, 2007; Tanaka, 2016). This work is complex, even when focused solely on how to weave Indigenous perspectives into teaching practice in meaningful ways (Dion, 2009; Kanu, 2011). Recognizing these complexities, I seek to understand what I, as a teacher educator, can do to connect with the vital work of Indigenous artists in order to enact my responsibility both to my students and to Indigenous communities.

## INTERPRETIVE WEAVINGS

This paper emerges from a broader research project in which I held conversations with seven Indigenous writers and seven teachers who teach Indigenous literatures in secondary schools in Calgary. I am grateful to them for working with me to generate understandings around Indigenous literatures, communities, and learning. I spent about an hour with each person, one-on-one, in shared conversation. Our conversations were open and flexible, so that each teacher / writer could share what s/he felt was important. However, all conversations, in their own ways, took up the study's primary research question: how do Indigenous literatures matter to the resurgence of healthy Indigenous communities? In this article, I look, in particular, at perspectives on how Indigenous literatures can inspire relational understandings when they are taken up in classroom spaces, opening up a sense of social responsibility (Episkenew, 2002).

Methodologically and conceptually, I shaped my research through *métissage* as an Indigenous and hermeneutic research sensibility (Donald, 2012). Founded upon "ethical relationality" (Donald, 2012, p. 543), *métissage* involves bringing together perspectives or methodological approaches from different sources, or even different worldviews or cultures, by weaving them together in a way that respects how they are distinct. I understood my process of interpretation as one of conceptual and textual weaving. Consequently, as I worked through the transcription and interpretation of each conversation, I drew out figurative *threads* — significant understandings — shared by each writer and teacher. Through *métissage*, I generated understanding by weaving together those threads, considering them in relation to each other. As I did so, I would weave in my own understandings, as well as understandings drawn from critical scholarship, seeking to understand deeply what writers and teachers had shared.

Understanding conversations, then, did not mean simplifying them or distilling them down to their basic ingredients or themes. Rather, it meant recognizing the complexities of what people had shared and retaining the intricate relationality of the interwoven threads. It meant dwelling with people's shared and divergent perspectives and listening for what they asked of me. In this interpretive process, I created four connected *weavings*, each one addressing a related set of understandings tied to my central question. This article, arising from one of those four woven lengths, considers how Indigenous literatures can draw readers into relationship with Indigenous perspectives and communities.

In what comes next, I will share perspectives on this topic from the teachers and writers who agreed to share conversations with me for my study. When I quote from their interviews, I will simply refer to them by name. The following table provides a list noting who is a teacher or writer. Within each box, they are listed in the order in which we met, between April and November of 2015. This list is presented to help clarify who is speaking when I quote from

our conversations; however, I must highlight the serious oversimplifications it entails. For instance, Indigenous / non-Indigenous identities are too complex to represent in this table, and teacher / writer roles overlap more than is suggested here. For instance, every writer I interviewed also happened to have an educational background of some kind, either past or present, ranging from school or post-secondary teaching to community-oriented educational organizations. I provide this simple table to help readers to move through the analyses that follow.

TABLE 1. *Participating teachers and writers*

Teachers	Writers
Angela Varila	Richard Van Camp
Rachel Baker	Jesse Archibald-Barber
Alice Curtis	David Robertson
Robin Green	Katherena Vermette
Suzette Williams	Warren Cariou;
Francesca Rawson	Sharron Proulx-Turner
Danny Bill	Daniel Justice

NOTE. Pseudonyms are used to keep teachers' identities confidential.

## INTERPRETATIONS — WEAVING THE THREADS

The following section of this paper begins with a textual weaving of quotations from writers and teachers as a way into the understandings explored there. This textual practice, juxtaposing perspectives from multiple sources, is a material form of *métissage* that opens up relational understandings of participants' perspectives (Chambers et al., 2008). It enacts and represents the process of weaving on the page. The sequencing of the threads in these weavings anticipates the ordering of ideas within the interpretive sections that follow. This textual weaving at the beginning of the next section demonstrates the significance of teachers' and writers' voices and the polyvocality of this project, as these voices interact on the page without interference, mediation, or imposition of the voice of the researcher (Kovach, 2009). While this article is largely composed in my voice and shaped through my own thinking, this textual *métissage* is a reminder that relationality is at the heart of my process: I am listening to others as I work to understand.

### *Weaving perspectives*

It's a process of learning what I know, and my own bias, and then figuring out what they know, and where can we meet and then talk about the text? (Alice)

I could never stand reading from a textbook in school. Never got excited for it. But if you give stuff that they'll engage with...that's half the battle. And then they're learning...they get curious about the history, and then they want to read more about it. (David)

If you see it in a specific way that a story can present to you, it can really foster a kind of empathy that all the technical knowledge is never going to provide to you. (Warren)

It's far more intimate in that sense. It's something that really gets inside you, inside your body and your consciousness...it's an internal process. (Jesse)

Sometimes fiction is as close as we can possibly get to understanding somebody who's very unlike ourselves or who has experiences that we haven't had. So I think it can be a very powerful way for students to get deeper into thinking about things. (Rachel)

You have to go through it through empathy...Empathy allows you to understand how it's related to you – whether it's because we're all human, whether it's because we live in this place called Canada...whatever connection we have. (Katherena)

When you go into the book room, Aboriginal literature just isn't there to choose from. And so to ask my school to spend money on a class set of books is just a really big ask. (Suzette)

Almost all Native writers, from the most humble to the most famous, will take the time to talk to you. You just have to reach out. (Sharron)

They are being called to carry that bundle. It was never a call that was meant to be easy...but if they don't carry that bundle, it won't be lighter for those who come after. (Daniel)

I think the greatest learning I've had is, well, talking with people of course, and meeting with Elders and the [Indigenous education resource team], who have been really a great resource. (Robin)

I just remember walking around with my daughter, just feeling this incredible sense of – awe, and humility, that we were being welcomed into this. And – literature does the same thing. It really does. And I just got really emotional. (Francesca)

If there are Aboriginal Studies teachers or people specifically using this kind of literature in other schools it would be cool to be able to get together. (Angela)

...talking about who you are in relation to where we're sitting right now... (Danny)

The literature that our mentors, our trailbreakers, are working on right now, the stuff that they're coming out with – staggering. Absolutely staggering in brilliance. (Richard)

### *Calling readers into relationships*

Knowing that building understanding is already a relational process is important to understanding the capacity of literatures to call people into relationships. From Gadamer (1960/2004) I understand that “meanings, too, are like a space in which things are related to one another” (p. 431) – that understanding is generated in relation with something, people coming together around a topic, within a topography (Jardine, Bastock, George, & Martin, 2002). The relational

nature of understanding is a core imperative within this study. Alice brings this emphasis out beautifully through her lived experiences in the classroom when she talks about coming together with her students around a text. She is talking about starting conversations with students about new texts and issues; she says, “for me it’s a process of learning what I know, and my own bias, and then figuring out what they know, and where can we meet and then talk about the text?” Alice’s portrayal of her teaching process here very much evokes the relational nature of understanding, as she works with her students to build relationships between participants in the classroom and the topic and text at hand. Learning will always involve relationality. Likewise, reading literature always involves a relationship opening up between reader and text. Literary scholars have theorized such dynamics in innumerable ways, such as through reader response theory (to name only one), which may examine the impacts of a text on (and beyond) its readers (Tompkins, 1980, p. ix). What interests me at present is how such relationality (between reader and text) can matter in particular for Indigenous literatures and learning.

The capacity of Indigenous literatures to teach readers, to speak to them, is a key assumption around using Indigenous literatures in the classroom, and it came up often with the teachers and writers in my study’s conversations. It is an assumption that warrants careful examination — both because it is an assumption and because it can open up immense potential for learning. Sharron makes the point that “people learn about Indigenous peoples from Indigenous literature,” which is an essential part of this understanding. I do not think that it should simply be taken for granted that reading Indigenous literatures in classrooms is a good way to bring young people to learn about Indigenous people. I believe that it can, but the taken-for-grantedness of my belief has led me to investigate further. This process warrants investigation because understanding what this process entails can enable educators to realize its potential more fully — and to avoid some of the pitfalls that exist along the way.

Literature necessarily entails learning. As Daniel suggests, any piece of art will be educational “for somebody”: he says, “The thing about words and stories, even entertainment, is they are teachings.” Art incorporates, transmits, and enables understandings. It portrays how things have been, how things are, and how things could be. It stories people and communities. When people read it, it draws them in, making them part of the story too. However, setting out to facilitate such learning within formal education requires consideration and care. As many Indigenous literary scholars have argued, texts must be taught in ways that are contextualized, critically framed, and socially responsible — otherwise, teaching them can be harmful (Episkew, 2002; Hanson, 2012; Justice, 2012).



A key understanding that writers and teachers shared with me in our conversations is that literatures can bring readers to learning because there is an affective, intimate quality to the experience of reading literature. Learning through stories is more engaging than learning from fact-based media such as textbooks. For instance, as part of explaining why he creates the educational graphic novels that he does, David says, “I could never stand reading from a textbook in school. Never got excited for it. But if you give stuff that they’ll engage with...that’s half the battle. And then they’re learning.” Similarly, Warren suggests, “If you see it in a specific way that a story can present to you, it can really foster a kind of empathy that all the technical knowledge is never going to provide to you.” Literature can reach readers and draw them in, these perspectives suggest, which enables deeper learning.

Similarly, writers and teachers suggest that literature fosters greater emotional connections because stories invite readers to relate to the experiences portrayed. When I raise the issue of whether learning from facts or from stories is more persuasive, Katherena suggests that both are important, but that “stories are always the way in. They are the accessible way...stories are the way that people relate to that experience.” Likewise, Rachel suggests that fiction is sometimes “as close as we can possibly get to understanding somebody who’s very unlike ourselves or who has experiences that we haven’t had... It can be a very powerful way for students to get deeper into thinking about things.” The intimate and experiential nature of reading literary texts can draw readers into meaningful learning.

The notion that better learning is enabled when readers engage with what they are reading may seem self-evident, but when writers and teachers talk about how being drawn into literary texts emotionally or experientially can impact learning, they offer new understandings of how significant that engagement might be for the topic of teaching Indigenous literatures. For instance, Francesca considers the impact literature might have on how her students will live their lives and treat other people, suggesting, “If it leads to a sense of empathy... the world becomes better.” Katherena, too, considers empathy as a necessary component for relating well with others, specifically for non-Indigenous people in Canada to engage respectfully with Indigenous people: “We need that empathy – that’s what I think is lacking.” She suggests that settlers might “hold onto prejudices, because...they’ve never been taught to be empathetic towards Indigenous people.” Katherena describes empathy as an emotional connection that can draw people into a sense of personal implication.

Weaving in Lenape-Potawatomi scholar Susan Dion’s (2000, 2009) critical perspectives on empathy is generative at this point. Dion analyzed the potential for settler Canadians (teachers and students) to be exposed to information about Indigenous peoples but not to really process it – that is, to fail to recognize the significance of that information or the impact it should have. Dion (2009) suggested that dominant discourses of Indigeneity – such as that of the

“romantic, mythical Other” (p. 56) — work actively to counter learning about Aboriginal people and perspectives. Without engaging in more critical learning, non-Indigenous Canadians are enabled “to distance themselves from and abdicate their responsibility for attending to the ongoing conditions of injustice that are a part of the day-to-day lived experiences of First Nations people in Canada” (Dion, 2000, p. 359). Dion (2009) engaged students and teachers with stories designed to reframe Indigenous histories and challenge colonial discourses. However, she found that readers persisted in falling back upon dominant discourses even when reading and learning from those narratives. In these examinations, Dion (2009) included empathy as a cautionary point: she critiqued the tendency of teachers (in her study) to focus on empathizing with the narratives rather than considering the implications they convey, such as their own positioning within Canadian colonialism.

Dion’s critique of empathy as a way of refusing more serious engagement contrasts with Katherena’s descriptions of empathy as a catalyst for engagement. Katherena suggests that empathy can be a way in for teachers, drawing them into seeing their own positioning and motivating them to take up Indigenous education work. Describing teachers in a local school district being tasked with incorporating Indigenous content into their everyday teaching, Katherena argues that teachers will not be able to engage well with that work unless they “have a connection to it,” and that such a connection can be precipitated by a “moment of empathy.” As she points to facts that might inspire people to care and connect — such as “a child in residential school” or “lack of clean drinking water” — she insists that empathy is the way to draw people in. She says, “Empathy allows you to understand how it’s related to you.” Katherena sees empathy as enabling personal connections to the learning and work — connections that transcend those offered by information alone, because readers understand how they are personally implicated in that work and learning. That sense of implication, of connection, of “how it’s related to you” is what motivates teachers to take on work they would otherwise feel unprepared to do.

I think that Dion’s (2009) cautionary note about a shallower form of empathy is a good one: she warned that a pedagogical approach to texts that encourages students’ feelings of empathy — more in the sense of pity — “limits engagement with difficult knowledge and avoids conflict” (p. 99). As Daniel and Sharron also warn in this study, it is not enough to respond to Indigenous narratives simply by feeling bad. However, if a deeper understanding of empathy is employed, like the one Katherena describes, empathy can be a useful way of framing how literature can call readers into personally significant understandings that motivate them to respond. This deeper empathy fosters relationship.

Katherena’s analyses here point to a key understanding in this study: namely, that knowledge alone is insufficient preparation for teachers to engage well in Indigenous education work: rather, relational understandings are required. David is right to argue that “if we’re going to be anywhere positive in the future,

we need to start from a good knowledge base,” but often providing information alone will not create adequate change. This contention resonates strongly with Simon’s (2000) formulations on transactional remembrances, in which he argued that knowledge is not enough to call people to interrogate their understandings and change how they act: “simply acquiring more information will never suffice if one is to respond to the force of a testimonial address, a force which, if acknowledged, puts ourselves into question” (p. 74). Rather, the transaction takes place through “reflexive attentiveness to the retelling or representation of a complex of emotionally evocative narratives and images which define...*points of connection* between people in regard to a past that they both might acknowledge the touch of” (Simon, 2000, p. 63, emphasis in original). In such assertions, Simon (2000) examined the kind of learning that may enable “a change in the way non-Aboriginals view their shared history with First Nation peoples” (p. 75). What I find salient here is Simon’s portrayal of meaningful understanding being generated through relationality, in that attending to a narrative (he looks at historical testimonies, for instance) means facing the possibility that that narrative will question and shift the way one understands oneself and the world. This kind of understanding requires more than the accumulation of knowledge. I take up Simon’s arguments here because they interweave well with the understandings I garnered through this study, supporting my contention that, while many teachers are clearly asking for support with teaching Indigenous literatures, information is not enough.

I can make this point about teachers asking for support most clearly through the example of resources. When I have spoken about my research at workshops, for instance, one of the most common questions I have been asked by teachers in the audience is where to find good resources for teaching. Likewise, in the early stages of this project, I assumed that the most useful way for me to support teachers would be to provide teachers with information about Indigenous texts. I thought that they simply needed resources — ideas of what was good to teach, of what texts were out there. However, through my analyses, I came to realize that provision of information might not be the most effective approach. After all, a quick, targeted Google search yields a number of annotated lists of Indigenous literature resources for educators, as well as a few support resources — information is already available. Available information is certainly not as extensive or easy to find as information on more commonly taught texts — as Alice and other teachers state — but there is material to build on.

Listening recursively to teachers in this study talk about their need for connections to resources, I started to really hear what they are saying: that is, they need *connections* to resources, not just resources. Teachers can find lists of appropriate texts, if they have the will and the time. However, building a relationship with the learning offered by those resources — for themselves and their students — is a more complex matter. This insight resonates with Indigenous perspectives on how knowledge is situated in particular places

and bodies (Smith, 2012; Tanaka, 2016), and to the recognition that putting learning into action is not merely a matter of mobilizing, instrumentalizing, or deploying information as rapidly and widely as possible. It is, rather, a matter of building relational understandings (Gadamer, 1960/2004; Jardine et al., 2002; Wilson, 2008).

I want to push this point about accessing resources further, since this was such a prevalent point in my conversations with teachers. In every conversation I held with teachers — and in several with writers as well — we discussed the topic of access to resources. Suzette's comments evoke many points shared by teachers:

As much as I would love to bring in some more Aboriginal literature, to be honest, there's not a lot that's available in my school. When you go into the book room, Aboriginal literature just isn't there... To ask my school to spend money on a class set of books is just a really big ask, especially if it's something that maybe only I'm going to teach.

I think it is fair to generalize across the teacher interviews and say that teachers would feel bolstered in teaching Indigenous literatures if every school had an ample supply of Indigenous books, with supports in place for teaching them. Notably, Suzette's comment that she might be the only one teaching Indigenous literatures at her school was made before Alberta considered Indigenous perspectives in its Teaching Quality Standard. These considerations become relevant for even more teachers when incorporating Indigenous content into teaching becomes mandatory rather than optional. The point about supports is interesting, because it connects to my argument on relational understandings, and because it enables me to offer some pragmatic suggestions for educators.

My conversations with teachers and writers offer several such suggestions, which, taken together, contribute to my argument that teachers need to build relational understandings. The first example comes from Robin. She begins to say that "finding the resources" is "the biggest problem" but then changes direction:

And yet when you look right in our textbooks that we have now, like I'm looking at the grade 10 [book]...It's an old text but it has lots of Indigenous literature in it, and I think it would be a great starting point for that. So it is available. I just think it doesn't occur to people maybe necessarily to use it.

The challenge is not necessarily that texts do not exist; it is that teachers do not necessarily see — or know how to use — what is already there. My second example here comes from Jesse and Warren, both of whom point to the availability of digital media and stories on the Internet: Warren, for instance, points to online resources from storytellers that can make oral storytelling "shareable in a broader way than it used to be." Accessing resources online may be a viable approach for schools seeking more Indigenous content, without incurring costs. However, again, identifying these and taking them up requires educators to build relationships with what is already out there. Such examples provide helpful suggestions for tackling the issue of resources, but also suggest that

it is connections and relationships that are needed for teachers to find the things that are already available. Sharron makes this point particularly clearly when she says, “Almost all Native writers, from the most humble to the most famous, will take the time to talk to you. You just have to reach out.” Reaching out is building relationships.

Admittedly, teachers might struggle to meet the needs of what Suzette calls “the real meat and potatoes of the curriculum – the novel study and the modern play, and the Shakespearean play” with texts that are readily available online and by connecting with writers and storytellers; they may still need those class sets of books. There are particular emphases within how curriculum and assessment shape learning at present, as several teachers discuss in this study. When Alice, for instance, says, “Everything is about deconstructing texts and pulling out quotations and writing and writing and writing and writing,” she argues that innovation is limited by conventional and canonical approaches. Alice and Rachel both point to the influence of the provincial Diploma Exam in shaping how the subject of English Language Arts is taught at the secondary level, such as through a focus on critical essay writing. These teachers suggest that they feel pressured by the assessment model to choose conventional, established materials in order to meet the requirements of the Diploma Exam – that is, texts with sufficient “literary merit” and “complexity” (Alberta Education, 2015a, p. 8). They also feel pressured to teach in conventional ways in order to ensure that students have the requisite skills to succeed on the Diploma Exam. However, in Suzette’s words, convention “still values the pen held by the white man.” Alice expresses hopes that approaches to teaching will shift “now that the Diploma’s worth less” – referring to the relatively recent shift in the exam’s weighting, from 50% to 30% of a student’s final mark (Alberta Education, 2015b). What teachers focus on within English Language Arts is linked to assessment.

The extent to which shifting provincial education contexts will precipitate change in the teaching of Indigenous content remains to be seen. At present, Indigenous texts might be able to constitute the “meat and potatoes” (to borrow Suzette’s words again) of high school English curricula if they are included on the “approved English Language Arts...list of short stories, novels, plays, screenplays, or films” (Alberta Education, 2015a, p. 8), if schools have elected to purchase them, and if teachers are able to build a relationship with that material and motivated to take on the preparation required to teach it well. As educational policy landscapes in Alberta shift to attend more fully to Indigenous perspectives – energized by the work of the TRC – I hope that teachers will receive more support and motivation for teaching Indigenous content (Government of Alberta, 2014, 2016). I also hope that researchers will increasingly examine the extent to which Indigenous literatures and other forms of Indigenous content are actually being taught, as well as the impacts and significance of such teaching.

The complexity of these contexts and considerations suggest that the bigger, deeper question that needs asking is not what teachers need to know, or what texts they should teach, but rather why teachers should undertake this work and learning. What calls them to make the effort? When I ask Daniel why this work is worth doing, why teachers should struggle with the institutional and disciplinary barriers that impede this work, he offers this encouragement:

The only way things will be better is if we do that...[Teachers] are being called to carry that bundle. It was never a call that was meant to be easy...but if they don't carry that bundle, it won't be lighter for those who come after.

I think it is motivating to see how it is a call. The contexts, the real-world situations and relationships that make teaching Indigenous literatures a valuable and socially responsible thing to do (Episkenew, 2002; Kanu, 2011) mean that teaching Indigenous texts is not just a matter of addressing the needs of the curriculum; rather, it is a matter of allowing oneself to be addressed by the perspectives, by the communities, that those literatures represent. I mean *addressed* in the sense of Gadamer's (1960/2004) statement, "understanding begins...when something addresses us" (p. 298). Being addressed is being called into relational understandings, as the readers' understandings are not generated out of their own minds alone but in relation to the subject matter (Gadamer, 1960/2004, p. 285). In other words, "To interpret and remember a text is to read and remember it as if it were addressed to me" (Jardine et al., 2002, p. 55). Further, generating understanding in relation to the subject matter means being called into relation with the people attached to it.

Such relational understandings are exemplified by the teachers in this study who have found ways to relate to Indigenous texts and contexts. Each teacher articulates her own reasons for coming to this work and her own ways of building relationships with the learning involved. Robin shows how relationships are central to doing this work well when she talks about how she builds up her capacity to teach Indigenous content: in her descriptions, she talks about knowledge and resources, certainly, but she also talks a great deal about connections with people — colleagues, Elders, students, Indigenous education resource people, administrators, parents, friends, and her own children. She says, "I think the greatest learning I've had is...talking with people...and meeting with Elders and [her school district's Indigenous education resource team], who have been really a great resource." Perspectives like Robin's suggest that the *what* and *how* of teaching Indigenous literatures — the knowledge, the awareness of texts and resources, the ideas for teaching activities and approaches — are supported by relationships with people — the mentors, resource people, collaborators, teachers, students, and other community members with whom that work is done. Learning from and through Indigenous literatures is enabled by relationships. Further, Indigenous literatures call people into relationships with communities, and this calling requires a response: it is a call to action.

## CALLING READERS INTO RESPONSE-ABILITY

The possibility for literatures to make a positive impact on real life hangs on literature's ability to call people into relationships with Indigenous communities that require action. My study integrates understandings of Indigenous principles of relationality and kinship — including the ethical relationality underlying the framework of *métissage* — and it is vital to recognize that, at their core, such understandings entail responsibility. Because two beings are interconnected, what one does affects the other. If I understand myself in relation with others, then I see how each movement I make impacts someone else. In making decisions, I must consider my responsibility to others. Understanding the connection means understanding the requirement for reciprocal, ethical engagement. Such understandings are fundamental within the scholarship I am building upon (Ermine, 2007; Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008), including Simon's (2000) arguments that enacting transactional remembrances, rather than simply metabolizing knowledge, means living "as if the lives of others truly mattered" (Simon, 2000, p. 62). Such understandings encourage teachers and students, as they learn and respond, to respect how Indigenous literatures matter to Indigenous communities.

Within Indigenous literary studies, one way into this understanding is through the concept of *response-ability*. Recognizing response-ability involves examining one's own positioning in relation to the literature and articulating one's responsibility to act in response to what one has learned (Anderson, 2000; Blaeser, 1999; Eigenbrod, 2002). Storytelling is a relational process and requires participatory involvement. How listeners or readers respond will of course vary depending on their positioning and experiences. Blaeser (1999), for instance, described how responses to stories

might range from perception or simply acknowledging understanding, to engagement in a conversation or involvement in the telling of the story, to a more active taking up of the story in retelling, interpretation of the unspoken, or physically reacting through political resistance. (p. 55)

Whatever forms their responses take, response-ability involves readers coming to some degree of recognition of their relationship with the story and the way that they are implicated in its telling and its teachings — an implication that calls them to respond. Thomas King's (2003) repeated story closing — "don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You've heard it now" (p. 151) — likewise invoked this sense of responsibility.

Understanding a reader's ability and responsibility to act in response to a text — response-ability — is importantly linked to the nature and continuity of traditional Indigenous storyways. Oral storytelling is distinct from written artistic expression (Blaeser, 1999). Warren insists particularly on this point: "To me the story isn't really a thing, at least in that capitalist way. It's a gift. It's a



spirit. It's something that permeates our being in a different way." While the oral and written differ, the ethical and relational dimensions of storytelling can carry through into literary texts — particularly when writers try to put them in, and particularly when readers respect the text's connection to community.

Like the relational structure of storytelling, the emotional and connective experience of reading calls readers to respond. In a story about being welcomed into a dance at a powwow, Francesca shows this progression from connection to action and argues that literature can inspire the same kind of phenomenon. She shows how significant this experience was for her emotionally, but also considers what those feelings call her to do: "There's this, a willingness, a recognition that the only way to move forward is together." There is a sense in her description that literature — like the dance that she describes — offers an intimate and meaningful experience that non-Indigenous readers should feel honoured to be included in. Further, that feeling of being welcomed in inspires Francesca to imagine building a future through shared relationships.

Jesse and Warren offer further examples of how learning through literatures can call readers to respond. Jesse describes tensions in his classroom, but suggests that learning about shared histories can convert such discomfort into empowerment:

The way I try and negotiate that is...by emphasizing that, no matter where you come from or who you are, this is our shared history.... In that sense, you can transform something traumatic and victimizing into something liberating.

Coming to an understanding of mutual responsibility and personal implication in the contexts they are learning about can bring students to feel liberated. This feeling of liberation is a strong foundation for response and action. Similarly, when Warren talks about literature's capacity to foster empathy, he argues that stories are "a potential building ground" possibly for "reconciliation" or for "movement toward some kind of action." Emotional connections, fostered relationally through stories, can enable readers to consider their own roles and responsibilities.

Connecting learning to responsibility involves understanding that a response is required. Understanding oneself in relation to a text — and to the communities it stories — means examining one's own positioning and developing a sense of responsibility to that relationship. For readers building such understandings, Warren shares a helpful insight about being in relationship. Reflecting on being Métis, he suggests that it "comes back to relationship and how you act rather than just who you are." While he is talking about Métis community, this point resonates in relation to reading. That is, it may be motivating to see that *how* one inhabits the relationship between oneself and an Indigenous text determines the character of that connection. Non-Indigenous readers are not automatically precluded from understanding Indigenous literatures: learning is something that they can work at (McKegney, 2007).



Teachers' perspectives in this study offer a range of considerations for thinking through how non-Indigenous readers can strengthen such connections. Most significantly, in discussing what support they need for teaching Indigenous literatures, teachers point to the possibility for collaborations among teachers. Angela and Robin call for opportunities for dialogue and mentorship among teachers interested in improving their teaching of Indigenous literatures. Suzette disputes the idea that funding is the issue and points instead to collective work between teachers: change, she says, "needs to happen with collaboration... we need to start working together more, to appreciate what other people's perspectives are, as teachers — because it starts with us." Many allied scholars of Indigenous literatures have worked to position themselves in relation (Eigenbrod, 2002; McKegney, 2007); looking at that work, I see how teachers' choices to engage with Indigenous literatures entail a recognition of responsibility. This work calls them to see how they are responsible to the Indigenous communities storied into the texts that they and their students are reading.

Before I conclude, I would like to share a tangible example from a teacher in this study who envisioned inspiring ways to foster the relationality that can grow between readers and texts. Danny — the only Indigenous teacher I spoke with — brought up Thomas King's short story "Borders" and her "dream" of teaching it in a way that would connect students to community, to land, and to their own identities. She says, because the story is set in southern Alberta, it would be possible — with a fair amount of planning and paperwork — to take students on a camping excursion to Writing-On-Stone, which is near the "border crossing" portrayed in the text. Danny shares her ideals of

going down to that place with an Elder...talking about the stories of the land...looking at that story...reading it out loud to the students as an oral piece...talking about identity, talking about who you are in relation to where we're sitting right now.

Learning in that place from a local, Blackfoot Elder would connect the students to the land and community portrayed in the story. In envisioning these conversations with students, Danny asks a significant question: "right now you're in this community...what does that look like for your own learning?"

## **CONCLUSION: CALLING READERS TO RELATE AND RESPOND**

How, then, are literatures significant for teachers in responding to the Calls to Action of Canada's TRC? What is it about literatures that can inspire people to take on the challenges of confronting colonialism? Returning again to the research question at the heart of my broader study — how do Indigenous literatures matter to the resurgence of healthy Indigenous communities? — I think that Indigenous literatures matter because Indigenous literatures are calling readers into relational understandings and the responses they entail. The literary arts invite readers into relational understandings, and these relational

understandings entail a need for readers to respond. Reading Indigenous literatures — while remaining “open to the meaning of the other person or text” and “situating the other meaning in relation to the whole of our own meanings or ourselves in relation to it” (Gadamer, 1960/2004, p. 271) — can bring people to an experience of learning that is not only about knowledge, but is also about understanding oneself in relation with Indigenous communities. Such relational understandings integrate the requirement of mutual responsibility, bringing people to understand their ability to respond, not only to the texts but also to their contexts. Resurgence is fostered when Indigenous readers develop these understandings and relations in their communities. However, learning through literatures might also help non-Indigenous readers to position themselves ethically in relation to Indigenous resurgence. This relationality is a powerful dynamic for educators to take on in responding to the impacts of the Indian Residential Schools system.

Across the conversations, I see hope that recognition of the importance of Indigenous literatures is growing, and that this recognition will help to facilitate change. Knowing that literatures can give readers a sense of “relationship” and of “the real impact on real people’s lives,” Warren says, “I do think that one of the reasons that Indigenous literatures are so popular right now is that there are a lot of Canadians who...want to learn more.” I personally am hopeful that such openness to learning among Canadians, motivated by the TRC, will have positive consequences for Indigenous communities and for Indigenous / non-Indigenous relationships. I believe that this growth in recognition is also linked to the appreciation of the artistry of Indigenous literatures. It is important to hear writers and teachers emphasize that Indigenous literatures can be *good*, not just *Indigenous*. As Richard says, “The literature that our mentors, our trailbreakers, are...coming out with...[is] absolutely staggering in brilliance.” Literatures, in their artistry, have the capacity to draw readers into experiences, to learning, and to relationships. They have the capacity to *address* readers (Gadamer, 1960/2004). Being drawn into relational understandings involves response-ability: engaging meaningfully with Indigenous literatures means being called to respond, to read for resurgence. A story can itself be a call to action — and one that is all the more compelling for its artistry.

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