

VITALITY AND TEACHING INDIGENOUS LITERATURES: A MÉTISSAGE

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ABSTRACT. Methodologically framed as *métissage*, this work shares our experiences of teaching Indigenous literatures in K–12 and post-secondary education. Using personal narratives, we situate the research on teaching Indigenous literatures within our geographical context, Mi'kma'ki. We share how we came to this work as teachers and scholars, then discuss our journeys as readers of Indigenous literatures. We then highlight our teaching practices based on our own experiences, such as circlework and centring orality. We conclude by pointing to humour as a pathway to making the classroom a vital space.

VITALITÉ ET ENSEIGNEMENT DES LITTÉRATURES AUTOCHTONES : UN MÉTISSAGE

RÉSUMÉ. Conçue sous l'angle méthodologique du *métissage*, cette étude partage nos expériences en matière d'enseignement des littératures autochtones aux niveaux primaire, secondaire et supérieur. À travers des récits personnels, nous situons la recherche sur l'enseignement des littératures autochtones dans notre contexte géographique, le Mi'kma'ki. Nous expliquons comment nous nous sommes lancés dans ce projet en tant que personnes enseignantes et chercheuses et discutons de nos parcours en tant que lecteurs et lectrices de littérature autochtones. Nous soulignons ensuite nos pratiques pédagogiques, fondées sur nos propres expériences, telles que le travail en cercle et la mise en avant de l'oralité. Nous concluons en soulignant que l'humour est un moyen de faire de la salle de classe un espace dynamique.

VITALITY IN CONTEXT

At the best of times, classrooms are vibrant places where stories are animated, reading is vital, and conversations change worldviews. Indeed, we maintain that *vitality*—defined in Boldt's (2021 reading of psychoanalyst Daniel Stern as “the feeling of flow and aliveness” (p. 207—

is central to the teaching of literacy and literature. There always seems something at work in reading that lies beyond books and their words, something magical. Being educators with long careers, we know that not everyone has equal access to such dynamic literacy experiences but providing them for others is what drives us; offering the opportunity for vitality in literacy and literature education seem to us an ethical imperative bordering on a basic human right (Boldt, 2021). In the context of teaching Indigenous literatures to mostly settler students, additional ethical imperatives accompany those of ensuring vibrant reading encounters (e.g., Justice, 2018). In this article, we share our experiences of reading and teaching at those ethical intersections, with attention always turned toward the pulse of vitality.

Our inquiry contributes to and is informed by a growing body of scholarship that links Indigenous literatures to the classrooms in which they are taught, both post-secondary (Reder & Morra, 2016) and K-12 (Hanson, 2020; Hanson et al., 2020). We touch on several themes emergent from that research: why Indigenous literatures matter (Hanson, 2020; Justice, 2018), which stories ought to be told and not told (Fortin, 2016), and who ought to teach these stories (Nxumalo & Cedillo, 2017). While this research informs our thinking, we often prefer to engage most directly with locally specific scholarship emergent from our shared geographical context in the unceded and unsundered territory of the Mi'kmaq, Mi'kma'ki. Literacy and literature have existed here since well before contact (Bryant, 2017), as shown by Marie Battiste's (2016) accounting of wampum belts, notched sticks, pictographs, and petroglyphs as a form of Mi'kmaq symbolic literacy. Yet, there remains a perception among some that Indigenous literature in the region is "emerging" (Tattrie, 2018), a notion that erases historical literacy practices and works to delegitimize literary contributions from Indigenous community members (Downey, 2022). Despite the long history of literature and literacy in Mi'kma'ki, and robust discussions of decolonizing education (Battiste, 2013; Munroe et al., 2013), there is a regrettable dearth of research around teaching Indigenous literatures in this context,¹ which we try to redress by extending current considerations around teaching Indigenous literatures into what is today known as Atlantic Canada.

Inspired by the many scholars, both Indigenous (e.g., Archibald, 1997; Kovach, 2021; Reder, 2022) and settler (e.g., Miller, 2005; Pinar, 1994), who put personal storytelling and/or autobiography at the centre of their scholarly work, we frame our inquiry as *métissage*. *Métissage* has been taken up by Canadian (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009) and Indigenous (Donald, 2012) curriculum scholars. We understand *métissage* as a specific form of life

writing that attempts to bring together multiple stories and experiences, “braiding” them in such a way as to show their similarities and contrasts, their overlaps and divergences, and their strength in unity and difference. Importantly, we do not see such writing as hybridity, nor as asserting that all our stories are the same (Donald, 2012). Indeed, as Vowel (2016) reminds, when *métissage* is taken up as hybridity, it can result in claims of Canada being a *métis* or “mixed” nation and folks with no connection to Indigenous communities claiming Indigenous identities (see also Tuck & Yang, 2012). Both of these ideas function as modern extensions of settler colonialism’s genocidal logic, which seeks to erase Indigenous presence from the land (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Rather than hybridity then, the unique beauty of *métissage* as life writing lays with the way complex and diverse personal narratives are bound together, not as one but as many.

In the following sections, we present our *métissage*. Rather than offering extensive scholarly interpretation of our stories, we allow them to speak for themselves – showing rather than telling, as one reviewer put it. While not normative in academic writing, we maintain that this practice is consistent with both our methodological approach, *métissage* as life writing, and our pedagogical practices – for example, the circlework (Graveline, 1998) discussed in the third strand. In that way, the form and content of this article mirror each other.

We frame our sections as “strands” within a “braid,” as is common in *métissage*. Individually, each strand brings together different stories around common themes, and when the three strands are braided together, the collection expresses something of our interconnected lived realities in all their complexity. We begin with a first strand that describes who we are and how we come to this work. We then move into a second strand of stories emergent from our practice as readers before offering a third strand that shares some of our experiences in classrooms. Finally, we tie everything together, loosely, in a concluding section focused on humour

STRAND ONE: WHO WE ARE

We, the three authors, met in a graduate course entitled “Indigenous Literatures in the Classroom” held in the summer of 2022 and taught by Adrian. After the completion of the course, Adrian invited Susan and Yelena to collaborate on this article to capture the conversations that happened in the classroom and to share some of their broader experiences with reading and teaching Indigenous literatures. In this section, we share our individual stories of coming to this work.

Adrian

The first assignment in all my Indigenous-themed courses is the same: In a video or essay, describe who you are, where you come from, the treaties with Indigenous Peoples in the place of your birth, and the Indigenous name for the closest body of water to where you were born. It is, for me, a way of starting conversations about positionality that both engage and transcend the Western notions of social location. It begins toward positioning folks in relation to land and treaties. It also serves as a way of getting to know students, and a way for students to get to know me, as I typically complete the assignment as well.

My responses to those questions run something like this: Niin teluisi Adrian Downey. My Ancestors were Irish, French, and Mi'kmaw and lived on the west coast of Ktaqmkuk (Newfoundland), where both my parents were born. The territory of my birth is Mi'kma'ki, where the Peace and Friendship Treaties were signed by the Wabanaki nations and the British Crown between 1725 and 1779. The name of the place of my birth, Kjiipuktuk, refers to Halifax Harbour.

Sometimes, I tell more of the story. In 2012, I was given a federal Indian status card and registered as a member of the Qalipu Mi'kmaq First Nation, but in 2018 I was removed from the registry because of a federally enforced political process known as the membership review. Over the last 14 years, I have wrestled with what having that status, then losing it, has meant for my positionality. Like Reid (2020), I once unequivocally asserted my identity as an Indigenous scholar; however, after considering more critical literature on Indigenous identity and thoughtful discussions of Indigenous identity in the Qalipu community (e.g., Brake, 2021; Reid, 2020), I have become more reluctant and careful in my self-identification. Today, I say I have Indigenous Ancestors — Mi'kmaw Ancestors from Ktaqmkuk. I usually leave the rest unspoken unless there is time to tell the full story.

Making sense of my positionality has served as a major motivator of my literacy practices over the last decade. Indeed, I've often tried to read my way into understanding, which is perhaps why I find myself at home in scholarly contexts, but I have also learned that “you can't read your way out of racism” (Figueroa & Shawgo, 2022, p. 25). Thus, one tension I experience in teaching Indigenous literature is how to share everything beyond the page — relation to land, the centrality of orality, the connection between language and worldview — that makes this reading vital.

Susan

Living, working, and pursuing graduate studies in Kijipuktuk, Mi'kma'ki, I acknowledge my position as a settler and a guest on this land. As I interact with Indigenous literatures, I recognize my socio-economic security and identification as a heterosexual White woman who has spent 25 years teaching in a system that prioritizes paternalistic, Western pedagogies. Each of these identifications impacts my roles as a learner studying Indigenous texts and as a teacher with ethical responsibilities to recognize my biases and how they impact the students with whom I share a classroom.

Reflecting on how I understand the world(s) around me, I look to the stories I've been told. This is my approach for making sense of life: Who can tell me a story that lets me see some truth? During much of my career, the stories and curriculum in my classroom were, because of the paradigm of my very Eurocentric education, overwhelmingly colonial. As my worldview widened, I became aware of stories beyond the usual curriculum modality of heteronormative, White-dominated text presented in Canadian schools. This "opening of eyes" is what drew me to the course on Indigenous literatures; I wanted to see the land I inhabit from the perspective of peoples who have been here for thousands of years.

As my eyes opened, I made conscious decisions to bring the secondary students with whom I worked literature that recognized their diversity and provided them with choices and alternatives that better reflected their identities. I began by replacing canonical offerings with the work of feminist, LGBTQIA2S+, and multicultural / world literatures. With growing awareness, I read the work of Indigenous authors Eden Robinson and Richard Wagamese. More recently, I have sought authors who speak to an intersectional perspective of Indigeneity: Joshua Whitehead, Billy-Ray Belcourt, and Katherena Vermette.

For much of my career, I focused on preparing myself to be an authoritative resource for students. That perspective has now shifted toward being a student and consciously letting go of authority, and I'm experiencing the discomfort that happens with a new way of thinking and learning. Through my reading I'm learning from stories that are not mine, but which are being shared with me. I am grateful, and I want to listen.

Yelena

As a history teacher, I believe that revision of one's perspective enriches any story's effervescent nature. My name is Yelena, and I identify myself as a Russian Canadian, middle class, cisgender, straight, and female settler. I am also a second-generation Holocaust survivor.

Growing up in the former Soviet Union in a family of a staunch communist, I was engineered into a *Homo sovieticus*, valourizing the spiritual dogmas of dialectical materialism. My formative years at Samara State University were also affected by these totalitarian discourses and left no space for emotional growth. It was not until the year 2000, when I became a student at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, that my Iron Curtain started to melt away, and I inhaled the inspiring air of a more liberal school of thought.

With COVID-19 illuminating and exacerbating the global social malaises, I felt compelled to return to graduate school to explore how I could engage in meaningful and contemplative conversations with my fellow educators and foster a safe place to ignite social change in my own classroom. Driven by a conviction that educators act as agents of change within their own classrooms, I blindly dove into the vast waters of Adrian's course "Indigenous and Decolonizing Studies." Little did I know how my Eurocentric ontologies veiled my ways of being, learning, and teaching. Following a visceral and unapologetic essay, "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor" (Tuck & Yang, 2012), which reclaimed the term "decolonization" to refer only to the return of stolen Indigenous land and called out six moves to innocence that pervade settler thinking, I realized that I could no longer look away.

STRAND TWO: READING AND LEARNING

Before we discuss our specific teaching contexts, we must recognize ourselves as readers and learners – our tendencies, desires, and histories. In this strand, we share stories and thinking emergent from our learning and reading of Indigenous literatures. The fact(s) of our classrooms, however, are never far from our minds.

Yelena

In the wake of the high-profile killings of Black and Indigenous people such as Breonna Taylor, Tina Fontaine, Colten Boushie, and George Floyd, in the summer of 2020, anti-racist educators compelled the world's educational community to respond not through vague statements but with actionable steps toward dismantling systems that harm historically

marginalized students. The events of that summer, coupled with disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 on multigenerational ethnic homes, propelled the salience of social justice education in schools and prompted discussions amongst Nova Scotia teachers on how to provide more meaningful education about insidious acts and harmful effects of racism. Still confined at home, I continued to teach online and read voraciously bell hooks, W. E. B Du Bois, and Kimberlé Crenshaw, who collectively highlight a trajectory of African American thought running against racism's silent normativity. I also felt conflicted on how I could create a space for my secondary students to discuss and act upon these social justice issues in a meaningful way. After 25 years of teaching history, I felt ill-prepared to address the social malaises that had arguably reached their cathartic point. Suffering from what Mills (2007) calls White "epistemology of ignorance," I enrolled myself in the Educational Foundations Master of Education program, desperately trying to find ways to dislodge the current status quo and explore social transformation through my teaching.

A colleague of mine suggested that I take the course on Indigenous and decolonization studies in the spring of 2021, characterizing Adrian's teaching as highly impactful. That class was a metamorphosis of consciousness. The nourishing learning spirit (Battiste, 2013) pervading that course allowed me to extend my philosophy of teaching by exploring personal and professional transformation in conversation with Indigenous texts. From the inception of the course, reading Battiste (2013) and Tuck and Yang (2012) among others, who emphasize dichotomy and schism in the historicization of Indigenous and Canadian storytelling, I found myself "homeless" and unsettled.

Through many conversations and readings, I eventually found my placefulness (Styres, 2019, p. 27) – my rootedness, my lived place, my home – when I founded an intersectional advocacy group, named "Cheetahs for Change" (CFC) after our school's mascot, with the sole mission to embark on a transformative journey to implement social change by amplifying the voices of folks historically unheard and silenced by the current education system. Adrian's "subtle," "metamorphic," and "awkward" teachings (Downey, 2018, title), along with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's (TRC) 94 calls to action, inspired a plethora of CFC projects: from raising awareness and celebrating Indigenous ways of being and knowing, planting weeping willows to commemorate the victims of residential schools, to raising funds to address systemic poverty in some Indigenous communities.

Fast-forward to the spring of 2022: I was happy to take another course with Adrian. This time, the focus was Indigenous literatures. We discussed issues and read articles authored by Vowel (2016), Battiste (2016), and Downey (2022) concerning the social, emotional, and cultural impact of colonialism on Indigenous communities and Indigenous people. I could not help but contemplate the ubiquitous role that Indigenous literature plays in Indigenous cultural survival, sovereignty, and its divorce from the dominant colonial literary tradition. While engaging with different Indigenous genres and media imbued with a courageous call to strength, pride, resistance, and resilience, I found myself in awe while drifting away from my Western worldview. I was inspired by the revolutionary lens of the Indigenous artistry as I deconstructed multiple Eurocentric discourses of time, place, education, gender, and that deeply rooted sense of the Western individualism. The synergy of the two courses, “Indigenous and Decolonizing Studies” and “Indigenous Literatures in the Classroom,” infused powerful imaginaries that help non-Indigenous students like me to understand our world differently and see a different future — one where sociological conflict is resolved. Arguably, the nexus of these two courses fosters an awareness of Indigenous brilliance, a notion that is spirit-centred and is equivalent to wholeness. Awareness of Indigenous brilliance hinges on the metamorphosis of “cognitive imperialism” (Battiste, 2013, p. 22) and therefore serves as an antidote to neoliberal, capitalist, and settler colonial epistemic ways.

Adrian

I often feel underprepared to teach. As I write these words, I sit at the computer having not slept well because my fall classes start today and, after more than a decade of teaching, I am still nervous that I haven’t prepared adequately. Sometimes, my anxiety is productive; it propels me to overprepare. It is not, however, based on reality. The things I am anxious about almost never come up: They are challenges to the legitimacy of the “authenticity” of my voice as a teacher and a teacher of Indigenous courses.

When I start my classes, I am always transparent about who I understand myself to be and my professional experiences. In my mind, however, those things aren’t enough; nothing could ever be enough. To soothe this anxiety, I read. In the 6 months before the Indigenous literatures course, I read 30 novels by Indigenous authors. I re-read older, somewhat obscure, titles like Lorne Simone’s *Stones and Switches* (1994) and classics like Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* (1977), and I also sought out more recent offerings like Eden Robinson’s *Trickster* series (2017–2021). Few of those books were taken up by students, but having read them made me feel

better. Over the past 4 or 5 years, my reading, even outside of Indigenous education, has taken on a paranoid character; it feels defensive. My earliest work as a scholar was deeply tied to my identity, and any critique of that work felt like a personal attack — that I didn't know my own story well enough; any absent foundational knowledge / reading, especially around Indigenous topics, was an absence of self. Echoes of that continue today, even as my work focuses less and less on myself.

These anxieties and my responses are steeped in colonial logics. When I turn toward Mi'kmaw thinking, I am reminded of the concept of *Netukulimk*, which is often used to talk about sustainability and "... is closer to the idea of 'avoiding not having enough' (Davis et al., 2011) than accumulating abundance" (Robinson, 2016, p. 64). In the Q and A at a public talk, I asked a Mi'kmaw scholar who was working with the concept of *Netukulimk* what it meant to them in the context of research. In conversation, the idea of "researching with enough" emerged (L. Leighton, personal communications, February 2021). While they were a mixed-methods researcher and thought about "enough" with reference to questions they might not ask and ways of conducting research without funding, I took the comment as a reflection of my own research practice: reading. What does it mean to read "enough"?

A music teacher I had a lifetime ago used to say, "Music should be as simple as possible, but no simpler" — apparently a play on a quote from Einstein. I've always appreciated that sentiment because it rejects the rigidity of an externally designated standard toward which folks ought to strive. The only reference for how simple music ought to be is the music itself. I suspect the same might apply here — we ought to read "enough," but no more. By extension, perhaps we ought to *be* enough, but no more.

Susan

As a settler scholar engaging with Indigenous literatures, my position is that of a student learning new ways of seeing and being in the world. Reading the words of Stó:lō Elder and writer Lee Maracle, I hear her warning against traditional scholarly lenses being applied to Indigenous works: "Colonial white society assigned itself some crazy Knower's Chair and handed white people the authority to sit in it ... It is rare that they will give it up so that they can learn from Indigenous people" (Maracle, 2017, p. 76). Maracle's message is clear: Settlers should not attempt to interpret or make assumptions about an Indigenous text based on dominant Western perspectives and experiences. Instead, settlers must humbly come to this scholarship through Indigenous sources. It is important for White / settler scholars to take seriously the responsibility of avoiding the

“Knower’s Chair” by acknowledging our ignorance and doing the research to understand the contextuality of the work we are studying. The result is a step toward responsible scholarship and respectful engagement with Indigenous texts and people.

My experience of reading and studying Indigenous literatures suggests a paradox. I read to learn. I read for the enjoyment of a good story. I read to feel resonance with my own experiences. I read because there are things I can never experience otherwise. I gravitate to authors who identify as female or feminist because I want an experience of story that recognizes women as fully realized. Flowing from these choices is a desire to find personal connection with characters and their experiences. As a settler, an outsider to Indigenous text, I feel drawn to the stories and the characters, even though they are not mine. I see the evident paradox, but I don’t feel it is insurmountable. My desire to connect is a tentative outstretching; it’s like a new relationship – I am nervous, excited, curious, and desperate not to offend. It is different from reading the literature of the Western canon with which I’ve grown up. I don’t have the inherited knowledge, the cultural heritage, the automatic recognition of analogy. I am working to be a learner without guile, to be a responsible and humble student of the stories shared by Indigenous authors.

Yelena

As a settler educator trying to inspire my students to come into the world of Indigenous literatures, I need to reimagine how, under the constraints of the current neoliberal system, this can be done with “just enough” time and resources. Dwelling on “just enough” in the world of education compels attention to the ambivalence of, on one hand, the cornucopia of educational resources nonchalantly suggested without meaningful follow-up by different agencies (e.g., “Oh, you know, just get a guest speaker or something”) and, on the other, the financial and bureaucratic constraints around simply being able to offer some exposure to Indigenous worldviews (e.g., “We don’t have the funding for honouraria”). In the dominant Western worldview, there is no limit to what humans can achieve. In contrast, Indigenous knowledges often prioritize interdependence and sustainability. Likewise, the epistemic constraint of “just enough” may emphasize balance and harmony and lead to a focus on using resources wisely, in ways that benefit the entire community rather than maximize immediate personal gain. In the spirit of “just enough” and honouring a hermeneutic of constraint, I have written a poem where one Indigenous truth deriving from the prolific Indigenous artistry is constrained to one line.

Indigenizing hinges on a transformation of cogito ergo sum to *I feel therefore I can be free*;

Neoliberal epistemology of ignorance coalesces comfortably with settler moves to innocence.

Decolonization is not a metaphor, so the TRC is spelt U-N-D-R-I-P.

I speak like you; I think like you so let me find my talk through ancestral roots and routes,

Gifted by the gilded generosity of those first treaties with Water and Land,

Earth dwellers flying above or swimming below for *as long as the grass grows,*

Near the river that always flows, chant in harmony with Nature.

Open your heart and feet will follow to the obliteration of the Eurocentric cognitive imperialism.
Unity flows from relationship.

Simmer down; start breathing. Welcome to the world of the Two-Eyed seeing.

Lnu'k kesalul lulls a meditative symphony of the spiritual songs from the sentient Land.

If I go missing in This Place, inquire to protect from the perils of the Highway of Tears.

Transform this *raging dumpster fire* into the 2SQ decolonial consensual love empire.

Embrace the futurity devoid of White fragility, even if your *Mind Spreads out on the Ground*

Reimagine otherwise.

As hope matters, affirm an anti-racist and anti-misogynist Tuck-esque praxis.

This Wound is a World filled with futile apologies.

Unlearn the unsettling terra nullius myth and validate the tropes of harmonious wholeness.

Revitalisation and reignition for we are not a plague nor you a curse.

Endowed with rich culture's beauty, a distinct non-homogenous enigma.

Since time immemorial, stories are sacred.²

Adrian

Pinar (2023) writes, “Just as spirituality can be contained with ritual, creativity can occur within constraints, but the singularity of each can require (at least a relative) freedom from both ritual and constraint” (p. 36). The idea of a constraint, a poetic form for example, can seem to be out of touch with the emancipatory tradition of education — that by putting limitations on students and their expression, we somehow operate through oppressive modalities. Such can, of course, be the case, but there is also a freedom in constraint — the constraint creates a new situation from which creativity will emerge. As per Pinar’s insight, that constraint can require a relative freedom — in Pinar’s mind, freedom from the objectives and outcomes so common in public schooling.

When I started teaching at post-secondary, I offered students a lot of choice both in terms of the modality of their expression and the topic upon which they focused in their assignments. This proved overwhelming for many. They appreciated the choice in theory, but in practice, they wanted some direction. In the context of my Indigenous education courses, I started offering choice in either modality or content, but not both. While I felt uncomfortable with enforcing constraints on students, I let them know that I was open to whatever they wanted to do and that the constraints were there only to give them some ideas.

Since then, I’ve had countless amazing projects submitted: children’s books and comic strips about treaties, a 5-song EP about decolonization, paintings of significant places in Mi’kma’ki, and wonderful collections of anti-colonial poetry. While initially I felt like constraint wasn’t in tune with what I knew of Indigenous knowledges, I also wonder if Netukulimk isn’t a form of constraint — a natural constraint developed over centuries of relationships with a particular place. Maybe constraint is what is missed in the conversations about the climate crisis, for surely in this regard we will never have done enough. Maybe we — and some of us more than others — need a hermeneutic of constraint, an epistemology of enough, rather than a liberal obsession with freedom, or perhaps, as with most things, it is a better balance between the two that is needed.

Susan

My experience interacting with Indigenous literatures as a graduate student has been filled with a certain level of anxiety, a feeling of never knowing enough to be an educated / worthy reader. I sometimes feel like I am spiralling out of control as I go from recommended resource to article to podcast to YouTube video to tweet in order to comprehend a concept

I find in my reading. In response to my feelings of “never enough,” Yelena brought her learning of the Mi’kmaw concept of Netukulimk to the conversation, linking it with the idea of “enough,” and how it can highlight a different perspective from the dominant Western idea that you must be an “expert” on a topic to have the authority to read and respond to a piece. Talking together, I was reminded that there should be joy in the discovery of something new, not fear that my understanding will be imperfect. Instead, it seems that if I come to the reading with reasonable knowledge and a heart open to learning, I can be part of the conversation.

A text that has helped me understand both my limitations and my learning journey as a non-Indigenous reader engaging with Indigenous literatures is Chelsea Vowel’s (2016) *Indigenous Writes: A Guide to First Nations & Inuit Issues in Canada*. Vowel, who is Métis from manitow-sâkahikan, has created a collection of essays that sets straight misperceptions about Indigenous people, living in what is termed “Canada” by settlers. Her style is full of humour and her language is precise and bold, challenging settlers to face their colonial assumptions and prejudices about Indigenous people and cultures. I love this book because, as an “awkward ally” (Koops, 2018), or someone accepting of the mistakes they might make in pursuit of allyship, I know that I am coming from a place of ignorance, often not knowing even enough to ask a relevant question. Vowel’s work provides the “explanatory comma[s]” (Demby & Marisol Meraji, 2016, 9:40) that I need, and I thank her. She has helped me to know what I don’t know.

STRAND THREE: TEACHING

Our practices as teachers are directly informed by our experiences as readers, listeners, and learners. In this section, we share thoughts and practices emergent from our work as teachers. We claim no universal applicability of our practices, but rather offer them up as examples of specific curricula lived and taught in particular places and times.

Susan

Powerful learning happens when there is a common thread between the story and the reader / listener. It’s connection – a realization that what you’ve read, seen, or heard is also present in your own life. Finding a metaphoric doorway to another person’s life through literature – a portal where self and other somehow touch – invites the reader to create connections to a world that is not their own. This has been my experience making Indigenous literatures a part of the senior high school English curriculum. As a settler teacher, I actively seek situations where I can facilitate even a small step toward reconciliation in my classroom.

Oftentimes this happens when I give a student a book and say, “I think this one is for you.” I saw this phenomenon realized specifically within our Indigenous literatures classroom as Adrian provided the opportunity for our class to read, to talk, and to open doorways to shared experience with the literature.

During the course, I read Katherena Vermette’s *North End Love Songs* (2015). A poem from that collection, “I AM A NORTH END GIRL,” opened a door for me. Even though the work is specifically situated in a community that is not mine, the women’s voices and the experiences they describe resonated with me. My deepest connection is to the lines that describe the physical pain of winter’s harshness in Winnipeg and how the extreme cold changes everything, making just getting through the day an act of survival. For those who live above the 49th parallel, winter is another hurdle to living in this overwhelming time. In Vermette’s words, I can feel the absolute exhaustion, the one more circumstance that might just be too much to endure. Common ground is created; I feel that experience too. Vermette paints a complex portrait of a specific community of women, and in doing so reveals a truth that brings me a moment of connection with the First Nations and Métis women of Winnipeg’s North End.

In the weeks that followed the Indigenous literatures course, I felt drawn to continue my relationship with Vermette’s work. In her novel *The Strangers* (2021), Cedar-Sage, a fictional Métis teenager, muses on why families stop talking to each other, saying,

This is what I think is so sad, all these people who don’t talk ... I always thought if I knew everybody in my family, I would always want to talk to them ... That’s what family should be. (Vermette, 2021, p. 322)

Just a few words and I get it because I live(d) it with members of my own family. Cedar-Sage and I share a moment of sadness and frustration. In so many ways our lives are different, but in that instant, we are connected. It is not about the story providing perfect symmetry – novels aren’t doppelgangers – but there is a subtle vitality in those small moments of connection where you feel “this is my life too” and think that maybe you’re not so alone.

Stepping further into the idea of building connections, what happens when students become a community, learning together without the need to compete? Eve Tuck’s (2019) “Indigenous feminist approach to facilitating academic Q & A,” to which the class was introduced by Adrian, reflects this approach. Tuck discusses how it is not about one-upmanship or besting the presenter. She introduces her thoughts by saying,

We often treat Q & A as something that is to be endured, and are willing to gamble on it not going well by having very passive facilitation. We can shift how we interact with one another and make it better. (Tuck, 2019)

Tuck provides several considerations for the audience before the Q & A begins. The one that resonates with me addresses the combative and competitive nature of normative academic discussion: “I remind the audience that the speaker has just done a lot of work, so they should figure out if their question is asking the speaker to do work that really the question-asker should do” (Tuck, 2019). I feel that this gentle, but firm, directive can be applied in so many classrooms. We should ask ourselves, and model for our students, how we can honour the work that has been shared with us.

In the case of our learning community, Adrian led conversations where every person in the room was given the opportunity to speak about the readings under consideration. It was also stated that repetition would be honoured and that to not speak was also a valued choice. Finally, there would be no response to the speakers (no dialogue) until all had been afforded the opportunity to share their thoughts. It was eye-opening for me to see how every person in the room, knowing there was a guaranteed space to be heard and that they would not be immediately challenged to defend their ideas, used that time and spoke their thoughts. No interruptions, listening until the speaker is finished, no need for an immediate reaction – these are practices that develop a different kind of skill set. Academic competition is belayed, and an atmosphere of support and real listening is created.

Listening is an active process, and I am learning to quiet my impulse to speak right away. I’ve often felt a responsibility to fill the silence in an academic setting, whether in my own classroom or as a student. I want to be perceived as a participant, a supporter of the learning community, a leader. These are not necessarily negative qualities, but they can result in a silencing of voices who require time to consider a response or who are more cautious participants in the often competitive and critical exercise of classroom discussion. Letting go of the self-imposed responsibility to make a noise allows me to enjoy and learn from, without immediate judgement and valuation, the wisdom of those around me. Within our classroom, the dialectical divide between teacher and student became less pronounced through the gentle practice of providing space for each to speak and, just as important, to be heard. With Adrian’s guidance and the willing support of all class members, we learned together, building a pedagogy of community, and the results were powerful.

Adrian

In designing the course, orality was at the fore of my mind. Each class began with an extended land acknowledgement in which I shared stories related to the treaties in the area. These land acknowledgements were improvisations rooted in my understanding of the treaties developed through attending events, talking with Knowledge Keepers, and reading scholarship on treaties (e.g., Paul, 2022; Pictou, 2017). I started doing land acknowledgements this way because I wanted them to feel vital. When I hear someone read the script, I pay close attention to the words they use and don't use, but it always feels like something done out of (at best) obligation or (at worst) moral superiority. The best land acknowledgements I've heard are the ones where people speak from the heart. So, I try to speak my heart through the stories I've been privileged to learn.

After those land acknowledgements, we would go around to every student in the class to hear their thoughts about the readings / videos / podcasts. This practice emerged for me from the cultural practice of the talking circle, but I don't think of this activity as a talking circle as such. Talking circles have specific cultural teachings that accompany them. Following the language of Métis scholar Jean Fyre Graveline (1998), I think of what happens in our classroom as circlework. We may be operating under the principles of reciprocity, mutuality, and equality that are offered by a circular formation where everyone gets as much time as they need to speak and others are expected to listen without interrupting, but what we are about in that space is work. It isn't the same sacred healing or decision-making space offered by traditional talking circles, and in the classroom, there are always barriers to our direct, spiritual encounter with one another. Yet, there is something pedagogically transformative – vital – about this approach.

The two major assignments in the course were informal oral presentations made to the class based on a poet / poem and a novel the students had read. Combined with our everyday circlework, the presentations attempted to make the class into a vibrant oral space where text was seen as secondary to orality. In a piece reflecting on a course in which no textbooks were assigned, Métis scholar Warren Cariou (2016) asserts that “teaching can, at its best, bring life to the archive and show us that the stories live in new ways for each new community of listeners” (p. 475). Indeed, through my own narration of the treaties and through hearing students speak to the novels and poems they read, I think the classroom was a vital space and the stories and poems we studied came alive.

Yelena

Deeply grounded in relatedness and relationships, Adrian's Indigenous literatures course became a quintessence for reimagining, revisioning, and challenging our colonial ways of "doing literatures." Toward the end of the class, two sessions were given to sharing poems we had read and discussing them with our peers. During those conversational circles, we would listen deeply, and then we would receive what was offered on a given day: a precious gift of understanding, a new story from an Indigenous lens. With every new story verbalized in the circle, the Indigenous voices we were reading would operate as a perennial reconstruction of the places we habitually call "ours." Then, we gave a gift of equal merit in return: the slow, but discernable shifting of our Eurocentric selves. The holistic and non-prescriptive approach of Adrian's circlework (Graveline, 1998) empowered students' authentic learning while (re)centring Indigenous voices. This style of teaching forwarded a storytelling circle as a pedagogy while amplifying the cultural and ethical protocols of Indigenous ways of being and doing. As Archibald (1997) contends, "Patience and trust are essential for preparing to listen to stories. Listening involves more than just using the auditory sense. Some say we should listen with three ears: 'two on our head and one in our heart'" (p. 10). The heartiness of the deep listening enabled each student to frame their own connection to the Indigenous texts, allowing them to construct personalized, significant pathways to engage with the beauty, humour, and resiliency embedded in each.

Listening to "I lost my talk," where Mi'kmaw poet Rita Joe (1996) captures the bewildering fear of being forced to leave one's culture, made me shiver. The imagery of the lost sense of identity, coupled with trauma, remained with her throughout her life. I sensed how Joe was craving a missing piece of herself. She came to understand that this missing piece was what the colonizers tried to take away: Indigenous voice. As a second-generation Holocaust survivor growing up with an ominous silence surrounding the pernicious impacts of concentration camps or the loss of a few family members, I know what it means to look for missing pieces of who you truly are. Though suffering from internal conflicting chasms and a survivor's persistent traumatizing pain, Rita Joe expressed not only the agonizing suffering of the Shubenacadie Residential School – and that such institutions were called "schools" remains unfathomable – but also her hope and conviction that her words could inspire Indigenous and non-Indigenous people across Canada to journey to a place of strength and healing. Her strength to talk might have been cathartic, as sharing her own experiences in the form of poetic personal narrative could have brought a

new awareness and a sense of clarity to painful memories. My parents' silence hindered their personal healing, likely deprived them of hope, and it continues to impact their mental health. Despite its powerful exploration of exile, resistance, and displacement, Rita Joe's poem ultimately celebrates the triumph of the human spirit over adversity.

By the end of the poetry circles, hearing songs by Rita Joe, Katherena Vermette, Rebecca Thomas, and many others, I felt Indigenous feminist poets' tribulations and trepidations, but I also sensed their resiliency, honour, wisdom, integrity, and enormous sense of hope and compassion. Thus, the conversational circle housed a sacred space, inspiring our passionate inquiry into the postcolonial and postapocalyptic reality, questioning deeply about everything without fear to comprehend and transform our Eurocentric consciousness while centring the Indigenous brilliance.

(UN)TYING OFF: VITALITY THROUGH HUMOUR

Here, we have shared stories of our journeys in reading and teaching Indigenous literatures in Mi'kma'ki. We have shared the stories of who we are and where we come from, which are always central to our reading, writing, and teaching. We have also highlighted the tensions in our reading and the ways we attempt to navigate those tensions, and we have offered several practices we use to evoke classroom conversations. There are doubtlessly limitations and gaps in our discussion. We have not, for example, spoken much about the influence of Land on our thinking, teaching, or learning. That feels a profound gap, one deserving of more space than we can offer here. Our overall aim has been to share what we have learned. It is a task we approach humbly through our own stories and with a recognition that this collaboration is the first step in a larger journey — one that others have walked longer and with more grace. In recognition of the continuance of our journey, then, we would reject the pull toward a tidy conclusion. Instead, we offer a thread of possibility left untied: humour.

Humour functioned as a marker of the vitality of our classroom community. Too often Indigenous literature is seen by settlers as dominated by sombre stories about trauma. There is, of course, a great deal of trauma in Indigenous literature — genocidal dispossession, residential schools, the 60s and millennial scoops, and everyday racism cast long and jagged shadows — but even in dark places there can be humour and occasional joy. As much as our classroom was filled with discussion on issues of systemic racism, settler colonialism, and

intergenerational trauma, it was often a lively place to be. There was a tremendous energy for reading Indigenous literatures and for the applicability of our conversations to the students' classrooms. Throughout the course, students enthusiastically shared stories about things they had done in their classroom inspired by what we had talked about in class: art projects, field trips, and revised curricula, for example. In short, the room was a vital space, and as heavy as the conversations were, there was always a vitality – a mutual and pervasive “feeling of flow and aliveness” (Boldt, 2021, p. 207) – driving our engagement.

In the words of humourist Victor Borge, “Laughter is the shortest distance between two people” (as cited in Buxman, 2001, p. 202). The weight of our burdens, whatever they may be, is lightened by laughter. Laughing together eases tension for both individuals and communities. Humour helps us to get along better. The conversational circle, gifted with the power of repetition, planted a nourishing seed of learning. As a community of predominately Western learners, we learned to feel comfortable with the uncomfortable, say the unsayable, and unlearn the deeply held convenient Truths. Our final evocation, then, is this: Amid the hard, but urgently needed, work of systemic change, let our classes, faculty meetings, and staff rooms become vital spaces – spaces for joy and humour as much as serious discussion of how to actualize change.

NOTES

1. Several (3–4) years have passed since we wrote this paper, and the literature has expanded somewhat in the ensuing years.
2. In order of appearance, the italicized words are quoted from the following references: Lorde (1984), Mills (2007), Tuck and Yang (2012), Joe (1996), Battiste (2013), Koops (2018), Jonnie (2019), Akiwenzie-Damm et al. (2019), Elliott (2017, 2019), Belcourt (2019), and Banggollay (2017).

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