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Aubrey Jean Hanson

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Disciplinarity and Decolonization in Indigenous Literary Studies

Aubrey Jean Hanson

TAANISHI, HELLO, MY FRIENDS AND RELATIVES. I greet you from the Treaty 7 region of southern Alberta and from the broad homeland of the Métis Nation, of which I am a member. My name is Aubrey Jean Hanson, and I am of Métis and Euro-settler ancestry and a scholar of Indigenous literatures and curriculum studies. I want to extend gratitude and appreciation to Ronald Cummings and the Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English (ACCUTE) for organizing the panel on which this readers' forum is based, to *English Studies in Canada (ESC)* for hosting us in this written medium, and particularly to my co-panelists, now co-authors, for the opportunity to build dialogue and solidarity. I open with these intentional gestures of positionality and relationality in keeping with Indigenous knowledge systems but also as a way into the work of re/imagining English studies. From this opening place of relationality, I want to think about disciplinarity and decolonization.

I will first speak to disciplinarity. My co-authors and I were, in this panel and forum, invited to speak to the topic of "The End/Future of the English Department." In my academic appointment, I work in a faculty of education, and I am speaking from there as a scholar of Indigenous literary arts outside of an English department. While my undergraduate

AUBREY JEAN HANSON

is a member of the Métis Nation of Alberta and an Associate Professor at the University of Calgary's Werklund School of Education. Her ancestry extends to Red River Métis, German, Icelandic, French, and Scottish roots. She is the author of *Literatures, Communities, and Learning: Conversations with Indigenous Writers*, published with WLUP in 2020.

degree was in English and my previous career was as a high school English teacher, I now occupy a different disciplinary space. You might wonder what it looks like to do literary studies from outside of English. I have always been very interested in the relationships between literatures and those who read them, such as how people learn from literary texts, the dynamics between text and context, and critical lenses that focus on social change. Alongside my love of teaching—I have wanted to be a teacher since the days when I was helping my little sister learn to tie her shoes—education makes sense as a place to do this work. My current teaching and scholarship in Indigenous education involves bringing people to a place of readiness to engage well with Indigenous knowledges and communities, including people, content, and contexts. I find this work a generative space for making connections with Indigenous literary studies.

Within my work in Indigenous education, I often find myself considering disciplinarity. I am addressing audiences whose thinking and professional learning needs are structured around academic or subject-area disciplines, such as social studies, language arts, mathematics, and science. However, Indigenous knowledge systems are not organized around, or fragmented into, disciplinary structures.¹ Traditionally and in the present tense, Indigenous knowledge systems and pedagogies undo disciplinary boundaries.

Let me give an example. Many of you will be familiar with Michi Saagig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's story of *Kwezens* or *Binoojinh* and the sugar bush in Simpson's talks and writing on land as pedagogy.² When Binoojinh pays attention to the other beings on the land, they notice the sweet liquid in the maple trees and are able to share this

1 In his contribution to the predecessor to this readers' forum, Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice makes a related point about Indigenous epistemologies. He writes that "Indigenous epistemologies generally don't divide knowledge into hierarchical and easily-divisible categories; thus, all the courses I teach include substantial historical, sociological, and political content." This point is made in the context of the important emphasis that students need to understand both text and context, and he continues, "to focus only on the literary texts is to erase the necessary contexts that would place the literature into broader streams of thought and experience that the writers themselves are addressing; yet to focus only on historical or political context is to strip away the human voices emerging from the texts. Both are needed for understanding" ("Renewing the Fire" 50).

2 For these discussions, please begin with her 2014 essay "Land as Pedagogy," or her more recent thinking in *As We Have Always Done*. Note that the use of the gender-inclusive pronoun "they" is intentional in *As We Have Always Done*, where Simpson states that we miss out on Indigenous intelligence "when we continue to uphold the colonial gender binary" (145).

learning with their family and bring a crucial relationship into the Nishnaabeg way of life (Simpson, *As We Have Always Done* 146–49). Because they were embedded within Nishnaabeg intelligence and kinship systems, Simpson points out, Binoojinh “*came to know* maple sugar with the support of their family and elders” and in an epistemology where “the land, Aki, is both context and process” (150–51). This story is incredibly rich, pedagogically. If I look at Binoojinh as a learner through contemporary education discourse I can invoke the terms experiential learning, perhaps unschooling or homeschooling, certainly land-based learning, and place as curriculum. I can also say that Binoojinh’s days as a learner are not bound by disciplinary structures, where for instance they might first document the behaviour of the squirrel for a science learning outcome and then move to the English classroom to represent their understandings of squirrel lore through writing, images, and/or multimedia text. Instead, the place, relationships, and experience drive the learning and disciplinarity does not shape the story. My point is that, traditionally and in resurgent scholarship and practice, Indigenous knowledge systems are not organized around disciplinarity. What insights does this point offer for thinking through the nature of the English department?

Rather than attempting to answer that question, I will offer another area of consideration to the dialogue: that of decolonization. This topic is one where I spend a great deal of time and consideration as a scholar in Indigenous education. One example of how I grapple with decolonization in my day-to-day work is within curriculum studies, where I work to challenge the notion that simply including Indigenous content (such as literary texts) within existing pedagogy and practice constitutes structural change.³ For instance, I collaborated with some colleagues on a classroom initiative that drew upon Indigenous epistemological or methodological principles to shape approaches to teaching. We published a piece looking at how such principles can “translate into pedagogy” for educators seeking transformative approaches, working “beyond the superficial inclusion of Indigenous content” (Louie et al. 18, 21). From my positioning outside of the English department, I was honoured to be invited into this dialogue in *ESC* to think through decolonization, or the dismantling of colonial structures. Decolonization, to me, entails turning a critical gaze to identify

3 This emphasis is articulated within Indigenous literary studies as well. For instance, in their 2002 piece “A Moose in the Corridor,” Métis writer Sharron Proulx and Aruna Srivastava caution that “we must pay attention to the how, the process and the pedagogy and not the what, the curriculum, the texts, the course outline” (189). Like them, I believe that Indigenous stories and literatures call for Indigenous ways of understanding and enacting pedagogy and practice.

colonial structures and following through to challenge them and take them apart, to remove them from the site of what was there before or of what has been growing up from underneath.

In thinking through decolonization, it is important to me to listen to Indigenous scholars who teach me what it means. Many of you will be familiar with Unangax̂ scholar Eve Tuck's work—for instance, her piece with Wayne Yang where they make the critical insistence that “decolonization is not a metaphor.” They show how decolonization is not about alleviating the impacts of racism and colonialism, is not a general term for things educators want to do to improve their classrooms, and they ask readers to look directly at settler colonialism. “Decolonization as metaphor,” they contend, “turns decolonization into an empty signifier to be filled by any track towards liberation. In reality, the tracks walk all over land/people in settler contexts” (Tuck and Yang 7). Simpson, likewise, insists that, “if the academy is concerned about not only protecting and maintaining Indigenous intelligence but also revitalizing it on Indigenous terms ... then the academy must make a conscious decision to become a decolonizing force in the intellectual lives of Indigenous peoples by joining us in dismantling settler colonialism and actively protecting the source of our knowledge: Indigenous *land*” (*As We Have Always Done* 172). How do these hard facts translate into the work of shifting what academics do in the day-to-day work of research, teaching, and service in the academy? When I am sitting in a windowless room talking to future teachers about land-based education, am I really dismantling colonial structures, manifesting redress for Indigenous Peoples, and making space for the corollary work of nourishing resurgent Indigenous knowledges, languages, and lifeways as they regenerate and flourish? Am I fostering solidarities with other racialized and colonized peoples, working with them to challenge racism and colonialism? I am not always so sure about that.

In my brief time here, I offer no resolution, but I will share a thing that I know about the work of story. In Indigenous knowledge systems, story plays particular roles within communities and within ways of knowing, being, and doing. Story is memory, pedagogy, governance, entertainment, tradition, rejuvenation, and continuity. When I was holding conversations with Indigenous writers for my recent book, Stó:lō scholar and writer Lee Maracle told me that the discipline of English has the purpose of studying story all wrong. She told me a story about her grandchild, and she said, “we’re supposed to love our children seven generations into the future, so we created this body of story to guide those children” (Hanson 100). She built on that to say, “that’s the purpose of us studying the stories. It’s

not for determining metaphors and themes, or whatever it is. It's for the impact of that story on the lives of the people who read it" (Hanson 100). She also makes this point in her "Oratory on Oratory," explaining that the purpose of listening to, reading, and studying stories is that we are bound to "transform ourselves" (Maracle 229). From listening to people like Lee Maracle, I know that the process of stepping into relationship with Indigenous literatures can teach readers how to listen to Indigenous voices and experiences and call them to respond in their own lives. I feel that learning how to understand and be in relation with Indigenous stories can guide us into alternate ways of knowing, being, and doing in scholarly work.

Again, decolonization cannot be a metaphor for opening up and transforming pedagogy and practice within academic disciplines, but I do believe that story can help educators to imagine otherwise—to borrow a catch phrase from Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice ("Literature, Healing" 108). In 2003, *ESC* published a readers' forum on the discipline of English—specifically on the question "what's left of English studies?"—which is interesting to look at in light of the dialogue in this present forum. In concluding his contribution, Justice claims: "English Studies, for all its problems, is still a discipline worth fighting for; it's still a place where profound progressive change can occur ... By doing this work, we give honour to the struggles of all those for whom literature has been a step toward liberation" ("Renewing the Fire" 52). I do not know exactly how this sensibility might be inflected through present circumstances nearly twenty years later, but I do know that this visioning work still matters.⁴

Speaking for myself, one thing I see is that, if I am working to dismantle colonial structures, I need to remember and imagine what I am finding or building in that space I am uncovering. It might be old ways and new—new solidarities and kinships, old ways of being in relation. Learning from Indigenous literary arts, speculative fictions, and two-spirit resurgent writings, for instance, I see how futurity and kinship are inextricable. And if nothing else, I am grateful to lean into kinship with my fellow co-panelists and co-authors now to do this work of imagining futurities together.

Maarsii, thank you.

4 Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's work, too, points to how "visioning" is vital part of resurgence, suggesting that those seeking change need to know how to envision and enact it ("Our Elder Brothers" 108).

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