Reading for Resurgence: Indigenous Literatures, Communities, and Learning

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doctoral thesis

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Abstract

This study explores the relationships between Indigenous literatures, Indigenous communities, and learning. My primary research question was this: How do Indigenous literatures matter to the resurgence of healthy Indigenous communities?

To investigate this question, I held individual conversations with 14 participants: seven Alberta secondary school teachers and seven Indigenous writers from across Canada. During these conversations, we discussed why Indigenous literatures matter to Indigenous communities through each participant’s experiences and perspectives. To analyze these conversations, I took up a hermeneutic and Indigenous métissage, interweaving my emerging arguments with perspectives from participants and from relevant scholarship. Through this interpretive process, I developed four primary understandings in relation to my research question. I found that Indigenous literatures matter to the resurgence of healthy Indigenous communities: first, because they create community; second, because they challenge colonial contexts, often through challenging learning; third, because they call readers to relate and respond; and fourth, because they enable transformation in education and in relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

By pursuing the rich connections between Indigenous literatures, Indigenous communities, and learning, this study asks what it means to read for resurgence. I therefore explore the spaces of possibility opened up by the work of particular writers and teachers. I also explore spaces where there is room for growth, amplifying the ongoing call for better ways of engaging with Indigenous content in Canadian schooling. Through its examinations, this research contributes to scholarship in Indigenous education and
Indigenous literary studies, as well as offering implications for educational practice, particularly in relation to language arts curricula.
Acknowledgements

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I offer my personal thanks and love to my partner, who showed me this could be done, and to my children for ensuring the rest of my life made sense. Also to all of my dear family and friends who cheered me on. I am humbled and inspired by all of the help I have received from innumerable sources. I offer my most sincere thanks: thank you, merci, marsi.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Locating Myself as Researcher

I am a Métis woman from Calgary, Alberta. Calgary has always been home to me, although I have lived in about eight other cities and towns, often adapting and on the move for education, work, or love—that is, mine, or, when I was little, my parents’. I am a member of the Métis Nation of Alberta, which to me represents a commitment to be responsible to that heritage. My ancestors were from many places, with a lot of moving around in the past few generations. My mother’s mother is Métis, her family stretching back to English, Irish, Scottish, French, and Cree people, their lives and migrations spanning the prairies in Canada and, for a time, the northern U.S. This is the part of my family I have spent the most time with. My mother’s father was German, the kind of German that is really from further east, formerly part of the Ukraine, a village now lost. Though I learned German because of him, we never spoke it, since mine was university Hochdeutsch, learned from books, and his was a dialect he struggled to speak, distanced by geographies and the long years since his childhood. His forefathers came over between the two world wars. My father’s father was Icelandic, a proud descendant of those Icelandic immigrants who survived difficult years in Manitoba. My great-grandfather was a dogsled racer of legendary status. My father’s mother also came from Manitoba, her parents coming together in another prairie blend of Scottish, French, and Indigenous ancestry. Although some of the genealogical lines have been obscured on this side of the family, I am working with my relatives to retrace them. I am proud of my family heritage, with all its complexities, and love to hear the stories we have of where
we come from, how the people before us survived through adversity and built futures
together across memory-laden landscapes. These widespread family roots hold me up.

How I come to this research is important, which is why I have begun by
introducing myself. My previous experiences, my personal beliefs, my perspectives and
hopes, all shape the study that starts here. This is Indigenous, interpretive research, and as
such it is appropriate for me to be deeply implicated and invested in it, personally and
academically (Absolon, 2011; Allen, 2012; Donald, 2012; Justice, 2006; Kovach, 2009;
Lowan, 2011; L.T. Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008). My research is also housed in and
influenced by curriculum studies, which has taught me to consider my experiences as
curricula, and to investigate how they have influenced my perspectives: this critical
reflexivity is vital in my research (Norris & Sawyer, 2012; Pinar, 1975). I am intent on
contributing to the rich bodies of scholarship in which I am immersed, intent on
uncovering insights that can benefit the people in communities that connect to my work.
In this introduction, it is important for me to share not only how I am located in relation
to my work, but also the inspirations and ethics that shape what that work is.

I bring my teaching background with me as I enter my research. My students are
still with me. I certainly think of the young people I managed to support or inspire, but I
think more fretfully about the (too) many young people who had negative experiences at
school, whether they were failing classes, having encounters with disciplinary structures,
struggling to reconcile their personal lives with the school environment, experiencing
harassment or unhealthy social dynamics because of who or how they were, or facing
other threats to their well-being. While I went to teach each day with the conviction that
we educators were working relentlessly in service of our students, there were too many
days where I felt that the big picture of schooling was not sufficiently enabling all
students to learn and thrive. There is room for improvement in education, particularly for
Aboriginal students, who face an unacceptable array of those threats to well-being. My
experiences teaching in big-city schools keeps me grounded in the meaning of my work.
However academic this work gets, however many years I grow away from that
classroom, I am doing it for those students, for all of the young people I taught, for my
teacher-self. I have not left that behind.

My sense of responsibility and community as a Métis scholar shapes my work.
Growing up Métis, and everything else I was—because of course my cultural heritage is
just one aspect of who I am—I had a rich range of ideas about my identity and what I was
supposed to do. Formal education has been one of the most powerful influences on my
self-understanding: largely because I have always been successful in academic work.
Developing my proficiency through my various schooling experiences imbued me with a
sense of responsibility; I learned that the skills and knowledge I was developing had to be
put into practice in the world in a good way. I came to feel the same way about being
Métis—that whatever doubts I had about who I was, thanks to colonial processes of
erasure and assimilation, responsibility overpowered uncertainty. I learned that there was
exciting, important work to do in Indigenous scholarship: decolonizing education;
exploring Indigenous knowledges and perspectives; sharing and interpreting innovative
Indigenous arts; helping non-Indigenous Canadians to understand colonialism and
racism; working for social justice. If I could contribute to these endeavours, it was my
responsibility to do so. My responsibilities tie me to my communities—both as a Métis
woman and as a scholar and educator. This sense of responsibility motivates my academic work here.

I have so far shared a little about myself and about the investments I bring to my doctoral research. Now I need to explain what that research is. At the core of this work is another source of inspiration and motivation: my passion for literature. I have always loved to read: I feel that reading teaches me, pushes me to grow, takes me through experiences I would not otherwise have, and helps me to understand myself, others, and the world around me. I have spent much of my working life with literary works—reading them, discussing them, studying them, developing critical approaches to them, and sharing them with students. Over the years, I have increasingly lingered with the bodies of literature created by Indigenous writers. I have learned a great deal by reading Indigenous literary texts; I have grown and changed through this reading. Through all of these experiences, I have come to believe that creative texts can be extremely powerful. They can change what people think, how people think, and how people treat each other.

Stories matter. My work in this study arises from my desire to generate something useful and beautiful out of the connection between literatures, communities, and learning.

1.2 Introducing my Research Question

Broadly speaking, my research investigates various ways that Indigenous literature matters to Indigenous communities. This inquiry builds upon the work of Métis scholar Jo-Anne Episkenew (2002, 2009) and others who consider not only what literature means, but also what it does (Bidwell, 2012; Justice, 2012). This means thinking about how creative texts can impact the people who write and read them. The
particular kind of impact I am interested in is shaped by my position as an educator and education scholar. Inspiring this study is my belief that the fields of Indigenous education and Indigenous literary studies are not only interconnected in important ways, but also that they could both benefit by informing each other more fully. As I will articulate and exemplify through my literature review in chapter two, a strong body of scholarship supports my leading insistence on the importance of Indigenous literatures to Indigenous communities, cultures, and perspectives. Likewise, a strong body of scholarship supports the contention that education, if it is going to foster success for Indigenous learners, needs to honour those same communities, cultures, and perspectives. These two areas resonate also with what Indigenous studies scholars have said about resurgence—about the ways in which empowered communities, cultures, and perspectives can revitalize themselves from their Indigenous roots. Despite their strong complementarity, I see room for further dialogue and connection between these bodies of knowledge. I believe that I can make important contributions to these rich fields by weaving these two areas together: this is the purpose of my research.

In pursuing this study, one primary, guiding research question orients my work in its relation to the literature and informs my methodological framework, as I demonstrate in the following chapters. That question is this:

➢ How do Indigenous literatures matter to the resurgence of healthy Indigenous communities?

This research question emerges from my understanding of the extant scholarship—on Indigenous studies, Indigenous education, and Indigenous literatures—and from my passionate dedication to literature, to learning, and to social justice for Indigenous
communities. As an education researcher, I situate this question in the terrain of learning, aware that educational processes and structures underlie how I ask this question, how I investigate it, and what answers I find. As I entered this study, I had in mind that the outcomes from this question might be used to enrich experiences of Indigenous students in schooling, but I found much more than that.

My personal dedication certainly fuels my inquiry, but several other, external, factors contribute to the urgency of my research question. The first is the changing landscape of Indigenous literary studies. Over the past few decades, a tremendous amount of growth has occurred in this field. The diverse causes and effects of this growth are worthy of exploration. Secondly, Indigenous education is a longstanding and still-crucial area in education research. After centuries of colonial policies and decades of decolonizing work, too many Indigenous learners do not experience success in existing educational settings. Responding to the continued call for better educational experiences is not only about addressing a deficit, as in improving an education system’s outcomes; it is also about critically considering what success is and even what education itself is. The third factor that speaks to the importance of my research questions is the ongoing resistance and resurgence of Indigenous communities. Scholars, community members, political leaders, and activists are analyzing and condemning colonial legacies and calling for changes that will enable Indigenous communities to thrive; much of this work is directed at education itself. This work, too, is both longstanding and pressing. The final factor I point to here in asserting the urgency of this research is the rapidly shifting political context in Canada at present, particularly following the conclusion of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and the insistence of the new Liberal majority.
government that Canada will work for renewed relationships—on a “nation-to-nation” basis (Liberal Party of Canada, 2016, para. 2)—with Indigenous communities. As I write this sentence in the spring of 2016, the question of how Indigenous peoples and settler Canadians can move forward together is a prominent one, everywhere I go. I have witnessed a remarkable gathering of momentum over the four years of my doctoral program, and the research I am introducing here is one way in which I believe I can contribute to these ongoing efforts.

1.3 Introducing Key Concepts

A few terms and concepts are prominent in my research and require some explanation before I go on. Outlining these terms also helps to situate my work, as I draw together different sets of disciplinary knowledges and approaches to pursue my research question.

1.3.1 Resurgence

Resurgence is both an organizing concept and a motivator for my research. Resurgence is how I am focusing my discussions of Indigenous literatures and Indigenous education. Looking at how the connection between these two can contribute to resurgence work gives my research a purpose and defines its scope. Understanding what resurgence is, how it can be enacted, and why it matters is a significant part of my study’s undertaking, and so a more substantial engagement with this concept will occur throughout the following chapters. At this point, I will set out some preliminary ideas as to what it is about. Indigenous education scholars Friedel, Archibald, Head, Martin, and
Muñoz (2012) describe “Indigenous resurgence” as “a concerted demand by Indigenous peoples for the right and responsibility to express their full humanity in the context of a long history of domination that includes being socially and recursively constructed as inferior” (para. 12). In understanding resurgence, it is important to acknowledge the context of domination or colonialism that has impacted Indigenous peoples. Resurgence is not simply about resisting such domination: it is about Indigenous peoples “express[ing] their full humanity” (Friedel et al, 2012, para. 12), finding ways to live as Indigenous people without being limited or defined by that colonial context. In the context of colonial violence, such self-expression takes on an added level of significance as it connects to survival and sovereignty.

In generating my understanding of resurgence, I build primarily upon the work of Leanne Simpson (2008, 2011), as she describes resurgence in ways that focus on celebrations of Indigenous existence and on the importance of imaginative and creative work. Simpson, who is of Michi Saagig Nishnaabeg ancestry, writes that, “in Nishnaabeg thought, resurgence is . . . visioning and dancing new realities and worlds into existence” (2011, p. 70). I define resurgence as the regrowth of Indigenous communities from strong roots toward strong futures, building upon tradition and heritage through processes of revitalization and reclamation in order to create healthy, vibrant, self-determining Nations. I argue that artistic practices are integral to community resurgence. This understanding of resurgence is necessary for my investigation into why Indigenous literatures matter to Indigenous communities.
1.3.2 Locating Scholars and Writers

A key issue that emerges when writing about Indigenous resurgence is how to locate scholars and writers in academic work. In this dissertation, I endeavour to foreground the perspectives of Indigenous scholars and writers. I also include perspectives from non-Indigenous scholars who are allied with and/or who have respectfully articulated their positioning in relation to Indigenous studies. My reason for being careful here is the long history of non-Indigenous people speaking for and about Indigenous communities and of Eurocentric perspectives challenging the validity of Indigenous ones (Battiste, 2013; Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Graveline, 1998; L.T. Smith, 2012). Such colonization of knowledges and perspectives has been a prime target for Indigenous critique (Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Dei, Hall, & Rosenberg, 2000; L.T. Smith, 2012). Being careful to focus on Indigenous and allied voices is one way of resisting this kind of colonization. I also draw upon particular strands of European scholarship that enrich my critical framework, as I explain in the following chapters.

While I seek to foreground Indigenous voices in my research, I draw intentionally upon non-Indigenous scholars who make valuable contributions. I draw particularly upon settler scholars who articulate a sense of responsibility to this work, who examine their own positioning through a lens of engagement or alliance, or who advocate for settler scholars to challenge colonial dynamics in academic settings (Eigenbrod, 2002, 2005; Findlay, 2000; Martin, 2012; McKegney, 2007, 2014). Sam McKegney (2007), for instance, explores in detail a number of “strategies of ethical engagement” (p. 44), working to earn the title of a “non-Native ally” (p. 45). McKegney (2007) states that, “to respect the creative work of Native writers, the intellectual work of Native critics, and the
activist work of Native community members, one must engage—listen, learn, dialogue, and debate” (p. 44). I respect such scholars’ decisions to contribute to work on Indigenous issues. I also respect their decisions to examine and articulate how they are positioned in relation to their work. I think that this practice valorizes critical reflexivity and opens up space for Indigenous ways of knowing.

However, not all scholars make their positioning explicit, which presents a (small) challenge to my writing here. As is customary in Indigenous studies scholarship, I note the cultural affiliations of Indigenous authors. However, I do not usually note the cultural affiliations of non-Indigenous ones (unless they have made a point of doing so in their own publications). Often, this information is not publically stated, whereas Indigenous scholars often include their community affiliations in biographies, faculty profiles, and so on. I acknowledge the discomfort that arises when one group is located or marked and the other is not. I hope that this discomfort provokes dialogue and consideration. Personally, I hope to contribute to shifts in research practice that encourage scholars from any background to examine how they are positioned; I have seen many education scholars do so, for instance, in my readings as a student of curriculum studies (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009; Kanu & Glor, 2006; Norris & Sawyer, 2012; Pinar, 2004). In my writing, I include the full name and Indigenous or cultural affiliation (if known) of each author the first time I discuss her or him. Further, I insist throughout this work upon the importance of understanding one’s relationship to the question or subject that is being explored.
1.3.3 Relationality

One of the basic assumptions underlying my work throughout this project is that of interconnectedness. It is one of the personal beliefs that affect how I approach my research, as I explain further in chapter three. In discussing this concept, I build upon several different understandings, including “relationality” (Wilson, 2008), “relational” research (Kovach, 2009), and “Self-in-Relation” (Graveline, 1998). These understandings are about relationships—understanding how things are connected to each other, how the relationships in which we exist make us who we are, and how our relationships entail reciprocal responsibilities. Scholars working on Indigenous approaches to learning and research emphasize that relationships are important to Indigenous perspectives and to research methodologies (Absolon, 2011; Ermine, 1995; Graveline, 1998; Kovach, 2009; L.T. Smith, 2012; Weber-Pillwax, 2001; Wilson, 2008). I believe that a very good way to begin, when I am trying to understand something, is to start with how it is interconnected and interrelated with the concepts and phenomena around it; this way of understanding underlies this research.

1.3.4 Indigenous literatures

I use this term to refer to creative writing authored by Indigenous people. I use the plural literatures to indicate that there is no singular category of Indigenous literature (Acoose, 2001; Fagan, 2002; Justice, 2006); rather, First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) peoples originate in numerous distinct communities across what is now Canada and their literatures are diverse across Nations, geographies, genres, and time periods. Critical movements such as Indigenous literary nationalisms (Fagan, Justice, Martin,
McKegney, Reder, & Sinclair, 2009) have demonstrated that generalizing across Indigenous literatures can be problematic. For the purposes of this project, I take up this ethical imperative by encouraging relationship building with particular texts and writers. While written literatures are closely related to oral and traditional storytelling, they are not to be equated and they operate in distinct ways, as I discuss throughout.

1.3.5 Indigenous education

I see this term as bundling together several important phenomena. One is the education of Indigenous students: for instance, the ongoing work of educators to decolonize schooling and to provide learning experiences for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) youth that are respectful not only of Indigenous cultures and people, epistemologically and ontologically, but that are also respectful of Indigenous sovereignty (Battiste, 2013; McCarty & Lee, 2014; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003). Another key component is education on Indigenous subject matter, including initiatives to ensure FNMI communities, perspectives, histories, and so on are taught through curricula in schools but also present in mainstream consciousness. A less concrete aspect of Indigenous education is societal responsibility, which at present can be usefully connected to Canada’s dialogues around reconciliation. That is, Indigenous education also includes educational initiatives that bring non-Indigenous and Indigenous people to grapple with the truths of colonial violence. Indigenous education in this sense is also about the learning required to foment substantial change in the relationship between settler peoples and Indigenous Nations. Indigenous education as a field of scholarship
and practice encompasses these endeavours and overlaps with related fields like Indigenous studies and social justice education or critical education.

1.4 Moving into this Study

This study is an opportunity for me to explore a fundamental belief: that literature is worth reading—that it touches people in some way that makes them better. Further, literature nourishes and teaches people as they grow and go about the daily business of living—that they learn from it. I am exploring this belief in a particular context. Mine is a question about what is worth knowing, as educators shape curricula—in the richest sense of the word—in relation to stories and literary texts. It is a question of what I can contribute to the urgent work of Indigenous education, of what possibilities I can open up in the service of young people and their teachers. It is also a question that I hope will honour and engage with the creative and community work of Indigenous writers.

This dissertation has six chapters. In chapter two, I situate my work in relation to prior scholarship. In chapter three, I explain the beliefs and principles that inform this study, articulate my methodological approach, and outline my research design. In chapter four, I share the conversations I held with participants. My interpretive process fills chapter five. Finally, in chapter six, I assess this study’s contributions, offer concluding recommendations, and provide reflections for further work.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to locate my work on Indigenous literatures, resurgence, and education in relation to existing scholarship: to open my eyes and ears to the words of those around me so that I can proceed in a good way with my research. I intend to show that I have a broad and deep appreciation of how my thinking is situated. Demonstrating this breadth and depth involves delineating the fields that surround my inquiry and the bodies of academic and community work to which I am indebted. I am grateful to have the opportunity to learn from so many writers, thinkers, and teachers: responding to and building upon their work is a privilege. Enacting the belief in relationality (Graveline, 1998; L.T. Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008) that is fundamental to my dissertation means attending to this literature review process with diligence, care, and respect.

My research investigates the possibilities for literature to be a space where Indigenous communities can imagine resurgence. I am interested in how such possibilities might impact education. I frame my investigations into this topic through this primary question:

- How do Indigenous literatures matter to the resurgence of healthy Indigenous communities?

For my study, conducting a literature review means contextualizing the importance of this question. It also means showing how the extant literature helps me begin to answer it. Pursuing my research question leads me to draw upon literature from three primary disciplinary areas: Indigenous studies, Indigenous literary studies, and Indigenous
education. These areas constitute my academic foundation and inform my study’s approaches.

I have organized this chapter into three sections that correspond, roughly, with these three areas, in a manner that feeds usefully into my research question. The first section examines briefly what resurgence is and why it is such a significant concept in my research. The second section examines the extent to which literature is already understood as connected to resurgence. The third section examines the connections between Indigenous literary studies and Indigenous education. The final section summarizes my literature review and discusses its implications for my research. I begin with the concept of resurgence because it imbues my work with purpose and direction.

2.1 Understanding Resurgence

Pursuing my research question requires me to have a strong grounding in the existing literature on resurgence. While I have provided a working definition of resurgence in the previous chapter, I will go a little further here and explain the primary dimensions of resurgence, as some development of this concept will help to elucidate this literature review. In working with the term resurgence, I am building mostly upon the writings of Simpson (2008, 2011, 2014) but also upon some points from Alfred and Corntassel (Alfred, 1999, 2005, 2008; Alfred & Corntassel, 2005; Corntassel, 2012). Simpson (2011) points to the importance of “visioning,” along with “intent, collectivization, and action” (2011, p. 147) as necessary elements of Nishnaabeg resurgence. That is, working for change, or creating “new worlds” (Simpson, 2011, p. 146), requires people to envision change and then be responsible to that vision,
committing to working together to help it materialize. I feel that this emphasis on vision and on community creates a meaningful notion of resurgence that connects importantly to literatures and learning, as I explore further below.

The term *resurgence* refers to the regeneration of Indigenous ways of knowing and being and to the renewal of strong Indigenous communities. To me, the word suggests a strong wave or rush, a rejuvenating growth, a returning of something powerful; these connotations enhance the inspirational quality that I see in the scholarly literature on resurgence. This quality is important to my work: I wish to take up Simpson’s (2011) idea of resurgence as infused with a spirit of celebration—celebration of continuing Indigenous presence despite the ongoing challenges of colonialism (p. 12). In this sense, I take a strengths-based perspective to framing resurgence. That is, in working with the concept of resurgence, I am focusing on the strength, resilience, and continuity of Indigenous communities. I view this focus on strengths as consonant with my focus on arts, as I believe that an important connection exists between the resilience of Indigenous communities and their artistic or creative processes (Flicker et al, 2014; Simpson, 2011, 2014). This strengths-based perspective or celebratory spirit orients my work toward constructive examinations.

Celebrating in this way involves remaining rooted in Indigenous cultures, knowledges, and histories while envisioning and working for healthy Indigenous futures (Simpson, 2008, 2011). Simpson (2011) calls resurgence “a flourishing of the Indigenous inside” (p. 17): I believe that enabling this flourishing entails resisting colonialism in all its forms, but also entails transcending the colonizing versus decolonizing dynamic to focus on regenerating strong Indigenous communities through
Indigenous perspectives. In other words, resurgence happens when communities challenge the restrictions imposed on them through colonial structures and systems. Resurgence happens even more powerfully when communities pursue better “ways of existence” by stepping out of the “cognitive box of imperialism” (Simpson, 2011, p. 148), visioning and acting from within their own understandings. Because resurgence is about remaining rooted in Indigenous cultures and knowledges, it may take shape and be articulated differently in different Indigenous communities: it is culturally specific (Alfred, 2005; Alfred & Corntassel, 2005; Corntassel, 2012; Simpson, 2008, 2011, 2014). Resurgence is inspired by and emerges from Indigenous words, ways, and wisdom, both old and new.

Resurgence is not just an abstract ideal: it occurs through the concrete, everyday existence of individuals and communities demonstrating the continuity of Indigenous lifeways. Seemingly small “daily acts of renewal” such as “prayer, speaking your language, honoring your ancestors” (Corntassel, 2012, p. 89) are significant and sustainable ways of enacting resurgence. Tsalagi / Cherokee scholar Jeff Corntassel (2012) calls such everyday renewals the “foundations of resurgence” (p. 89). Communities thus have rich elements to contribute to the everyday work of resurgence, such as ceremonies, traditions, community gatherings, stories, Elders, spiritual beliefs, and relationships to the Land (Alfred, 1999, 2005; Alfred & Corntassel, 2005; Corntassel, 2012; Simpson, 2008, 2011). Community health is an important example: recovering health in the wake of colonial violence is an act of resurgence: good health is also a condition that enables further resurgence. Eating traditional foods, maintaining healthy family relationships and healthy spirituality, and combating the health issues that occur
disproportionately in Indigenous populations—these are all everyday ways of contributing to resurgence (Alfred, 2005; Alfred & Corntassel, 2005; Corntassel, 2012; Simpson, 2011). Resurgence thus entails “embracing a daily existence conditioned by place-based cultural practices” (Corntassel, 2012, p. 89): it is about “being Indigenous” (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005, p. 614). Resurgence as everyday being demonstrates the continuity of Indigenous communities and connects past, present, and future.

I have chosen resurgence—instead of other terms or frameworks describing Indigenous struggles or continuity—because I find it complex and challenging and because it pushes my thinking in the ways that I have described. However, I see resurgence as necessarily related to other terms and frameworks like the following: resistance, decolonization, Indigenization, reclamation, regeneration, cultural revitalization, survivance, self-determination, sovereignty, and reconciliation. Understanding the terms of the engagement, or describing what Indigenous communities are doing as they work and fight for well-being and justice, is important because these different frameworks have particular functions and connotations. However, spending too much time distinguishing among these conceptual cousins is not fruitful for my purposes here. The one distinction I feel it is necessary to make, given the current context in which I write this dissertation, is between resurgence and reconciliation.

2.1.1 Resurgence in a Time of Reconciliation

The conclusion of Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation process this past year means that reconciliation is now a highly prevalent framework. It is a motivating one, with useful political momentum attached, and in my teaching and other work I am busily
deploying many of my efforts through the channels it opens up. However, it is not an ideal organizing framework for this study. I think reconciliation carries a slippery range of connotations, anywhere from a kind of making-up-and-moving-on, as in “solving the Indian problem” (Regan, 2010, p. 11), to a collaborative, justice-oriented rebuilding of healthy relationships between Canada and Indigenous Nations, or settler and Indigenous peoples in Canada (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015b, p. 3). Wherever one situates it within this range, the term reconciliation focuses upon relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

Reconciliation discourse is problematic when it undermines Indigenous communities’ self-determination—that is, when it works counter to resurgence. Allied scholar Keavy Martin (2009), for instance, has argued that the concept of reconciliation relies upon a form of amnesia: it entails “a fixation upon resolution that is not only premature but problematic in its correlation with forgetting” (p. 49). She contends, “The danger is that the discourse of reconciliation—though rhetorically persuasive—can at times be less about the well-being of Aboriginal peoples and communities than about freeing non-Native Canadians from the guilt and continued responsibility of knowing their history” (Martin, 2009, p. 49). She argues that one of the functions of residential school literature, in re-telling stories of colonial experiences, is to contradict this problematic fixation on resolution. Such texts demonstrate that healing (as understood in Indigenous terms) is an ongoing journey, rather than a finite process with an end point (as understood through a Euro-Western framework) (Martin, 2009, p. 55). Martin (2009) shows how survivor narratives, as well as the personal testimonials embedded in Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation process, defy the pull toward amnesia and ensure that
“scars remain visible—that historical wounds continue to seep” (2009, p. 63). I agree with Martin (2009) here that the TRC itself, while operating under a state-sponsored rubric of reconciliation, incorporates truths from Indigenous people that transgress the impulse toward forgetting. Interrogations like Martin’s caution against the reassertion of colonial dynamics within reconciliation discourse, while also insisting on the complexity and breadth of the issues that Indigenous communities are working to address. Challenging reconciliation as an end goal for Indigenous struggles may entail pushing further into what is possible for Indigenous communities when it comes to self-determination.

I set reconciliation in comparison with resurgence here because while I think reconciliation is concerned with the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada, resurgence is about Indigenous communities. Resurgence is a rhetorical and political framework that concentrates on regeneration within Indigenous communities. It asserts the value of Indigenous knowledges, cultures, histories, and ingenuity to Indigenous communities’ continuity. Resurgence is an Indigenous impulse; it acknowledges colonialism and domination through resistance but it does not focus solely on colonialism as the most important concern. Relationships with settler Canadians are of course connected to the well-being of Indigenous communities, but those relationships are not the focus within a resurgence framework. Instead, resurgence insistently focuses on Indigenous communities as sites of power and regeneration.
2.2 Connecting Indigenous Literatures to Resurgence

Asking how Indigenous literatures connect to resurgence led me to begin with the (substantial) body of scholarship that examines connections between literature and the real world—looking, for instance, at how literary writings can affect communities. Considering how Indigenous texts relate to their contexts—social, political, cultural, epistemological, or otherwise—is an ethical emphasis that permeates much of the scholarship on Indigenous literatures. Métis scholar Jo-Ann Episkenew (2009), for instance, tries to understand “the applications of Indigenous literature as it moves outside the boundaries of the text to affect the material world” (p. 193). Métis scholar Kristina (Fagan) Bidwell (2012) characterizes this emphasis in Episkenew’s work as an assumption that “stories do things” in addition to creating meaning (Bidwell, 2012, para. 1): that is, the belief that stories “not only reflect reality; they create it” (Bidwell, 2012, para. 1). I have previously looked at why the connection between text and context means that readers and teachers of Indigenous literatures need to work responsibly (Hanson, 2008, 2012); in this study, however, I am focusing on what this connection means for Indigenous community resurgence. In this portion of my literature review, then, I look at how the extant scholarship connects Indigenous literatures and resurgence.

2.2.1 Literatures Can Resist Colonialism

The long-standing and multi-faceted workings of colonialism on our continent have inspired correspondingly deep and intricate forms of literary resistance, which, scholars argue, are intertwined with other political, cultural, and social forms of resistance (Episkenew, 2002; McKegney, 2007; Justice, 2006; Weaver, 1997; Womack,
1999). Such resistance is resurgence work, as resurgence involves asserting continuing
Indigenous presence and resisting the effects of colonialism (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005;
Corntassel, 2012; Simpson, 2008, 2011). Resurgence can take root in people’s efforts to
resist—to resist, for instance, the loss of their languages, the erosion of their cultural
knowledges, or the silencing of their perspectives (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005; Simpson,
2008, 2011). As I reviewed literary scholarship looking for connections to resurgence, I
found the idea of resistance to be so pervasive that it was, perhaps paradoxically, difficult
to see. It was not a question of whether the scholarship addressed resistance, because the
idea was everywhere; it was more a matter of determining how to specifically articulate
the relationship between literature and resistance when this relationship was so
prominent.

Let me give a few examples of how resistance is discussed. Cree-Métis scholar
Emma LaRocque uses resistance almost as a categorical distinction to characterize
(some) Indigenous writing: she calls it “resistance literature” (2002, p. 216), implying
that its nature or function is to communicate resistance. Cherokee scholar Jace Weaver
(1997), too, suggests that the purpose of Indigenous literatures is resistance and survival,
but he also describes literature as a space where resistance can occur, as “a critical arena
literature can show readers how to resist, “how to proceed in a de-colonizing process” (p.
125). Finally, allied scholars Renate Eigenbrod (2012) and Sam McKegney (2007) both
suggest that literatures can portray, enact, and embody resistance, describing them as
narratives of “survivance”—drawing this latter term from Vizenor (1994, 2008).
Eigenbrod (2012), specifically, argues that such texts can “reclaim the power of the
imagination . . . evoking survival, resistance, and continuance of cultures against colonial policies aimed at the annihilation of Indigenous presence” (p. 280). Eigenbrod’s (2012) and McKegney’s (2007) thinking seems to be that resistance is a purpose and an effect of such writings—something that they do and are, as well as something that they address or show.

All of these writers link literature and resistance; however, they do so in a wide range of ways. For some, resistance is a theme that appears in Indigenous writing; for some, resistance is its mode of existence. Resistance against colonialism is a clear emphasis within the scholarship in Indigenous literary studies and it is a foundational part of resurgence.

2.2.2 Literatures Can Create Understandings of Community

Another area I was particularly interested in as I conducted my literature review was understandings of community. What kinds of relationships form communities, according to writers and critics? How are communities conceptualized in Indigenous literary scholarship? I went into my literature review with the idea that resurgence is about communities, and my reading reinforced that perspective (Alfred, 1999, 2005; Alfred & Corntassel, 2005; Corntassel, 2012; Simpson, 2008, 2011). Resurgence entails regenerating shared understandings and working together to rebuild relationships and collective experiences.

When I examined the literary scholarship, then, I was looking for ways in which people talked about communities and about resurgence taking place through investment in community relationships. I found community, like resistance, to be another prominent
concern in literary scholarship: it seemed to come up everywhere (Armstrong, 1993; Blaeser, 1999; Damm, 1993; Eigenbrod & Episkewew, 2002; Fagan et al, 2009; Justice, 2006, 2008; Warrior, 1995; Weaver, 1997). The ubiquity of this concept supports King’s (1990a) claim that “community . . . is one of the primary ideas from which our literature proceeds (p. xv). As I journeyed through the varied discussions of community in literary scholarship, I focused my reading by asking what concepts connected to resurgence—what realizations were most important to answering my research question.

One compelling example of this connection is the notion of *kinship*. Kinship, as a concept for understanding relationships and ethics, is prevalent in the critical and creative writings of Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice. According to Justice (2008), kinship entails mutual commitment: it is a “delicate web of rights and responsibilities” (p. 154). In this sense, communities are comprised of reciprocal relationships, offering both opportunities and obligations. Justice (2008) takes up kinship and community as “interpretive concepts” for “ethical Native literary criticism” (p. 149), exploring “the relationship of our literatures to our communities—and the role of that relationship in ensuring the continuity of indigenous nations into the future” (p. 150). This thinking on kinship allows critics to see literary work—both writing and interpretation—as feeding into the reciprocal relationships of kinship. That is, kinship gives meaning to stories (Justice, 2008; Eigenbrod, 2012; McKegeley, 2013; Niatum, 1993). The corollary is also true, as “stories define relationships” (Justice, 2008, p. 150): stories are “what we do, what we create, as much as what we are” (Justice, 2008, p. 150). Communities are continually shaped through stories, through imaginative work done within relationships (Justice, 2008; Vizenor, 1994; Weaver, 1997).
This is the significant piece that I am taking up from notions of kinship: namely, that resurgence can be found in communities themselves, in the interconnections and relationships that create and sustain them. If literary work both constructs and emerges from those relationships, as many scholars believe (Eigenbrod, 2012; Justice, 2008; McKegney, 2013; Niatum, 1993; Weaver, 1997), then literatures are certainly a kind of resurgence work. This thinking on kinship propels my own research forward: I am ready to build upon and contribute to what literary scholars are saying about stories and communities.

2.2.3 Literatures Can Shape Literary Nationalisms

One way in which literary scholars address notions of community is through a push for literary nationalisms (Fagan, Justice, Martin, McKegney, Reder, & Sinclair, 2009; Justice, 2006; Ortiz, 1981, 2005; Warrior, 1995; Weaver, Womack, & Warrior, 2006; Womack, 1999; Womack, Justice, & Teuton, 2008). This movement aligns with thinking on resurgence, particularly with the concern for ensuring literary and cultural work remain rooted in specific community contexts.

Scholars who address literary nationalisms see their work as intertwined with anti-colonial political and social projects, such as protecting treaty rights, pursuing land claims and national sovereignty, and decolonizing education (Battiste, 2013; L.T. Smith, 2012; Vizenor, 1994; Weaver, 1997; Weaver, Womack, & Warrior, 2006; Womack, Justice, & Teuton, 2008). Literary nationalisms focus on the intellectual sovereignty or cultural self-determination of a community (Justice, 2006; Warrior, 1995; Womack, 1999)—on the people’s ability to speak and imagine for themselves who they are and
how they exist to others in the world. According to such frameworks, literature should
“not only serve its home community in some way, but [should] also emerge . . . from the
cultural, intellectual, and spiritual realities and ideals of that community” (Justice, 2006,
p. 9). Community, nationhood, peoplehood, and kinship are thus interconnected concepts
(Justice, 2006, 2008). Anishinaabe scholar Niiganwewidam Sinclair’s definition here
further illustrates how literary nationalisms connect literatures to community:

This movement is interested in illuminating the intellectual histories,
experiences, and knowledge structures available in Native (tribal/pantribal)
nations’ creative and critical expressions, and embedding these in the history
and politics of those nations’ community existences. Literary nationalism
examines stories, poetry, songs, nonfiction works and autobiographies as
processes deeply invested in the continuance of a People. (Fagan, Justice,
Martin, McKegney, Reder, & Sinclair, 2009, p. 20)

Literary nationalism thus involves appreciating a community’s literary tradition and how
those writings emerge from and fuel the community’s experiences, understandings,
struggles, and survival.

What I find useful in this framework for my thinking on resurgence is the
insistence that literary work operates within a community’s ongoing efforts to represent
itself and to persist (Adese, 2013; Alfred, 2005; Alfred & Corntassel, 2005; McLeod,
2007; Ruffo, 1997; Simpson, 2011). I also find the notion of literary nationalisms
somewhat troubling, perhaps only because the word nationalism is too haunted, for me,
by Western histories of nationalist violence.
2.2.4 Literatures Can Nourish Indigenous Literary Studies

Through my readings, I have strengthened my sense of how Indigenous literatures contribute to the growth of Indigenous literary studies. Building up this field of study is a process of resurgence, in that an important principle in resurgence is remaining grounded in Indigeneity—in Indigenous perspectives, places, and people (Alfred, 1999, 2005; Alfred & Corntassel, 2005; Corntassel, 2012; Simpson, 2011). Resurgence in this context involves respecting the integrity of Indigenous perspectives, including the possibility for Indigenous perspectives to transform non-Indigenous ones, instead of only vice-versa (Eigenbrod, 2002; Findlay, 2000; Womack, 1999). Indigenous literatures can transform the disciplinary frameworks that shape how literatures are understood.

Indigenous literary scholars have done an immense amount of work over the past few decades to build up the field of Indigenous literary studies, shaping Indigenous ways of responding to Indigenous texts. Indigenous literary criticism matters, they argue, because applying non-Indigenous literary traditions to Indigenous texts is culturally inappropriate and can be a form of colonization (Blaeser, 1993; Eigenbrod, 2002; L.T. Smith, 2012; Womack, 1999). For instance, Muskogee Creek-Cherokee scholar Craig Womack (1999) writes that he is “interested in what can be innovated and initiated by Native people in analyzing their own cultures” (p. 12), arguing that literary criticism should come from inside Indigenous communities:

In terms of Native literature, I relate this to a more radical “Red Stick” approach—the assumption that Native viewpoints cohere, that Indian resistance can be successful, that Native critical centers are possible, that working from within the nation, rather than looking toward the outside, is a
A legitimate way of examining literature, that subverting the literary status quo rather than being subverted by it constitutes a meaningful alternative.

(Womack, 1999, p. 12)

Womack’s arguments here are inspired within a Creek context, as he shows through his story of the “Red Sticks,” a group of “traditionalist Creeks” who engaged in an “anti-colonial movement” in the early 19th century (Womack, 1999, pp. 11-12). His “Red Stick” approach to literature is rooted in a specific Indigenous community context. His approach constitutes not only a way of using culturally rooted perspectives but also a way of transforming literary disciplines. Critical work in this vein builds up Indigenous approaches to literary studies (Eigenbrod, 2002; Gingell & Reder, 2012; Justice & Cox, 2008).

2.2.5 Literatures Can Enable Healing

If health is part of resurgence, then literatures contribute to resurgence by enabling people to heal and regenerate healthy ways of living. Resurgence takes place as people take care of themselves and each other, nurturing good health in their lives and relationships (Alfred, 1999, 2005; Alfred & Corntassel, 2005; Corntassel, 2012; Simpson, 2011). I found healing to be a prominent topic in my reading: in describing the power of stories and literature, scholars frequently evince the belief that reading and writing stories can help people to handle trauma and strive for wellness (Episkenew, 2009; Justice, 2012; King, 2003; McKegney, 2007; Reder, 2002; Weaver, 1997). Put simply, many literary scholars believe that “stories can heal” (Weaver, 1997, p. 161). I feel that Episkenew (2009) puts this belief most eloquently; she addresses her (2009) monograph
to “the healing power of stories in general and of Indigenous literatures in particular” (p. 2). She argues that Indigenous literature provides an alternate story that challenges the dominant understandings or “master narrative” of settler Canada:

Not only does Indigenous literature respond to and critique the policies of the Government of Canada; it also functions as “medicine” to help cure the colonial contagion by healing the communities that these policies have injured. . . . Indigenous literature acknowledges and validates Indigenous peoples’ experiences by filling in the gaps and correcting the falsehoods in this master narrative. (Episkenew, 2009, p. 2)

Episkenew’s (2009) arguments focus on the “transformative functions” (p. 15) and “restorative powers” (p. 68) of Indigenous literature that counter the effects of devastating colonial policies. I find this emphasis compelling, as she articulates the value of Indigenous perspectives for community well-being. That is, if telling alternate stories and challenging the oppressive understandings of the master narrative enables people to heal and reclaim their lives, then literature can be a vehicle for resurgence. Episkenew’s (2009) arguments generally resonate with what others have written about literature and its power to heal—both for those who tell their stories and for those who read and experience them (McKegney, 2007; Reder, 2002; Weaver, 1997).

I noted two further nuances, relevant to my arguments on resurgence, in how healing is discussed in the literature. One is that healing need not be thought only in individualist terms, as McKegney (2007) points out. He suggests a community-based way of looking at healing as he shows how residential school writings can enable healing and empowerment for survivors. Writers creating such texts remake community and enact
survival, “proving and prompting radical Indigenous endurance” in defiance of assimilation and genocide (McKegney, 2007, p. 182). This focus on community regeneration connects importantly to the collective nature of resurgence.

The second nuance here is that, while literature can enable healing, it does not inevitably do so (Episkenew, 2002, 2009; Justice, 2012; King, 2003). If stories are “medicine,” as King (2003) has written, then they may either “cure” or “injure” (King, 2003, p. 92): as with any medicine, harm is possible if the wrong person takes it, or if it is taken in the wrong way. Respecting the power of stories entails recognizing this potential for harm. Another way of looking at this potential for literatures to harm, rather than heal, is to note that not all stories will have a positive influence on everyone. Justice (2012) points out that, while he has “found nourishment and healing balm in Indigenous texts,” he has “also found hurtful works by Indigenous writers that replicate the pathological savages of reactionary settler fantasies, or that select certain groups—mixedbloods, queer folks, women, etc.—as targets for scorn and abuse” (para. 10). The fact that a text is written by an Indigenous author will not always mean that it will enable healing in all Indigenous readers: a large number of factors matter here, including the content and style of the text, the reader’s past experiences, the way in which the reader approaches the story, and so on. If a text is going to enable healing and resurgence, the reader has a responsibility to read the text in a way that demonstrates solidarity with Indigenous community struggles (Episkenew, 2002, 2012; Hanson, 2008, 2012). What particular responsibilities teachers and writers hold, if literature can enable healing, becomes an interesting question, as Justice (2012) points out in response to Episkenew’s (2009) work.
2.2.6 Literatures Can Foster Responsibility

Responsibility is integral to resurgence. I personally find responsibility to be useful in framing my own work, but I also found it to be a prominent concern in the literary scholarship that I reviewed (Anderson, 2000; Blaeser, 1999; Eigenbrod, 2002; Episkenew, 2002; Weaver, 1997). I am including it here because it is important in holding together many of the elements I have discussed previously. For instance, perceiving themselves as existing within a web of relations—as in kinship (Justice, 2006, 2008)—may prompt people to consider how their choices impact others. So how does this understanding connect to stories? Throughout this literature review, I have been explaining dimensions of an ethical emphasis in Indigenous literary studies, namely the belief that literatures are intertwined with their real-world contexts and can influence them in significant ways—this is the belief that “stories do things” (Bidwell, 2012, para. 1). I think it is worth spelling out the fact that, if stories are powerful and can do things, readers need to approach them responsibly.

I see this emphasis very clearly in King’s (2003) much-cited book *The Truth about Stories*: he ends each chapter with an invocation to the reader, a call to act upon what he or she has heard. The first piece ends like this:

Take Charm’s story for instance. It’s yours. Do with it what you will. Tell it to friends. Turn it into a television movie. Forget it. But 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. 29)

What I find significant here is the connection King makes between the story and the way in which the listener or reader is now obliged to take it up. Having heard this story, I must
respond, one way or another. I may apply its teachings to my life, or ignore it, or pass it on, and so on, but no matter what I do, I am responsible for how I respond. King has done what he can by sharing the story; the rest is up to me. I certainly do not want to act as if I had “no relations” (King, 1990a, p. ix): I am responsible, through my relationships, to my community. Stories draw readers into imaginative work, to which they can and must respond, hopefully with community well-being in mind (Anderson, 2000; Blaeser, 1999; Eigenbrod, 2002; Episkenew, 2002; Weaver, 1997).

2.3 Connecting Indigenous Education to Literatures and to Resurgence

In some ways, coming to the literature on Indigenous education was the most challenging part of my reading. It is a large body of scholarship, ranging over a wide number of topics and incorporating a diverse range of approaches, but I will give a brief overview here. The scholarship shows that schools have historically been colonial institutions for Indigenous learners, pushing them to assimilate into Euro-Canadian ontological and epistemological frameworks (Battiste, 2013; Battiste & Barman, 1995; Graveline, 1998; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2002; L.T. Smith, 2012). The Indian residential school system was a landmark in this history, as a prominent example of assimilative education (Battiste, 2013; Grant, 1996; Haig-Brown, 1988; Miller, 1996; Milloy, 1999; Niezen, 2013; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015a). However, this legacy also continues in contemporary schooling, as is indicated, for instance, by the gap between the achievement of Indigenous students and their non-Indigenous peers (Battiste, 2013; Ermine, 1995; Hampton, 1995; Howe, 2013; Kanu, 2011; Pidgeon, Archibald, & Muñoz, 2013). Indigenous education scholars and
practitioners have been working to decolonize education: to challenge the push for assimilation and to insist on the validity and significance of Indigenous cultures, knowledges, and ways of being (Battiste, 2013; Battiste & Barman, 1995; Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Castellano, Davis, & Lahache, 2000; Dei, Hall, & Rosenberg, 2000; Graveline, 1998; Kanu, 2011). Scholars also examine promising practices from culturally responsive education, from schools that value Indigenous learners and perspectives, and from curricula rooted in Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies (Battiste, 2013; Bell, 2004; Castellano, Davis, & Lahache, 2000; Dion, 2009; Kanu, 2011; Wane & Waterfall, 2005; Wason-Ellam, 2001). Through such areas of study, Indigenous education scholars work not only to improve Indigenous students’ schooling experiences, but also to enrich the education of all students.

In reviewing this body of literature I initially felt it was somewhat challenging to connect education, resurgence, and literatures. This feeling now seems out of place; however, I will outline my early thinking here as it helps to explain how I conducted my inquiry. I had two reactions to that initial feeling: I found it exciting and I feared it was inauspicious. One the one hand, it seemed like it was a good sign if there was a little room for me to make connections between these three areas. On the other hand, I was hesitant to impose connections that were not warranted. Balancing these two reactions was foremost in my mind as I organized my thinking around this portion of my literature review. I am grateful now that I listened to my intuition, knowing that I was on to something important, that connecting Indigenous literary arts and community resurgence to education could enable me to make a meaningful contribution.
In what follows here, I explain the most promising connections to the literary arts and to resurgence that I found in the education scholarship—promising both for pursuing my primary research question and for keeping my work accountable to education scholarship in ways that could contribute to the field. One of my main purposes in this research is to be of some service to Indigenous learners and to the educational work of improving relationships between Indigenous people and settler Canadians; this part of my literature review guides me toward this purpose.

2.3.1 Teaching Indigenous Literatures Can Be Indigenous Education

The strongest connection that I was able to make between my three areas—Indigenous literatures, resurgence, and Indigenous education—as I worked through the education scholarship was the emphasis on decolonization and the assertion of Indigenous perspectives in all three. In education scholarship, this emphasis permeates educators’ ongoing work to transform education to better serve Indigenous learners, but also for the benefit of all learners and of Canadian society as a whole (Battiste, 2013; Pidgeon, Muñoz, Kirkness, & Archibald, 2013). I will share some words from Mi’kmaw scholar Marie Battiste (2013), whose work captures this spirit effectively:

No educational system is perfect, yet few have a history as destructive to human potential as Canada’s with its obsession with assimilation . . . The racism inherent in the system drains students of their capacity for achievement in all aspects of their lives. It is time to change the educational outcomes for Aboriginal youth by fully integrating their knowledge and heritage into an educational system that values and respects Indigenous ways
of knowing and allows Aboriginal students to embrace and celebrate who they are instead of making them doubt themselves. (p. 180)

This passage brings together the insistence on challenging colonialism and on asserting Indigenous perspectives that I have been articulating throughout this chapter as being necessary to resurgence work. Even further, Battiste’s statement that Aboriginal students should be empowered to embrace and celebrate who they are promotes the health and confidence of Indigenous communities and the celebration of Indigenous existence that are so vital to resurgence. My readings on Indigenous education supported my belief that the processes of transformation that Indigenous education research advocates are processes that align with my resurgence framework.

Such processes can materialize through teaching Indigenous literatures; a growing body of scholarship exists that considers pedagogy specifically in relation to Indigenous literatures (Acoose, 2001; Armstrong, 1993; Balzer, 2006; Episkenew, 2002, 2012; Hulan, 1998; Justice, 2004; LaRocque, 2002; Proulx & Srivastava, 2002; Reder & Morra, 2016; Strong-Wilson, 2008; Strong-Wilson, Yoder, & Phipps, 2014). As I read, I was looking to show that teaching Indigenous literatures can make important contributions to decolonizing and Indigenous work in academic settings, and I noticed a few primary ways in which scholars support this supposition.

One focus within this set of scholarship is examining how Indigenous literatures can teach readers about Indigenous people and perspectives. Many scholars look at how teaching Indigenous literatures is a way of sharing and analyzing important issues in Indigenous communities—such as experiences of colonialism, stories of resistance, or expressions of cultural or spiritual beliefs, to name only a few. Such sharing and analysis
can engage learners (of any background) in thinking about those perspectives (Episkenew, 2002, 2012; LaRocque, 2002). For instance, Teresa Strong-Wilson (2008) and her collaborators (Strong-Wilson, Yoder, & Phipps, 2014) examine how Indigenous literatures—particularly children’s picture books—function within the context of social justice education. These examinations look at how Indigenous stories can precipitate learning about residential schooling and other sites of trauma that challenge perspectives on the Canadian nation (Strong-Wilson, Yoder, & Phipps, 2014). As another example, Cree-Métis scholar Emma LaRocque (2002) argues that, in teaching Native literature, it is important to connect students to contextual information about Indigenous peoples and colonization. She articulates a way of showing students the significance of Indigenous oral traditions, for instance, through approaches to poetry. Such examples suggest that bringing Indigenous texts into classrooms transforms educational settings, in that focusing on these texts can challenge Eurocentrism and foster “knowledge pluralism” (Battiste, 2013, p. 117) by foregrounding Indigenous viewpoints. Further, such scholarship shows that literature can be conducive in expanding students’ understandings of real-life Indigenous communities.

A second area I found in the scholarship connecting Indigenous literatures and education is pedagogy-oriented criticism on particular texts. Many scholars explore individual novels, stories, or other texts, focusing on what perspectives they offer to students and what experiences have arisen for teachers and learners in understanding those texts together (Acoose, 1999; MacDonald, 2009; Perreault, 1999; J. Kelly, 2002; Tarc, 2011). For example, Jeanne Perreault (1999) describes helping her students to learn about the “social and physical realities” facing Native people in Canada as they read
Beatrice Culleton Mosionier’s 1983 novel *In search of April Raintree*. Students engaged with issues from the novel such as “illness, infant mortality, foster care, alcoholism, rape, domestic violence against women, prostitution, and suicide,” learning that these elements were not simply “aesthetic choices” made by the author but genuine issues in contemporary communities (Perreault, 1999, p. 261). Working with particular texts can bring learners—I count both teachers and students as learners—to listen to particular voices and understand particular communities and their concerns.

The third kind of scholarship I looked at comprised considerations of how to teach Indigenous literatures well. That is, some scholars work to support educators who want to teach Indigenous literatures, or look for ways of facilitating such teaching (Balzer, 2006; Eigenbrod, Kakegamic, & Fiddler, 2003). I believe that this kind of work validates the importance of teaching literature to the broader work of decolonization and Indigenous education. This work often bridges academic and professional arenas. For example, Renate Eigenbrod, with Sandy Lake First Nation teachers Georgina Kakegamic and Josias Fiddler (2003), co-authored a teacher’s resource guide in order to “encourage the teaching of Aboriginal literature in English high school curricula across the country” (p. 2). This resource guide provides teachers with information about Indigenous literary contexts, as well as practical suggestions for teaching. Geraldine Balzer (2006) describes a study in which she supported teachers teaching Indigenous literatures in their secondary classrooms by helping them to develop critical perspectives informed by postcolonial and Aboriginal literary studies. Balzer’s (2006) interventions with the participating teachers resulted in “classroom teaching that implemented decolonizing methodologies” (pp. 229-230), but she argues that the broader goals of decolonizing education “are not achievable
unless significant changes are made in the traditional school and the individual classroom and are not restricted to Aboriginal educational settings” (p. 230). As a final example, Cree-Métis scholar Deanna Reder and her allied colleague Linda Morra (2016) recently released a critical anthology that provides a comprehensive overview of Indigenous literary studies to support classroom practice. Like these scholars, I entered this research with an investment in supporting educators with bringing Indigenous literatures into their classrooms, seeking to build upon work like this that connects Indigenous literary studies, studies in education, and classroom practice.

2.3.2 Teaching Indigenous Literatures Can Foster Responsibility

I think it is worth emphasizing here that, while teaching Indigenous literatures is an endeavour with the potential to connect to resurgence work, it will not inevitably do so: how educators take up Indigenous literatures affects what students take away from that encounter. I have already shown that literary scholarship incorporates an ethic of responsibility to communities, but I want to briefly show that this ethical focus is also prominent in the scholarship on teaching Indigenous literatures specifically (Acoose, 2001; Armstrong, 1993; Eigenbrod & Episkewenew, 2002; Eigenbrod, Kakegamic, & Fiddler, 2003; Justice, 2004). To begin with, I echo Métis writer Sharron Proulx and Indigenous studies scholar Aruna Srivastava’s (2002) contention that including Indigenous literatures in curricula is not inevitably beneficial:

It is perfectly possible (and is often done) to teach Aboriginal literatures in deeply racist, colonialist, ahistorical and disrespectful ways—often unintentionally—and . . . it is possible for students and teachers . . . to read
the literature and to take in the knowledge of Aboriginal and Indigenous people in such disrespectful and close-minded ways that it is infinitely more harmful in many ways to read these texts at all than not to. We must pay attention to the how, the process and the pedagogy and not the what, the curriculum, the texts, the course outline. (Proulx & Srivastava, 2002, p. 189)

I agree with their point that paying attention to the how and not only to the what in teaching Indigenous literatures is vital if that work is going to challenge colonial mentalities and encourage Indigenous resurgence.

Proulx and Srivastava’s (2002) arguments connect to the work of other scholars who advocate particular ways of approaching Indigenous texts in classrooms. For instance, Episkenew (2012) calls for “a compassionate, decolonizing pedagogy” (para. 16) that helps students to grapple with challenging ideas and issues. Likewise, in my Master’s work, I built upon perspectives from Indigenous literary and education scholarship to advocate an anti-colonial approach to reading and teaching (Hanson, 2008). I believe that responsibility is central to such approaches: an ethic of responsibility holds academic discussions of Indigenous literatures accountable to real-world Indigenous communities. Again, remaining rooted in Indigenous communities and working to oppose colonialism is vital to resurgence. This literature review suggests that theorizing responsible pedagogies is an important contribution that education scholarship can make to resurgence work.
2.3.3 Teaching Indigenous Literatures Can Invoke the Power of Stories

It would be remiss of me to leave my discussions of Indigenous education scholarship without raising the connection between education and stories for Indigenous peoples. I will do so here only briefly, because stories, in the sense of storytelling and the oral tradition, are not the focus of my work and, indeed, are significant enough to education to warrant their own consideration, as Stó:lō scholar Jo-ann Archibald’s (2008) work shows. Within Indigenous cultures, stories are hugely significant to education—to pedagogies, to inquiry, to transmitting knowledge, to sustaining oral traditions, and to enabling learning to happen within relationships (Acoose, 2001; Archibald, 2008; Battiste, 2013; Battiste & Barman, 1995; Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Bell, 2013; Cruikshank, 1990; Graveline, 1998; Kanu, 2011; L.T. Smith, 2012; Ward & Bouvier, 2001). What is relevant here for my work is the lesson that a broader understanding of story—beyond what is written in literature—is necessary in Indigenous studies.

I can clarify the scope of my work in two ways by referring to this body of literature. First, because my work deals with written literature, I must be aware of the critiques that have been aimed at writing and literacy. In relation to oral traditions and Indigenous epistemologies, writing and literacy can be seen as colonial, particularly when tied to broader assimilationist agendas in formal education (Archibald, 2008; Maracle, 1994; Justice, 2004; Steeves, 2010; Teuton, 2008; Weaver, 1997). Valuing oral stories and oral traditions, including storytelling done in communities with respect for cultural protocols, aligns strongly with cultural revitalization and resurgence (Anderson, 2000; Archibald, 2008; Corntassel, 2012). Comparable critiques have been aimed at the use of English and other colonial languages: choosing to use Indigenous languages is a way of
validating and upholding cultural knowledges and worldviews (Alfred, 1999; Alfred & Corntassel, 2005; Battiste, 1998; Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Iseke-Barnes, 2004; Weaver, 1997, 2001). I need to be aware of these critiques, but I am not asserting that my work focuses on story, in this oral sense of the word; I am focusing explicitly on Indigenous literatures written in English. What I will do is remain open to story: I will take any opportunities that arise in my research to demonstrate respect for oral traditions and storytelling—as well as Indigenous languages—because doing so fits with my focus on resurgence. Such opportunities are not unlikely, as many Indigenous writers and literary scholars insist that elements of oral traditions can thrive in writing and that the English language can be adapted to Indigenous purposes (Achebe, 1975; Blaeser, 1999; Eigenbrod, 1995; LaRocque, 2002; Maracle, 1995; Neuhaus, 2011).

The second clarification I can make in relation to the broader understanding of the word story is that I do intend to suggest that the social and political landscape of Indigenous experiences can be thought of through stories—and that it is vital for multiple stories to be possible. To begin to explain this point, I will share a few examples of how story is used in this sense. First, Alfred and Corntassel (2005) write, “There is a danger in allowing colonization to be the only story of Indigenous lives” (p. 601). Second, Mi’kmaw scholar Bonita Lawrence (2002) states, for “Indigenous peoples, telling our histories involves recovering our own stories of the past” (p. 25). Third, Gail Guthrie Valaskakis (2000) contends that, since “the earliest days of non-Native contact, the stories of Aboriginal peoples have been constructed and disseminated by outsiders, for outsiders,” then goes on to explain the importance of “telling our own stories” (p. 78). This way of using the word story is more than just rhetorical: it points to a belief that
knowledge is discursive, that narratives bring meaning to people’s lives, that such stories can be generated and shared in communities, and that some stories contest the understandings embedded in others (Episkenew, 2009; Lyotard, 1979; Valaskakis, 2000). In this sense, story is about how people see and understand the world.

This sense of the word story is very important to my research: it carries within it the potential for literature, education, and resurgence to coalesce around imaginative work. I believe that “visioning” (Simpson, 2008, p. 147) is vital for resurgence and for changing education (Battiste, 2013, p. 102), and that literature can play a vital role in such visioning. I take a great deal of inspiration from this statement from Justice (2012):

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iterature is good for many things, but none perhaps more precious than to help us imagine otherwise, to help us realize in our lived realities the very best hopes and dreams of our imagined lives, to provide a transformative vision of possibility. (Justice, 2012, p. 108)

In other words, literatures can enable the kinds of visioning that Indigenous education and resurgence are calling for. Literatures can inspire change because they can expose readers to alternate stories; they can help people to imagine what other stories might be possible. This sense of story is necessary to my work: it suggests one way in which Indigenous literatures might be able to bring resurgence into play in education.

2.4 Chapter Summary

Indigenous studies scholars have said a great deal about the importance of stories and literature to Indigenous people and cultures. Thomas King’s well-known statement, “the truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (2003, p. 92), is an invocation of the
ability of stories to infuse people’s lives with meaning, to give a particular shape to how people exist in the world. Stories are powerful for resurgence: they are crucially tied to cultures and communities; they are a vital part of intellectual and cultural expression; and they can foster healing, learning, and self-understanding. As Cree writer Neal McLeod (2007) has said, “through stories, we can find our place in the world” (p. 68). Being able to “find our place” (McLeod, 2007, p. 68) is significant for contemporary Indigenous people as communities work against historical and ongoing manifestations of racism and colonialism to regenerate wellness and to shift relationships.

The significance of literatures to Indigenous communities has important implications for linking Indigenous education and resurgence—for how young Indigenous people learn about their capacities and responsibilities and forge connections to their communities. Literary texts can, if taught well, fuel these experiences in powerful ways. Indigenous education researchers have explored closely related topics, such as the roles of cultures, communities, and stories in teaching. However, much work remains to be done in education scholarship on the topic of teaching Indigenous literatures. Likewise, there is room for growth in Indigenous literary studies’ considerations of pedagogies and classrooms, and particularly of how teaching Indigenous literatures affects Indigenous communities.

I believe that this trans-disciplinary connection has important implications, and that my research, in working across this space, will benefit multiple fields. This belief invigorates my investigation of what possibilities Indigenous literatures might open up for Indigenous learners and communities, and thus for resurgence. Incorporating understandings constituted through the disciplines of Indigenous studies, English, and
education—as represented by the above literature review—enables me to delve meaningfully into this question. Attending carefully to Indigenous literatures, I hope to uncover teachings on how education can contribute to healthy Indigenous communities. Likewise, I believe that critical research in education—curriculum studies and Indigenous education in particular—can deepen existing understandings of what it means to teach Indigenous texts. Based upon my assessment of the extant scholarship, I believe that my project uncovers potential ways of reading for resurgence.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Conducting research on an Indigenous topic is an opportunity to contribute to the rich and growing body of Indigenous scholarship. It is also an opportunity to contribute to the ever-strengthening foothold that Indigenous research methodologies are gaining in academic institutions. I am grateful to the scholars before me who have opened pathways for Indigenous ways of understanding, which I believe are necessary for meaningful engagements with Indigenous topics. In this study, I draw upon a research approach that fits with my topic and with my research question. Again, that primary question is as follows:

- How do Indigenous literatures matter to the resurgence of healthy Indigenous communities?

While I have established, in the previous two chapters, the context and importance of my inquiry, it is now my task to explain how I pursue it. Shaping my methodology meant finding a good way to delve into that inquiry.

In this chapter, I outline my methodological framework. In the first section below, I introduce my approach to my research question, which is based upon principles drawn from scholarship on Indigenous research and upon my personal beliefs. Next, I delineate the specific kind of methodological métissage I use in my research. Finally, I provide the details of my research design. I conclude with a brief chapter summary.

3.1 Approaching the Research

In formulating a methodological framework, I considered how to take on my inquiry in a manner that would demonstrate methodological and academic rigour, speak
to my multiple disciplinary contexts, suit my topic, resonate with who I am, and fit with my values and beliefs about learning. This questioning led me to take up a methodological métissage rooted in Indigenous approaches to research and informed by hermeneutics (Donald, 2012; Gadamer, 1960/2004; Kovach, 2009; Lowan-Trudeau, 2012; D. G. Smith, 1991; L.T. Smith, 2012; Weber-Pillwax, 2001, 2003; Wilson, 2008). I explain the specific nature of my métissage later on in this chapter. In introducing my methodological framework, I first need to introduce two main entities: Indigenous research and my beliefs about research.

3.1.1 Grounding in Understandings of Indigenous Research

The topic of my study and its founding research question bring me to Indigenous approaches to research because these are concerned with Indigenous ways of knowing and being and with the sustenance of Indigenous communities. Employing Indigenous methodologies—and particularly, métissage—in pursuing my research question provides me with the tools and considerations I need in order to investigate my questions fully and responsibly, respecting Indigenous ways of understanding (Allen, 2012; Dei, Hall, & Goldin Rosenberg, 2000; Donald, 2012; Findlay, 2000; Rigney, 1999; L.T. Smith, 2012; Womack, 1999). Indigenous research involves, for instance, decolonizing research and remaining rooted in Indigenous perspectives, territories, identities, and “cultural action” (L.T. Smith, 2012, p. 147). Although they overlap to some extent, Indigenous and anti-colonial frameworks differ importantly from post-colonial frameworks and cannot be equated (Dei, Hall, & Rosenberg, 2000; Donald, 2012; King, 1990b; Womack, 1999). In this study, I delve into perspectives from Indigenous people and affecting Indigenous
communities. Taking up these perspectives with respect and understanding them well requires an Indigenous methodological framework that accounts for what is at stake in understanding them, not only for what they are.

Indigenous research methodologies have grown in presence over the past few decades as Indigenous peoples have resisted the cognitive imperialism wrought by too much Western research and turned to their own ways of knowing and doing (L.T. Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008). Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s (2012) well-known statement—originally published in 1999—that “the word itself, ‘research,’ is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary” (p. 1) suggests the impetus for this shift. As Cree scholar Shawn Wilson (2008) explains it, Indigenous research approaches have grown out of the potential for research to incorporate “Indigenous beliefs, values, and customs into the research process” and to be “more culturally sensitive” (p. 15). Indigenous research methodologies comprise a growing area, encompassing diverse Indigenous perspectives and many specific methods and applications (Absolon, 2011; Chilisa, 2012; Kovach, 2009; Rigney, 1999; L.T. Smith, 2012; Thompson, 2008; Weber-Pillwax, 2001, 2003; S. & P. Wilson, 2002, 2008), which I am able to build upon in articulating my own approach. I acknowledge the responsibility I carry in taking up and contributing to this emerging and important field.

To attend to this growing body of methodological literature, I will next outline the principles that inform my methodological framework—principles that I see emphasized by other scholars and which I have taken forward in pursuing my inquiry. Following the example of Cree-Métis scholar Cora Weber-Pillwax (2003), I used these principles to structure my work and give it direction, while maintaining an openness in my specific
methodological approaches. Notably, doing research in this open, “fluid” way (Weber-Pillwax, 2003, p. 43) allows me to enact my beliefs about research, but also relies upon the “willingness of the participants to trust the process that they themselves co-create and then move in” (Weber-Pillwax, 2003, p. 43). Each conversation partner helped to shape how and what I understood. As I worked through my research steps and interpretive processes, the integrity of these Indigenous research principles (listed below) balanced the flexibility of my methodological framework.

I have assembled these principles by reviewing literature on Indigenous methodologies (across various disciplines), listening to what other scholars have said about what is important in their approaches, and drawing out ideas that are particularly important for this study. As such, this gathering is not intended as a comprehensive overview of all Indigenous approaches to research, but rather as a guiding framework. Also, while these principles are listed one by one, I understand them not as discrete but rather as deeply interconnected.
### Validity of Indigenous Worldviews
Indigenous knowledges and epistemologies must be seen as valid, not dominated by Eurocentric perspectives. Indigenous and Western perspectives are distinct but can fruitfully be brought into dialogue if care is exercised to maintain ethical relations. See Allen, 2012; Battiste, 2013; Dei, Hall, & Goldin Rosenberg, 2000; Ermine, 2007; Kovach, 2009; Lowan(-Trudeau), 2011; Ngugi, 1986; L.T. Smith, 2012; Thompson, 2008; Wilson, 2008; Womack, 1999.

### Specificity of Indigenous Nations
It is necessary to recognize the diversity among Indigenous groups and their distinct worldviews and cultures. Connections, dialogue, and solidarities can be fostered across or between communities, locally or globally, but erasing particularities is a form of colonization. See Acoose, 2001; Allen, 2012; Dei, Hall, & Goldin Rosenberg, 2000; Dei & Simmons, 2012; Fagan, 2002; Justice, 2006; Kovach, 2009; Thompson, 2008.

### Specificity of Indigenous Research Paradigms
Indigenous researchers formulate research paradigms out of specific cultural, ontological, and epistemological frameworks. There is no singular, universal form of Indigenous research; Indigenous methodologies are particular and diverse. See Lowan(-Trudeau), 2011, 2012; Kovach, 2009; L.T. Smith, 2012; Thompson, 2008; Weber-Pillwax, 2001; Wilson, 2008.

### Importance of Place
Indigenous communities have relationships with particular places and territories that shape knowledges, cultures, experiences, histories, and inter-cultural relations. See Basso, 1996; Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Dei & Simmons, 2012; Justice, 2006; Martin, 2012; L.T. Smith, 2012; Thompson, 2008; Womack, 1999.

### Adherence to Cultural Protocols
Maintaining appropriate respect for cultural protocols is an important aspect of research with people. Following protocols and cultural practices helps to shape research methods appropriate for each community. See Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Graveline, 1998; Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008.

### Importance of Indigenous Languages
Indigenous languages embody and shape Indigenous ways of knowing and being. It is necessary to respect this significance and to understand the potential limitations of the English language. See Allen, 2012; Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Gardner, 2004; Kovach, 2009; Thompson, 2008; Weber-Pillwax, 2001.

### Importance of Story
Like Indigenous languages, stories carry cultures and knowledges and are integral to oral traditions. Storytelling connects people and places across generations. Stories can play a wide number of roles within Indigenous research. See Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Graveline, 1998; King, 2003; Kovach, 2009; L.T. Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008.

### Ethical and Reciprocal Engagements
Researchers must engage responsibly with Indigenous communities through reciprocal and ethical relationships at all stages of the research. This means considering such factors as how projects are shaped, how data are owned and handled, how findings are disseminated, and how all parties benefit. See Ermine, 2007; Kovach, 2009; L.T. Smith, 2012; Steeves, 2010; Thompson, 2008; Weber-Pillwax, 1999; Wilson, 2008.

### Relationality
Relational understandings help to create research that is located, self-reflexive, valid, ethical, reciprocal, and that respects Indigenous cultures, worldviews, and the land. Research must be conducted through good relationships. See Graveline, 1998; Kovach, 2009; Nicholls, 2009; Wilson, 2008.
3.1.2 Grounding in my Beliefs

I am a Métis woman, and while I have always tried to navigate the numerous branches of my wide-rooted family trees with nuance and care—and while my cultural heritage is only one aspect of who I am—this Métisness has been an indelible source of pride and motivation. My Métisness has brought me to this work, imbuing me with a strong sense of my responsibilities. However, I am unwilling to characterize myself as voicing *an Indigenous perspective*. This unwillingness originates in my refusal to posit mine as a representative, authentic Indigenous standpoint. When I describe my own perspectives and how I come to my research approach, I do not want anyone to think that I speak for others, or to overgeneralize my viewpoints as applying to all Métis or to all Indigenous people. As Thomas King has said, “I’m not the Indian you had in mind” (2003). While debates have proliferated on the issues of authenticity and identity, I feel that demanding *authenticity*, in the sense of representing an abstract ideal of Indigeneity, is a form of colonial imposition (Alfred, 1999; Battiste & Henderson, 200; Cook-Lynn, 1996; King, 2003; Lawrence, 2004; L.T. Smith, 2012; St. Denis, 2007; Wilson, 2008). Constructing a singular or essentialized notion of Indigeneity assumes homogeneity among diverse and distinct Indigenous communities, which is a troubling form of erasure (Justice, 2006). So while I am working through an Indigenous approach to research, the particularity of that approach must remain rooted in the specificities of who I am, where I come from, what I bring to my learning, and where I am trying to go with it.

What remains in this section, then, is for me to explain what it means to me to build understandings—what my beliefs are about knowledge and consequently about
research. I am explicit about these beliefs not only in order to reveal my investments as a researcher but also to help describe my methodological framework.

Many of my beliefs about knowledge are disciplinary understandings: that is, when I seek to understand something, I draw upon the discourses and knowledge that I have been taught in my formal education. My post-secondary studies have included English and comparative literature; critical theory; gender and sexual diversity studies; English, German, French, and Russian language and cultural studies; Greek and Roman studies; anthropology; Indigenous studies; and education, which includes curriculum studies, sociology and equity studies in education, Indigenous education, interpretive and hermeneutic research methodologies, and pedagogical approaches to the other topics in this list. I share this information here in order to suggest why I feel it is important to me to bring interdisciplinary understandings to my research, as appropriate to my topic. I also share this in order to suggest my comfort with divergent perspectives, with working through the nuances, contradictions, and potential allegiances between disparate approaches to knowledge. For example, my project at its heart requires me to bridge disciplinary understandings between humanities (literary studies) and the social sciences (education). This willingness to navigate disparate approaches matters for my methodological thinking because, as I will explain below, the way I will take up métissage involves interweaving ideas and perspectives—even contradictory ones—in order to see what they generate together.

My personal beliefs about learning are shaped, like anyone’s are, by a wide range of factors: family and cultural values, formal education, life experiences, social context, contemporary ideologies, critical reflection, and so on. I articulate here the key personal

My beliefs and experiences are inseparable. They relate to a Creator (metaphysics), the universe and how it came to be (cosmology), what I believe about knowledge and why (epistemology), and beliefs about humankind and the nature of being (ontology). This framework of being and knowing informs every aspect of my life and as such extends into and informs my research framework, facilitating an approach that accepts and acknowledges an interdependency and interconnectedness in life overall. Such an interdependency and interconnectedness is applicable in all realms and ways of knowing and being, including those related to academic studies. (Steeves, 2010, p. 30-31)

It is important for me and for my readers to understand how my beliefs will shape my research process. The following three beliefs strike me as most pertinent.

First, I believe that relationships are important in how I form understandings. This includes relationships with people, other living creatures, and everything in my environment; it also means understanding how things are interrelated: many Indigenous writers have explained this kind of “relational worldview” (Kovach, 2009, p. 34; L.T. Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008). I am grateful for what Elders and scholars have taught me about the Cree teaching of wâhkôhtowin. This teaching invokes the ways in which we are all related, including all others in the natural world. I have learned that enacting wâhkôhtowin means understanding how everything is interconnected, but also honouring those relationships, and being accountable for how my actions may impact others. It is an ethical imperative as well as a part of positioning oneself, and requires that one work with
positive and honest intent, or in a good way, as many would say (Kovach, 2009). One way in which I enact this belief in relatedness is that, before I feel I understand something, I must build—over time and through personal experience—a substantive relationship with it. I am highly averse to forcing my own understandings on something or someone else; instead, I am tentative in stating what I understand. My research methodology is based on this belief in relationality. It also incorporates ways of generating strong relationships—for instance, with participants and with their ideas—and ways of allowing people and texts to speak for themselves in their own words. This belief in relatedness and its emphasis on responsibility is at the heart of my work.

Second, I believe in being open to plurality in my understandings. This includes feeling comfortable navigating divergent viewpoints, as mentioned above. It resonates with what Blackfoot scholar Leroy Little Bear (2000) calls the flux—the notion that “everything is constantly moving and changing” (p. 78). It also resonates with the kind of knowledge pluralism that Mi’kmaq scholar Marie Battiste (2013) calls for in transforming education. My personal experience has taught me a great deal about occupying multiple and even contradictory positionings. Being of Cree, Métis, and settler-Canadian ancestry is just one example: I navigate multiple possible identities wherever I go—for instance as a queer woman, spouse, and mother. Many Métis scholars have discussed and debated the inherent plurality—and simultaneous wholeness—that is possible in Métis identity (Adese, 2013; Gaudry, 2013; Lowan[-Trudeau], 2011, 2015). Studying literature has also taught me a great deal about plurality: any text can inspire multiple interpretations as it is read by different readers, who bring their own experiences to it, or as it is read through different theories or critical frameworks, such as historicist,
feminist, Marxist, poststructuralist, or humanist. This plurality of interpretability is not a free-for-all where anything goes, as it must happen with careful attentiveness to the particulars of the text. In my approach to research, I enact my belief in plurality by remaining open to multiple possibilities in my understanding. I take the time to draw out and articulate particular perspectives.

Finally, I believe in remaining open to transformation and emerging events or ideas as I move through my learning. In starting out, I was hesitant to set out too firm a plan, to anticipate outcomes, or to overly limit the topics that might arise as I pursued my inquiry. This openness to change is a key part of the reflexivity that is necessary for carrying out Indigenous research. Steeves (2010) includes this notion of transformation in her doctoral methodology, stating that the specific components of the research—as well as everyone involved—would be transformed as her research journey continued (Steeves, 2010, p. 32). Weber-Pillwax (2003) has also emphasized the importance of this “anticipated transformation” (2003, p. 38) both to “every living thing participating in the research project” (1999, p. 43) and to the researcher’s ethical responsibilities. Remaining open to transformation in this way throughout the research can have substantial implications when setting out a methodology and embarking upon a study. Métis scholar Gregory Lowan(-Trudeau) gives an example of this point in his doctoral dissertation when he writes,

The preliminary sections of this [methodology] chapter were dramatically revised in the final stages of the study as my understanding of the distinction between bricolage and métissage, Western, and Indigenous knowledge was not clear until I had absorbed and interpreted the meaning of the interviews (2011, p. 148).
For Lowan(-Trudeau), such transformation led him to articulate his framework of methodological métissage later in his study; I am indebted to his work, with our shared supervisor, Dr. Gail Jardine, as I was able to begin my own study with his example before me. I, likewise, formed deeper understandings of my methodological framework and of my topic as I formed relationships with my participants and their stories. I, too, have returned to my initial framework to revise and refine based on what emerged in my learning.

I stepped into my research journey with Wilson’s (2008) description of research held carefully in mind: Wilson calls research a ceremony, with “specific rituals” that are “designed to get the participants into a state of mind that will allow for the extraordinary to take place” (2008, p. 69). He invokes the good intent required to set up such a ceremony in this invitation: “let us go forward together with open minds and good hearts as we further take part in this ceremony” (2008, p. 11). In proceeding with my own work I sought, humbly, to emulate this open and responsive spirit.

3.2 Methodological Métissage

The grounding understandings, principles, and beliefs that I have outlined thus far led me to choose métissage in characterizing my methodology. Métissage as way of approaching research is an emergent approach but with a solid scholarly base (Donald, 2012; V. Kelly, 2012; Lowan[-Trudeau], 2011, 2012, 2015; Simpkins, 2012; Chambers, Hasebe-Ludt, Donald, Hurren, Leggo, & Oberg, 2008; Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009). Scholars use métissage in varying forms and with varying intents, but one commonality in their models is the bringing together of disparate elements to create
By “disparate elements” I mean, for instance, considerations from distinct disciplines (Chambers, Hasebe-Ludt, Donald, Hurren, Leggo, & Oberg, 2008), perspectives from differing cultures or worldviews (Kelly, 2012; Lowan-Trudeau, 2012, 2015), and/or narratives from various sources (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009; Simpkins, 2012). As is suggested by the term’s etymology, métissage suggests some degree of mixing or heterogeneity (Donald, 2012; Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009). Often this heterogeneity is created by juxtaposing segments of text written by multiple authors—from autobiographical narratives for instance (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009; Kelly, 2012)—as an aesthetic and curricular practice (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009; Simpkins, 2012). Additionally, in describing métissage, some authors invoke the connection between the root word “metis” and the Greek term “metis,” which refers to a mutable, situated, adaptable kind of knowledge or identity, as well as to the goddess who holds those characteristics (Baumard, 2001; Lowan-Trudeau, 2012). Métissage itself takes a number of forms, as is perhaps appropriate to its constitution.

In building upon existing models of métissage (Donald, 2012; Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009; Kelly, 2012; Lowan-Trudeau, 2011, 2012), I wish to take forward the notion of drawing elements from, and bringing together, disparate methodological and discursive fields in order to approach research in a way that is open, adaptable, and responsive. From curriculum studies scholars theorizing métissage I particularly draw forward the critical practice of situating oneself relationally in understanding by exploring creative, narrative, and self-reflexive critical processes,
connecting with curriculum-specific practices like *currere* (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009; Pinar, 1975, 2004). I also draw particularly on understandings of *métissage* that foreground responsibility to Indigenous perspectives and those that make space for hermeneutic processes of opening up understanding (Donald, 2009, 2012; Kelly, 2012; Lowan-Trudeau, 2011, 2012). In the next three sections, I outline the key elements of my methodological *métissage*, aligning *métissage* as a research sensibility with my thinking around Métisness, ethical relationality, and hermeneutics.

### 3.2.1 Métissage as Métis

There is an important connection between *métissage* and being Métis. I did not come easily, however, to the belief that it could be a positive connection: I resisted, when I first heard the term, what seemed to be a too-easy equation of Métisness with *métissage*, and I had concerns about potentially problematic ways of taking up *métissage*. For instance, I had heard Métis scholar Jennifer Adese (2013) criticize *métissage* for relying upon a notion of mixedness that perpetuates fragmented and racialized understandings of Métis identity, undermining the understanding of the Métis as a distinct people or Nation. I understood how this critique was also directed at the use of Métisness as a trope to invoke a blend of European and Aboriginal perspectives in Canada—such as Saul’s (2009), perhaps. As I thought this through, I agreed with points by Adese (2013) and other Métis scholars who criticize the appropriation of Métisness or *métissage* as a rhetorical trope (Adese, 2013; Andersen, 2011; Gaudry, 2012). Adam Gaudry (2013), for instance, puts this critique well: he argues that using Métis identity as a metaphor erases the experiences of the Métis people as “a politically organized society with a common
culture, self-awareness, and long history of self-assertion” (p. 78). Such critiques and my initial hesitations have not led me to avoid *métissage*, but instead to take it up with due attention to Métisness.

Focusing on who I am and what contexts I am trying to affect helps me to understand *métissage*. I share Cree scholar Dwayne Donald’s (2012) insistence on a *métissage* that is not predicated on post-colonial hybridity or upon a universalized homogenizing mix, but instead upon relationality and Indigeneity. I echo Donald’s (2012) call for “an Indigenous form of métissage that encourages theorists to pay closer attention to the particular character of colonial discourses in specific Canadian contexts” (p.541) and to the particularities of Indigenous places, wisdom traditions, and identities. Understanding *métissage* in these context-attentive ways enables the possibility of it having the desired effects: Donald (2012) writes that Indigenous Métissage “is not done to overtly oppose colonial frontier logics, but rather to circumvent those logics through the assertion of ethical relationality” (p. 543). I also want to emulate the insistence by Métis scholars Vicky Kelly (2012) and Gregory Lowan(-Trudeau) (2011, 2012, 2015) on situating methodological thinking in relation to one’s own understandings of what it means to be Métis. I hope my work builds upon the metaphorical power of *métissage* models while also contributing something meaningful to Indigenous resurgence, which in all humility I hope is a responsible way for me as a Métis scholar to proceed.

The literature on *métissage* establishes connections between the methodological framing and the real-world experiences and perspectives of Métis and other Indigenous people. *Métissage* as an Indigenous “research sensibility” (Donald, 2012, p. 534) suits my need to draw upon multiple and diverse academic traditions and to enact my personal
beliefs about knowledge and research. I share with Kelly (2012) and Lowan(-Trudeau) (2012) the belief that métissage can be representative of my perspectives as a Métis researcher if, like Donald (2012), I maintain the problematization of hybridity and the emphases on Indigeneity and relationality. I agree with scholars who show how being Métis means embodying a sometimes-ambiguous position and entails a simultaneous understanding of multiple perspectives (Damm, 1993; Gaudry, 2013; Kelly, 2012; Lowan[-Trudeau], 2012, 2015). I believe that métissage can be a way of navigating multiple perspectives in an ethical and relational way (Donald, 2012; Lowan[-Trudeau], 2012). I also agree that being Métis teaches me to engage with diverse and divergent perspectives: “The mixed-bloods, the ‘half-breeds,’ have now become the ‘wayfinders.’ We, the Métis, stand in both worlds; we can navigate in both” (Kelly, 2012, p. 365). An ethical, relational métissage therefore fits with my own experiences of being Métis.

3.2.2 Métissage as Weaving

Bringing disparate elements together in ethically relational ways, adapting to emergent circumstances—this complex, slippery research methodology becomes more tangible when expressed through a more concrete image. Figurative imaginings of métissage take a particular form, one that encompasses plurality, convergence and divergence, creativity, and Indigenous cultural practices. That is, much existing scholarship on métissage uses the metaphor of braiding or weaving in explaining what métissage involves and what it might look like (Donald, 2012; Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009; Lowan[-Trudeau], 2012). Donald (2012) writes that the particular “look’ of the braid” (p. 544) depends upon the researcher, the particular places and
topics involved, and the specific tools and methods drawn into the métissage, because “each research context must be explored and evaluated based on the particular character of the situation” (Donald, 2012, p. 544). I take up this idea of braiding or weaving in understanding métissage. Specifically, in this study I imagine my weaving in relation to the Métis sash, in the spirit of Kelly’s (2012) invocation: “It is by writing, by spinning the living webs of words, and by weaving the threads of our stories that we create the patterns of our existence, our unique Métis sash, our métissage” (p. 367). I think of the sash to encourage myself to be responsible to Métisness specifically, remembering the risk of using métissage as a metaphor.

While this so-called weaving is indeed metaphorical, it still calls me to remember where I am located and what my responsibilities are. If I am going to describe myself as weaving as I conduct my research, I want to keep myself rooted in a particular place and in a living tradition: to understand what my relationship is to that tradition, or how I can let myself “be addressed by tradition” (Donald, 2012; Gadamer, 1960/2004, p. 283). The sash, as a symbol of the Métis people (Manitoba Métis Federation, 2014), is a tradition that I want to be responsible to—my weaving in this work proceeds with the particularities of that tradition in mind.

My work therefore builds upon what other scholars have said about braiding or weaving. Scholars like Simpkins (2012) and Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, and Leggo (2009), for instance, enact métissage as a textual practice, juxtaposing short texts—personal stories, poetry, critical writing, photographs, and so on—in order to open up interpretations. The latter set of authors frames métissage “as a form of curriculum inquiry” in which
texts are selected and braided in such a way as to highlight both points of affinity (Haraway, 1994) and dissonance. The braiding becomes an interpretation of the narratives as well as a form of representation and reporting of the research, individual and collective. (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009, p. 9)

While the work of these three authors focuses on autobiographical writing, which mine does not, I resonate with the notion of textual weaving and the relationality that it demonstrates (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009, p. 130). I also invite this spirit of intertwined life narratives to influence my conversations and interpretations, while focusing more particularly on the relational aspect of interweaving perspectives.

Weaving maintains the unique-yet-interconnected nature of the individual strands, brought together to create something intricate, beautiful, and functional. I take seriously Donald’s (2012) suggestion that “the act of weaving a textual braid through Indigenous Métissage provides a means for researchers to express the convergence of wide and diverse influences in an ethically relational manner” (p. 544). Métissage, as I am taking it up, is not simply mixing. It creates a new braid, or text, while retaining the “integrity and distinctiveness” of the individual strands, or perspectives (Chambers, Hasebe-Ludt, Donald, Hurren, Leggo, & Oberg, 2008, p. 142-143). The sash I envision weaving must be complex yet must hold its many individual and eclectic strands together, each in relation to the others.

One of the first things I learned about the Métis sash is that, in its original form, it was a practical garment, not just an aesthetic one. It served not only to keep wearers warm but also as an emergency towel, saddle blanket, or tumpline to help carry heavy loads; sash wearers would also use it for first aid or, as needed, pull out a thread or two
from the fringe for emergency sewing (Alberta Metis Historical Society, 2001; Manitoba Metis Federation, 2016). It was a garment of contingency, adapting to meet its wearer’s needs, so that the integrity of the Métis sash is not only in its aesthetic properties. Certainly, it has these as well: each colour is symbolic and the look of the garment is importantly tied to Métis cultural identity (Alberta Metis Historical Society, 2001; Manitoba Metis Federation, 2016). However, the way that this sash existed in the world historically was as a functional object, one whose constituent threads could be pulled out, individually, to address particular needs in particular situations. This functionality resonates with my beliefs about responsibility and my identity as a Métis woman: the symbolism of Métisness exists in the sash, but this signification is based upon everyday action, adaptation, and survival.

3.2.3 Métissage as Hermeneutic

Métissage suits this study because it is a hermeneutic approach. I have already stated that I am taking up a métissage founded upon Indigenous approaches to research and informed by a hermeneutic imagination (Donald, 2012; Gadamer, 1960/2004; Kelly, 2012; Lowan[-Trudeau], 2012; D. G. Smith, 1991; L.T. Smith, 2012; Weber-Pillwax, 2001, 2003); I will now explain how this hermeneutic sensibility fits into my methodological framework. One of my main reasons for choosing métissage in approaching my research is my desire to remain open to hermeneutics as I frame and conduct my study. Métissage allows me to place my feet in both Indigenous and hermeneutic approaches (Donald, 2012; Kovach, 2009; Lowan[-Trudeau], 2012).

Clearly, explaining all of hermeneutics would take me beyond the scope of what I
am able to do in this chapter; conversely, reducing the diverse incarnations of hermeneutic interpretation to a few key elements would be a very un-hermeneutic way of proceeding. However, I do need to explain what will be hermeneutic about my research. What I am therefore electing to do in this section is to invoke again my beliefs about knowledge—namely, relationality, plurality, and transformation—and to interweave these with insights from hermeneutic writings, thereby also creating a chance to show how métissage can draw out understandings. I will show how a hermeneutic imagination (D.G. Smith, 1991) fits into my conceptualization of métissage because it is a good way to approach my topic while staying true to those beliefs.

My belief in relationships requires a “hermeneutical consciousness” (Gadamer, 1960/2004, p. 157). My research on Indigenous literature requires attention to social context, asking whether it is possible to shift the ground in the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada, to shift away from colonization and decolonization into a different kind of ethical relationship (Donald, 2012). A hermeneutic attentiveness to the historicity and the specificity of these relationships fits with my pervasive belief in relationality. Donald (2012) argues that the difficulties of relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people call for a “hermeneutic imagination” and that “Indigenous Métissage” is “conceptualized amidst these difficulties” (p. 547). As such, “Indigenous Métissage” can propose “more creative ways to understand such encounters between Aboriginals and Canadians” (p. 547). My belief in relationality and relationships also means that I intend to create meaning by engaging with others on particular topics, not to find out what other’s opinions are on that topic and to share those: “hermeneutics is about creating meaning, not simply reporting on it” (D.G. Smith,
1991, p. 201). Hermeneutics entails “restoring life to its original difficulty” (Caputo, 1987, p. 1). It entails also being open to the other, to “alterity,” and being “prepared” for that other to “tell [us] something” that might challenge our “own various expectations of meaning” (Gadamer, 1960/2004, p. 271). Gadamer states that “meanings, too, are like a space in which things are related to one another” (p. 431). A hermeneutic approach enacts my belief in relationality.

I turn to Gadamer (1960/2004) to illustrate this point. He writes here about understanding:

We begin with this proposition: “to understand means to come to an understanding with each other” (sich miteinander verstehen). Understanding is, primarily, agreement (Verständnis ist zunächst Einverständnis) . . .

Coming to an understanding (Verständigung), then, is always coming to an understanding about something. Understanding each other (sich verstehen) is always understanding each other with respect to something. (Gadamer, 1960/2004, p. 180)

Another way of saying this is that understanding occurs only through relationships: if I understand, it is in relation to the subject I am trying to understand. If we understand each other, that relationship occurs as each of us generates understanding in relation to subject matter we hold in common. This is just one example of how my beliefs about relationality bring me to think hermeneutically.

Hermeneutic understanding also fits my research because I believe in remaining open to plurality and transformation as I uncover insights about the material at hand. These beliefs help me to navigate the complex realms of interpretation, cultures,
languages, and traditions. Staying true to my beliefs means taking the time to understand how a given idea or experience exists “in-relation” (Graveline, 1998), to trace its threads in the complex fabric of life and writing. This way of understanding resonates with how David Jardine (1992) describes the interpretation of rich “incidents,” illustrating “the fecundity of the individual case” (p. 51):

Understood interpretively, such incidents can have a generative and enlivening effect on the interweaving texts and textures of human life in which we are all embedded. Bringing out these living interweavings in their full, ambiguous, multivocal character is the task of interpretation. (D. Jardine, 1992, p. 51).

Jardine emphasizes the importance of keeping interpretation open: a new case is not to be related to a foregone conclusion or knowable experience, closing down understanding. Rather, interpretation opens up (again) the possibilities of what that familiar experience might mean. He says, “a ‘good’ interpretation, then, is not definitive and final, but is one that keeps open the possibility and responsibility of returning, for the very next instance might demand of us that we understand anew” (D. Jardine, 1992, p. 57, emphasis in original). Working with meticulous care to trace the way an idea or experience exists in relation to other ideas and experiences, to language and history, to places and people, is a hermeneutic undertaking (Donald, 2012; Gadamer, 1960/2004; D. Jardine, 1992; Jardine, Clifford, & Friesen, 2002; D.G. Smith, 1991).

My belief in plurality and transformation is consistent with the methodological openness of hermeneutics. This openness shapes a métissage that is “against prescribed method” (Donald, 2012, p. 544). Putting métissage into action is not about following a methodological formula. Rather, it entails adhering to my principles and beliefs and
building upon my experience as I co-create meaning with others—through conversations and texts—about a topic. Remaining open to the insights of others will enable me to expand my understandings. “What is required instead” of “prescribed method,” Donald (2012) shows, is “careful attention to the details of the research context with the hope that a story will arise that will need to be told” (p. 544). Unearthing such stories, and seeing how they demonstrate the significance of Indigenous literatures, brings me back recursively to my core teaching from McLeod that “through stories, we can find our place in the world” (2007, p. 68). A primary purpose of this research is to open up understandings that offer something useful or beautiful to the lived realities of Indigenous people.

Putting my “careful attention” (Donald, 2012, p. 544) into my research material means that it can be rigorous even if I am not adhering to a specific, set, methodological procedure (Donald, 2012). David Smith (1991) writes, “the mark of good interpretative research is not in the degree to which it follows a specified methodological agenda, but in the degree to which it can show understanding of what it is that is being investigated” (p. 201). Engaging in interpretation of a work of art means finding out what is at “play” (Gadamer, 1960/2004, p. 117) in that work, and remaining open to “the work’s own possibilities of being” (Gadamer, 1960/2004, p. 117)—likewise for strong interpretive research. Uncovering the complexities of a particular idea or experience—if done with a careful attentiveness to how that idea or experience exists, in relation, in the world—is an undertaking that resists pre-set methodology. To understand my topic, I turn first to my topic, not to a methodological recipe. Building a relationship to my “topic”—or “topos”—i.e. space” (Gadamer, 1960/2004, p. 431)—means understanding the topography and
learning my way around (Jardine, Bastock, George, & Martin, 2002). Doing this learning through relationships with my conversation partners keeps me connected to my purpose.

3.3 Research Design

On setting out to conduct this research, I proposed a design, but knew that I would adapt and respond to what emerged in that topography. Proceeding with flexibility held me to my beliefs in plurality, transformation, and acting in the context of close, accountable relationships. Proceeding with a plan held me to my institutional requirements for ethics approval, as well as to some of the worldly requirements for organization. The openness and adaptability of my methodological framework, grounded in the strong principles I have articulated, was a good way to proceed. I was able to meet each participant with my beliefs and principles in mind, but ready to be “pulled up short” (Gadamer, 1960/2004, p. 270), to have my assumptions interrupted and to hear something different from my own thoughts. That is, I was ready to build understanding together, ready to let what I was learning change me and show me where I really was. In what follows, I outline the final version of this study’s design—not what I set out at the beginning, but rather where I ended up.

3.3.1 Participants and Recruitment

This study was designed around the interpretive possibilities of speaking with teachers and with Indigenous writers—weaving their perspectives together through métissage. According to my initial plans for recruitment, the people I spoke with would care about Indigenous literatures, communities, and learning. Each person was in a
position to speak to the topic, bringing who they were and what work they did to our conversations. To structure my two participant groups, I set out explicit criteria as to what I meant by *writers* and *teachers*; participants who fit with those criteria and who were interested in taking part were included. I included everyone who signed up to participate within the recruitment period—that is, I simply stopped recruiting when I had enough people. I did not use any other, secondary criteria: for instance, I did not explicitly aim to achieve any particular kinds of representation or diversity—such as across Indigenous nations, racial or cultural identity, sexual orientation, gender, age, class, religion, language, places, and so on. Rather, this study’s framework allows participants’ narratives and perspectives to be situated in relation to their particular positionings and experiences.

As I have stated, determining which writers and teachers fit into this study required me to set out general criteria for inclusion. The following table lays out the criteria that bounded my two groups of participants.

Table 3.1 Criteria for Inclusion of Participants

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Writers</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indigeneity</td>
<td>Self-identify as Indigenous (First Nations, Métis, or Inuit)</td>
<td>Need not identify as Indigenous; teachers may be of any racial or cultural background</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographical Limitations</td>
<td>Anywhere in Canada</td>
<td>In or near Calgary, Alberta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Adult (18 years or older), old enough to consent to participate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Qualification</td>
<td>Is building or has established a record of publishing creative writing. Writers generally fit within the Canada Council for the Arts’ (n.d.) definition of a professional artist</td>
<td>Certified teacher, currently teaching in secondary education (grades 7-12) or having done so within past 5 years</td>
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</table>
To interject with a key point about language, I viewed each of these people not simply as a *participant* in the study but more as a co-creator: each person taught me, showed me things I needed to find, influenced and shifted what I was doing, theorized and interpreted with me, and generally came together with me to create understanding. As such, I struggle with the language of *participants* in this dissertation and try to use their names or refer to them by more particular or human terms when I can feasibly do so. However, my task here is to be specific in how I sought out participants so that readers can make sense of the work that follows; once I have established who my participants were, it will be easier to leave that language behind.

To recruit teachers and writers for this study, I began with existing relationships (Kovach, 2009). Once I had institutional ethics approvals in place, I reached out to my existing contacts and networks to find people who might be interested in participating. Specifically, I sent a recruitment email to people I already knew from academic or community settings, thinking of those who fit within the populations set out above and who might be interested in taking part. Within that email was a request to recipients to

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<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Writers</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Additional Professional</td>
<td>No limits beyond above; creative writers may work in any</td>
<td>Teaching or have recently taught in a subject area where they could opt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Criteria</td>
<td>genre, medium, etc.</td>
<td>to teach Indigenous literatures, including but not limited to English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Any gender</td>
<td>Language Arts. No limits around amount of experience or attitudes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of participants</td>
<td>6-10 of each, in roughly equal numbers</td>
<td>toward Indigenous topics.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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pass along the recruitment information to others in their own networks, enabling me to identify additional interested people through extended relationships (i.e. snowball sampling). Specifically, the study’s documentation included a Letter of Initial Contact (essentially a brief email introducing myself, the study, and the other two attached documents), a Letter of Invitation (a condensed overview of the study information and recruitment process), and a comprehensive Consent Form to allow for informed consent. I had laid out plans to pursue additional recruitment by distributing recruitment information through appropriate community or professional organizations—for which I prepared an additional document, a third-party Email from Organizations—but this third layer of recruitment did not turn out to be necessary, as I reached the desired number of participants through the first two strategies. Interested participants reviewed and signed the Consent Form and we arranged the time and place of our meeting. The ordering of conversations was simply responsive to when people were able to meet.

3.3.2 Research Conversations

I engaged in flexible, interpretive, one-on-one conversations with writers and teachers during which we generated understandings together as co-creators of meaning. In other words, I drew upon a pre-approved list of possible questions to allow each question to develop as an in-depth, semi-structured interview (Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Lofland & Lofland, 1995; Marshall & Rossman, 1989). These interview questions are included in Appendix A. Early in my planning stages I had a conversation with Coast Salish scholar Robina Thomas, during which she shared with me that, while conducting her own doctoral research, she fostered open conversations by asking one primary
question, thinking that she would limit the answers she received by having more specific questions. I reflected upon that suggestion and grounded my own conversations by having one primary question: “Why do Indigenous literatures matter?” Each conversation was unique as each conversant and I met together in the topic (Jardine, Clifford, & Friesen, 2002), but each one remained grounded in that primary question.

In terms of logistics, I met with each person for about one hour, sometimes longer, depending on the time they had. We spent time beginning well: with cultural protocols where appropriate, discussion of the study and the consent process, snacks and beverages, introductions or catching up, preliminary discussions, and so on. I expressed my thanks and appreciation to each participant for their time and words. Each conversation was recorded with a digital recorder: usually I turned it on once our initial chatting started to get more substantial, or whenever each person was ready to start the more formal research conversation. Recorded conversations varied between about 30 and 75 minutes, again depending on how much time each person had and how our conversation went. Because I traveled to meet participants at locations of their choice, interviews took place in a range of locations: libraries, coffee shops, offices, front porches, and kitchens, for example—one took place inside a giant glass tipi (at First Nations University of Canada in Regina). Recorded conversations were transcribed for further interpretation—I say “further” because the interpretive process began during conversations, as we opened up understandings together.
3.3.3 Responsible, Reciprocal Relationships

At an institutional level, I ensured that this study adhered to the required research ethics protocols. This study was approved by the University of Calgary’s Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board. I also obtained the necessary approvals from school jurisdictions in order to interview teachers. As per the terms of those ethics approvals, I do not identify school boards, schools, or teachers, either by name or by including identifying information. This latter requirement involved balancing dual directives: situating teachers in their particular positionings and experiences, while excluding any information that might reveal their specific identities or their workplaces. While this was an inherent tension, I communicated with each teacher to work out the details. Institutional ethics approvals were adhered to throughout the study process.

Ensuring reciprocal and responsible relationships with the writers and teachers who agreed to participate involved additional considerations, given that this is Indigenous research. As demonstrated in this chapter, I completed a methodological literature review to identify ethical principles for proceeding; I also drew principles from the Tri-Council funding agencies’ Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research on Humans (2014), which contains guidelines for Indigenous research. Based on these consultations and on the principles and beliefs I have outlined in this chapter, I designed this study with the following considerations for ethics and reciprocity:

- **Respectful Relationships:** It was important to me to communicate and interact respectfully with the people who agreed to contribute to this project. For example, when we met in person, I made space for some relationship building before the recorded conversation (while keeping within the time frame each
participant made available to speak with me). I made sure to introduce myself and my study—for instance describing my beliefs about and hopes for the work.

- **Cultural Protocols**: I asked which (if any) cultural protocols—such as the giving of ceremonial tobacco—participants considered appropriate as a good way of beginning together. Cultural protocols were followed depending on participants’ wishes.

- **Comfort and Convenience**: Out of respect for place but also for people’s time and effort, I traveled to meet them at a convenient location of their choice. For each conversation I provided light refreshments as a small thank-you gesture and to ensure participants’ comfort. Because responsibility also involves considering my fossil fuel consumption, I want to note that conversations involving cross-Canada travel were conducted at times when I was already traveling to those cities for other purposes. For instance, my family and I moved from Calgary to Montréal in summer 2015: I scheduled several conversations during that drive.

- **Identification and Anonymity**: Initially, I planned to offer participants the equal choice to remain anonymous or be identified within this study. This choice was framed through two basic considerations: first, the potential risks of participating—of having one’s name included in a piece of scholarship, of speaking from a particular community or workplace, etc.—which underlies the conventional imperative to keep participants’ identities confidential in research; and, second, the importance of locating understandings—for instance, as in protocols around introducing oneself and explaining what one brings to a conversation that are common in Indigenous circles. However, I determined through the ethics approval processes, as noted, that teachers could not be identified. Teachers thus chose pseudonyms, which are used throughout this study. Writers, however, as public figures, were offered the choice. While this meant treating participants asymmetrically, I feel that ultimately I am respecting their differential positioning. Teachers speaking about the difficulties of bringing Indigenous literatures into their classrooms, for instance, are put in a less
vulnerable position if they are kept anonymous, because they are not exposing their workplace to critique. There are multiple school jurisdictions in and around Calgary, comprising hundreds of schools, so that individual workplaces cannot be identified.

- **Open Conversations:** As I detail further below, conversations were structured flexibly so that participants were able to co-shape the conversation and contribute what they felt was significant. Keeping conversations open—with a broad, interpretable primary question—was one way of not pre-fixing the research agenda but instead enabling participants, as community members, to co-shape the research so that it served them.

- **Reciprocal Sharing:** While asking writers and teachers to speak to who they are and why they care about the work they do, which can be a vulnerable or emotional process, I felt it was important to reciprocate. Together we shared personal stories, thoughts, beliefs, experiences, and ideas, and occasionally laughter, anger, and tears.

- **Participants Learning from Each Other:** One potential benefit I intended was for participants to have the chance to learn from each other’s perspectives. Conversations were conducted individually for mutual convenience, but I obtained permission from each participant to share perspectives (anonymously and respectfully paraphrased) between conversations.

- **Finalizing Transcripts:** I sent the transcript of our conversation to each participant to review before including it in the study. Participants were able to make any changes they wished—additions, revisions, or deletions. Sending in approved transcripts constituted an additional stage of consent in that participants had time to consider their participation and to withdraw for any reason. During this process I worked with teachers to remove any identifying information from their transcripts.
Ownership of Data: I considered it unethical for me as a researcher to have sole ownership of the research data, as conversations were generated together. Participants received copies of their transcripts and are free to use them for any purpose. They were also offered copies of their audio-recorded conversations.

Protection of Data: Appropriate precautions were articulated during ethics approval processes and duly followed to safely store and protect data and maintain confidentiality.

Mobilizing and Demobilizing Research: Reciprocity in academic contexts involves sharing knowledge widely, seeking to mobilize across academic and community settings. I have a strong foundation for such dissemination and plan to ensure this work reaches audiences who will benefit from and appreciate it. Conversely, sometimes responsibility in research involves leaving certain ideas or experiences where they arose—a point I considered for instance if personal perspectives were shared within conversations. Participants were able to revise their transcripts, as noted; however, on occasion I also initiated consultations with participants about excluding certain passages from the study, for various reasons.

In addition to the above considerations for respect and reciprocity, I framed the opportunity for participants to discuss their work and beliefs as a potential benefit to them. Relating back to the point I made previously about anticipating transformation for everyone involved in the research process (Steeves, 2010; Weber-Pillwax, 1999), I intended this study to open up space for teachers and writers to possibly have a meaningful experience by speaking with me, sharing ideas and experiences that mattered to them. Lowan(-Trudeau) (2011), too, describes the opportunity to “discuss and reflect” (p. 157) as a potential benefit he provided to his research participants. Co-creating
meaning with my participants through flexible conversations mean that there was room for their stories, their connections, their reflections, and their understandings—I was intentional about respecting participants’ experiences in this learning journey, not only my own. To jump ahead for a moment to give an example, because I think this is quite important, one teacher (Angela) remarked upon the process of speaking with me near the end of our time together, saying, “I didn’t realize the perspective I had [laughs]. I mean I do, but you know? You don’t really talk about it.” Similarly, one writer (Richard) told me, “I think you’ve got a good question, because it’s open-ended. People can interpret it many ways, right? And I think it’s important that people be given a forum to talk about why they do what they do, how they discovered their process.” Offering participants the space to wander through their own reflections made our conversations richer but also more respectful and reciprocal.

3.3.4 Métissage and Interpretation

Enacting métissage as set out in this chapter means that my interpretive processes began right away, or, rather, interpretive processes intentionally pervaded each stage of the study. For example, in the first conversation I held, with Richard, we began already weaving together our perspectives and stories, remembrances from texts we had read or experiences we had had, and so on, in an emergent way that opened up understandings. Following that, each subsequent conversation started to interweave with the previous ones. That is, perspectives from other conversations were brought in to enable dialogue and sharing. For instance, where I noted particular points of affinity or dissonance (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009) or where I thought another participant’s
perspectives called to be brought into dialogue with the ones being voiced in the
cornerstone I was in, I would paraphrase those responses and take them up with my
current conversation partner. I found as I worked through the conversations that choosing
which perspectives or comments to share with each new participant was in itself an
interpretive process. I asked myself many questions as I reflected on how to shape this
dialogue. What was important from the previous conversations? Which ideas are relevant
for the person with whom I am currently speaking? How might she or he respond? How
will bringing in this or that perspective shape this conversation? In thinking about
shaping the conversation, am I really attending to this person’s ideas? I did not have a set
procedure for how to include certain perspectives; it was a matter of listening to the
conversation and bringing in a comment from a previous participant if and when it would
contribute to what we were saying. This process added depth to the research.

Once conversations were completed, I went through several further stages of
interpretation or analysis. In keeping with the methodological métissage formulated in
this chapter, I saw this interpretive process as one of weaving, and I saw the perspectives,
ideas, experiences, questions, and stories shared in conversations as threads to be woven
into the figurative sash. Approaching conversations with teachers and writers
reciprocally, with a hermeneutic imagination, and interpretively, meant not having a pre-
set formula for conducting analysis determined separately from the topic and from my
participants’ investments (Donald, 2012; Gadamer, 1960/2004; D. Jardine, 1992; D.G.
processes entailed allowing understandings to open up, allowing myself to be addressed
by what emerged (Gadamer, 1960/2004), and listening for the stories that “need to be
told” (Donald, 2012, p. 544). In what follows, I describe how, generally, I went about pursuing understandings in that spirit; these explanations also help to introduce my fifth chapter, which presents my interpretations.

The first stage of my analysis was to draw out and juxtapose threads in order to gain some initial understandings of participants’ perspectives and how they related to each other. Using the original digital recordings, I listened to one conversation at a time, typing out a rough, note-form version of that participant’s ideas. As I took these notes, I separated each main idea from the next, giving each short paragraph (containing one big idea) a header that invoked the main point the speaker was making in that section of the conversation. I designated each of these paragraphs as a thread drawn out of that conversation. While I marked each thread with the speaker’s name to preserve its origins, I separated it from the continuity of the conversation in which it appeared, snipping at the beginning and end of each big idea to let it stand, temporarily, on its own. As I produced each short block of text in this way, I placed it into a single Word document that accumulated all of the threads from all of the conversations. I considered the placement of each thread carefully. Each time I placed an idea into the document, I examined the ideas that were already there. Did this idea echo, challenge, respond to, build upon, or question an idea that had come before? This questioning led to an emergent ordering, through which I brought participants’ ideas into dialogue with each other through juxtaposition. Each header (the main idea of each paragraph or thread) was automatically listed in a table of contents at the top of this document, allowing me to see an overview of the whole. Each time I worked in this document, I would reconsider and rearrange the paragraphs as my understandings of the threads and conversations moved.
In the second stage of my analysis, I created four main weavings out of the threads I had gathered as above. Visualizing the Métis sash, I imagined that most of the threads would be woven into the main body of the work, and some would constitute the fringe at its end. The four sections I organized would be interconnected and would constitute the body of my fifth chapter. To carry out my weaving during this stage, I first printed the table of contents from my (very long) threads document. I considered the ordering I had created and the emerging dialogue—questions, echoes, developments, and contradictions—that I saw arising from writers’ and teachers’ juxtaposed and clustered ideas. I focused in on four main clusters that I saw as invoking the most significant understandings emerging from the connections between the conversations and my research question. I designated these as weavings. I mapped these out on paper, jotting down the threads that were integral to each weaving and making notes on the understandings that arose through the juxtapositions of threads in that section. From these weavings, I created a first draft of my analysis chapter (chapter five).

To undertake the third stage of my analysis, I essentially pulled apart the weaving I had previously done and laid out the threads again in order to begin afresh. I revisited each conversation to ensure I had listened to each participant’s significant concerns and to the development of my own ideas occurring across those conversations. I reconsidered the threads in relation to each other and to the most important emphases in each conversation, jotting lists of which threads I had included in, and which I had dropped out of, my first draft of chapter five. Working toward my next attempt at weaving, I created a new map in which I plotted all of the threads into sections of weaving, each of these a cluster of significant ideas that responded to, questioned, built upon, or echoed each
other. This mapping generated again four weavings, each emerging from rich clusters of interconnections. From this map, I wrote a new draft of my analysis chapter, both starting fresh and building upon the two previous versions. This writing entailed organizing and articulating my understandings both downward (from my model of four weavings) and upward (from the implications of each strand and its relations to its neighbours).

In other words, I took an interpretive approach to so-called data analysis through métissage, which enabled me to draw from diverse traditions, respect the particularities of elements in relation, wonder and wander intentionally, allow individual voices to resonate, bring voices together into dialogue, respect the tangled interconnectedness of the threads the conversations uncovered, juxtapose ideas and segments of text through weaving, illuminate convergences and divergences, adapt what I was doing to the shifting terrain of my topic as I learned my way around, attend to the power of stories, connect to critical and personal contexts, remain open to the worldly complexities of my topic, leave room for my co-creators to meet me at the topic and come together to open up understanding, remain grounded in my beliefs and principles, remain open to the otherness of my participants and their experiences, and be ready for what I found to demand something of me, knowing that sometimes understanding is “what happens to us over and above our wanting and doing” (Gadamer, 1960/2004, p. xxvi).

### 3.4 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have introduced and explained my methodological framework and the approaches that took me through my research process. Fitting these approaches to my research topic brings me to Indigenous research methodologies, and specifically to a
métissage that is open to hermeneutics while remaining rooted in Indigenous relational and ethical principles. I have outlined the principles and precedents to which I am indebted in articulating an interpretive métissage. I have described some of my core beliefs about understanding—through the concepts of relationality, plurality, and transformation—to show how they resonate deeply with this approach. I have also outlined the main components of my research design to explain how I came together with participants to explore the connections between Indigenous literatures, teaching and learning, communities and resurgence, and their particular experiences and investments. Guiding my research with my core beliefs and with the principles of Indigenous research outlined above, I worked to enact this métissage, bringing together the diverse perspectives of participants, drawing upon the multiple academic disciplines in which I am positioned, and weaving intricate understandings. The following chapter, chapter four, presents my summaries of the conversations I held with teachers and writers for this undertaking.
Chapter 4: Findings—Gathering the Threads

The deepest pleasure of all this work, thus far, has been to dwell for a time with the people who agreed to come together in this learning: in their presence, but also with their words, as I listened and tended over the past months. In writing up the findings that emerged, I struggle a little with the multiple tasks implied by that word, for reporting simply something I have found—supposedly a straightforward process—is not the same as sharing the experience of the journey through which I was doing the finding—a journey that was as much about connecting with others as about spending time in a particular conceptual territory, so that my voice is only one among many that needs to be heard. Nor is the relational nature of the finding I have done conveyed if I only report my findings.

As I consider how to begin this chapter, I reflect on what David Jardine (2002) writes about gathering, because (although he is very much talking about ecological understandings and birding) his words portray the process of understanding in a way that is deeply resonant for me:

There is something about such gathering that is deeply personal, deeply formative, deeply pedagogical. As I slowly gathered something of this place, it became clear that I was somehow “gathering myself.” And as I gathered something of the compositions of this place, I, too, had to become composed in and by such gathering. And, with the help of cicadas, I did not simply remember this place. Of necessity, I remembered, too, something of what has become of me. A birding lesson: I become someone through what I know. (p. 155)
The work that I share in this chapter is *gathering* work: I went out into the world to collect perspectives from people who could shed some light on my questions. However, it is no simple matter of reporting back what I found out, as I am deeply implicated in the learning, and the understandings being generated are emerging through webs of relationships between multiple knowers and the topic, which is in many ways the *place* that we are learning through. Having inhabited this inquiry for about two years, I understand more deeply what the process of *composition* entails—and because of the richness of those experiences I find it challenging to write this particular chapter within conventional, institutional, and pragmatic limits. I am consequently stretching these a little. What follows is a carefully considered navigation, but, more than that, it is a *gathering* in the sense I have invoked.

My purpose in this chapter is to share the content of the research conversations that I had the pleasure of holding with teachers and writers for this study. Setting out the knowledge and experience that others have shared with me is a kind of collecting and preparing. I am laying out the brightly coloured strands that I will later weave together. To fulfill this purpose, I present the conversations one by one, with the intent of allowing each conversation to speak on its own terms, so that each participant’s perspectives and concerns can be shared. At this point my intent is not to weave—that will come in chapter five—but I invite readers to begin their own weavings as they move through this chapter and to bring those understandings forward. Honouring and listening to these conversations takes time: I am making time and space here for people’s words and stories.
4.1 Composition of this Chapter

As befits my theoretical and methodological framework, I respect the people who came together with me in this research as co-creators of understanding. I want to continue stretching the understanding of what role participants play in interpretive and Indigenous research, acknowledging the extent to which my participants shaped the work and generated significant understandings. Ultimately, I am the one composing the chapter, and it is my journey of understanding that is being represented across this dissertation; however, in this chapter I use a few structural strategies to foreground the perspectives of the people who enabled me to do that work.

The first of these is that I foreground participants’ own words in order to convey their ideas faithfully and to preserve the tone and character of the conversations. That is, this chapter is comprised largely of quotations from the conversations. Including participants’ own words—their ways of telling, ways of working out and illustrating their understandings—respects the integrity of what they have shared, as well as the storytelling embedded in our conversations, through which we created meaning together (Kovach, 2009; L.T. Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008). Quoting words, phrases, and passages from these conversations, furthermore, allows teachers’ and writers’ words to stand open to interpretation, which is fundamental to the hermeneutic nature of my study: laying out participants’ words allows me to “open up possibilities and keep them open,” striving to suspend my prejudices and pursue a question that may lead to understanding (Gadamer, 1960/2004, p. 298), both for me and for my readers. In terms of textual organization of quotations, each writer or teacher takes up one discrete section of this chapter, and within
that section, all quotations (unless otherwise attributed with an in-text citation) come
directly from the transcript of that person’s conversation with me. Quotation marks are
used only for direct quotations and quotations are always from participants’ words. Very
occasionally, I quote from my side of the conversation, which I mark simply through
description, like this for instance: *In response, I say “[my comment].”* I quote my
contributions to the conversation only when they are necessary to make sense of the other
speaker’s words.

When quoting what teachers and writers have said, I quote fairly cleanly from
their spoken language, leaving out much of the messiness of natural speech: this
cleanliness is another concession, losing some authenticity for the sake of clarity and
concision. In many cases this cleaning-up was also at participants’ requests. I will note
here that these conversations varied widely in tone and character. What does not fully
come across in this chapter is the range of expression, body language, and feeling with
which the words were spoken. Sometimes speakers felt very strongly about what they
were saying and spoke with fervour and confidence. Sometimes speakers were quite
uncertain and hesitated, struggling to find the right language or right ideas to address the
topic. Sometimes people laughed and spoke jokingly, and sometimes they became
overwhelmed and shed tears—often we did these things together. Very often there were
pauses, breaths, false starts, rewordings, repetitions, and personal verbal mannerisms.
Such aspects added a great deal of meaning to the conversations, but it was beyond the
scope of this project to include them. Throughout my interpretative processes, I returned
recursively to the recordings and to the notes in the transcripts in order to consider the
conversations more fully.
While I intended to foreground participants’ own words through quotations, it was not pragmatic to include the transcripts in their entirety. Therefore the second structural strategy I use in this chapter is to hold these quotations together with a summarizing structure. I elected to summarize each conversation—while quoting as much as possible—to keep this chapter reasonably short and relatively clear to read. Summarizing is tricky to navigate because, as Kovach (2009) points out, “writing is a process of defining” in which “the power resides in the writer” (pp. 131-132). Choosing to summarize, rather than including transcripts verbatim, was an organizational concession. I acknowledge that my summarizing voice reduces the particularity of my participants’ voices. That said, in writing these summaries I exercised a highly vigorous level of self-reflexivity and attentiveness to the conversations themselves as I selected which passages to quote and which words to use when I summarized instead. I tried to respect the spirit of what each participant said and how each conversation proceeded.

Third, while my voice is present in my summarizing, and while I am in many ways “gathering myself” (D. Jardine, 2002, p. 155), I have worked to minimize my own presence in this chapter. In particular, I mean that, although the conversations I held with teachers and writers were interpretive and dialogic, such that we both explored the topic and created understandings together, and my voice was present as we spoke, I generally do not include my side of the conversations in this chapter. I feel that my contributions come throughout this dissertation and so my words within the conversations themselves are not necessary to summarize and quote here, except where required to understand what my conversant is saying.
This dissertation’s Appendices include transcript samples to exemplify the conversations in their textual form—I do not say original form because even the audio recordings are not that, as our conversations were situated, embodied, and relational. In addition to the samples provided in Appendices B and C, I want to provide one example here of how I have summarized our research conversations. This example demonstrates my approach, building upon methodological scholarship and also helping readers to understand how I have put this fourth chapter together. This is an excerpt from my conversation with Warren, as it appears in the transcript. As a quick note on punctuation, in the transcripts, ellipses (...) are used to show where our speech overlaps, and dashes (—) are used to mark pauses. Everywhere else in this chapter (and dissertation) ellipses and dashes are used according to convention (American Psychological Association, 2010): namely, ellipses ( . . . ) to signal within a quotation that some of the original text has been omitted, and dashes ( — ) to signal a break in a sentence. This part of our conversation occurs after Warren has explained his ancestry and understandings of being Métis, including family members’ perspectives, and I have responded in kind, sharing comparable reflections of my own.

AH: So that kind of complicated positioning and kind of navigating that almost more as a, like I find it, well, and some of my mentors and teachers have shown me where it’s not really about your own identity questions; it’s about your responsibility questions…

WC: Mm-hmm.

AH: …like okay okay that makes me feel better…

WC: [laughs]

AH: …I can do my work and…
WC: Yeah.

AH: …like if it’s good work do it and really who cares – about your questions, or insecurities about whether, you know?

WC: Right.

AH: It’s like, okay, do it well and do it accountably.

WC: Yeah.

AH: And then, the rest kind of falls into place a bit more.

WC: Yeah.

AH: That’s not the best articulation of that but…

WC: No I think…

AH: …I hope you kind of know what I mean [laughs].

WC: That’s true, yeah, and it, it really is about how…

AH: Yeah.

WC: …how you are in relation to people, not…

AH: Yeah.

WC: …who you are per se I think, and so how you’re relating to the, to the community –

AH: Anyway yeah I don’t want to take up space with my…

WC: No but that’s…

AH: …I just wanted to reciprocate a little specifically about that…

WC: …absolutely yeah…

AH: …those questions mean a lot to me and, that…

WC: …yeah.
AH: ...and you know the ways I shape my work are often actually about stitching together some of those ruptures...

WC: Mm-hmm.

AH: ...and that it’s a possible thing to do in writing and in academic work.

WC: Yeah. Mm-hmm.

AH: Which is why I’m asking, so what do you think about what you do [laughs]

WC: [laughs] No, that’s for sure...

AH: Yeah.

WC: ...and that’s it, I mean, for me now, I have been, I have thought about this and read about this for a few years now...

AH: Yeah.

WC: ...maybe I guess 20 years, probably – it, I still haven’t, you know, got a final easy definition of who I am, and I don’t think I probably ever will – but I do feel in some ways more – like I have allegiances and connections, really close connections to particular people and particular family members...

AH: Mm-hmm.

WC: ...but also others who have, you know, really made the, given me the gift, I guess of, of showing me – in a sense what my role could be, you know, to help me...

AH: Mm-hmm.

WC: ...with that. – So yeah it, it is as the, it almost comes back to relationship and how, how you act rather than just who you are (or claim you are), I think.

This exchange shows a bit of how this conversation went, with both of us sharing perspectives and stories, building understandings together, working things out through our dialogue. Just to put this excerpt in perspective, it is about 460 words out of more
than 16,000 in the complete transcript. I chose this excerpt because it allows me to exemplify a number of the textual strategies I have discussed.

To illustrate what I have said about my approaches to summarizing, then, I will show how I present that part of our conversation in this chapter. This is a quotation from Warren’s section below:

In response to what Warren has shared, I reciprocate, sharing some of my own family experiences and feelings around being Métis. For instance, I tell him how friends and mentors have taught me that “it’s not really about your own identity questions; it’s about your responsibility questions,” which helps me to focus on what work I can contribute. Warren expands on this idea: “I have thought about this and read about this for . . . maybe 20 years [and] I still haven’t got a final easy definition of who I am, and I don’t think I probably ever will. I do feel more like I have allegiances and connections, really close connections to particular people and particular family members, but also others who have . . . given me the gift of showing me what my role could be, you know to help me with that. . . . It comes back to relationship and how you act rather than just who you are.” “Or claim you are,” he adds. I share this example to show, rather than simply tell, how I am composing this chapter. This process is reductive, to be sure, but has resulted in a text that is, I hope, both readable and respectful.

Because the conversations build on each other and dialogue with each other, I summarize them in the order in which they took place, between April and November of 2015. Teachers’ and writers’ interviews are thus interspersed. Conversations are labeled
with participants’ names or pseudonyms, their roles as writers or teachers, and the cities where the conversations took place. The summary of each conversation is preceded by a short introduction written by that participant: out of respect for personal positioning and voice, I asked teachers and writers to introduce themselves within the work. Teachers’ names and identifying information are not included, but they chose their own pseudonyms. Before moving on to the conversation summaries, I will provide some introductory material about the people who took part.

4.2 Overview of Participants—Coming together with Teachers and Writers

For this study, I held conversations with 14 people. To guide readers in navigating this chapter, I have created a table that contains an overview of participants’ key details. This table lists participants’ names or pseudonyms in the order in which interviews were conducted, corresponding with the organization of the summaries below. This table also notes whether each person is Indigenous and each person’s role in the study, i.e. teacher—denoting an educator within formal schooling in Calgary for grades 7-12—or writer—meaning an Indigenous person who has published creative writing.

Even more than anticipated, the categories of teacher and writer are not discrete, in that the writers I spoke with also speak as educators. That is, all of the writers have previously worked or currently work, alongside their writing, as educators in a range of educational contexts. Many are or have been faculty members or instructors within post-secondary institutions and/or creative writing programs, and several of them work with community or other organizations with an educational mandate. Katherena also previously taught in early childhood education. Sharron is respected as an Elder by
community members. In addition to formal educator roles, many of the writers forge intentional connections to educational settings through their writing and community work, such as by visiting schools, doing storytelling for young people, or creating educational resources. Because interview questions were open-ended, participants were able to speak from whatever experience was significant to their perspectives on those questions; participants had diverse relationships to the questions I asked, as is reflected in the summaries that follow this table.

Table 4.1: List of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sequence</th>
<th>Name or Pseudonym*</th>
<th>Date of Conversation (dd/mm/yy)</th>
<th>Indigenous</th>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Writer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Richard Van Camp</td>
<td>29/04/15</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Angela Varila*</td>
<td>09/05/15</td>
<td></td>
<td>•</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Rachel Baker*</td>
<td>15/05/15</td>
<td></td>
<td>•</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Alice Curtis*</td>
<td>16/05/15</td>
<td></td>
<td>•</td>
<td></td>
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I hope this table helps readers to move through the conversations that follow.
4.3 Richard Van Camp, Writer (29 April 2015, Edmonton)

4.3.1 Richard’s Introduction

Richard Van Camp is a proud Tlicho Dene from Fort Smith, NWT. He writes and publishes in every genre. His novel, *The Lesser Blessed*, is now a feature film with First Generation Films. You can visit him on Facebook, Twitter and at richardvancamp.com. Mahsi cho!

4.3.2 My Conversation with Richard

As we begin our conversation, Richard begins by narrating his way into writing and storytelling. He tells it like this:

I was raised in a house full of stories. I was raised with some of the greatest storytellers in the world. You know, my parents were taxidermists in the seventies. This was before television. This was a time when families still visited families. . . . What I remember most was that we had all day to visit, all day to share, all day to cook, all day to eat, all day to run, all day to play. And our parents read to us. And they told us stories. And we have a great library, Mary Kaeser library in Fort Smith. *Beautiful* library. And we had Wally’s Drug Store, where they had comic books, the same comic books that the kids were reading in Edmonton, Alberta, and Las Vegas and New York and Vancouver and Toronto.

Richard names some of the comic books and magazines he used to read, and tells me that he “always worked,” saving up his money “every week for new comic books.”
Richard traces his origins as a writer, describing the influences that brought him to write his first novel, *The Lesser Blessed*. He shares,

As I became a teenager, I discovered Judy Blume, S. E. Hinton, Stephen King, Pat Conroy, and comic books, comic books, comic books. I can’t stress that enough. The comic books gave me the confidence to be a reader for 800-page Pat Conroys, or, you know, 700-page Stephen Kings. . . . I have 13 books out. I have nine coming—I would not be the writer I am today without the stories that I grew up with. Learning about medicine power, having grandparents who are medicine people—I would not be the human being that I am today, had it not been for those books.

This reading, he argues, was necessary for him to begin writing: “I couldn’t have written *The Lesser Blessed* without Judy Blume and S. E. Hinton and Pat Conroy and Stephen King, and those comic books.” He also credits music: “My Bloody Valentine, and Slowdive, and The Sisters of Mercy, and The Cure, and The Mission, and Siouxsie and the Banshees, and the *Terminator 2* soundtrack.” He explains that he could not have written *The Lesser Blessed* “without braiding all that medicine power together.” He mentions that he was 19 years old when he started that book and that it took him “five years to write.” He emphasizes, “I didn’t know that I’d be the first Tlicho Dene to ever publish a novel. I didn’t know I’d be the first person from Fort Smith N.W.T. to ever publish a novel. I had no idea.”

It has now been “20 years” since Richard’s first novel came out and he is able to reflect back. He says, “The greatest joy of my life, in the last 20 years, is seeing Northern
voices emerge.” He mentions he will shortly be going to the “10th annual NorthWords writers’ festival,” which he helped to establish. He goes on,

My greatest joy is not only seeing Northern voices grow and become published—also the Aboriginal community. To see someone like Jennifer Storm, who at the age of 14 wrote . . . her first novel. I was on the selection committee at Theytus Books when that manuscript came in. . . . I’ll never forget seeing it. It was the most beat-up manuscript I’d ever seen in my life.

. . . but the title—The Boy that Sheldon Killed—stole my heart.

He tells me a bit about this novel (including how they changed the title to make it more school-friendly) and proclaims that “to this day” it is one of his “favourite books.”

Richard expresses his joy over the growth in Aboriginal writing. He remarks upon his own pleasure when fellow writers produce new works in unexpected ways:

The beauty of Aboriginal literature is that you think you know who somebody is, right? Drew Taylor has 25 books out right now. He comes out with The Night Wanderer—a story about a young lady, Tiffany Hunter, 16, who meets an Ojibway vampire. . . . Knocked me out of my little white mismatched socks. . . . It’s a timeless story. I’m so proud of Drew Taylor.

He remarks upon the “epic, timeless work” David Robertson is “doing with the graphic novel” in his 7 Generations series: “It’s alchemy, what he’s capable of.” He persists, “Look at Gregory Scofield. Chrystos. Those are voices of forever.” He celebrates other writers’ work and achievements:

In Aboriginal literature we carry each other’s joys, like we’re excited when Katherena Vermette wins the GG for poetry. We’re excited when Joseph
Boyden is up for a major award for *The Orenda* or *Three Day Road* or *Through Black Spruce* or, you know, *Born with a Tooth*, which I think is one of the least-recognized masterpieces of Canadian literature. . . . 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.

You look at Lee Maracle, right? For her to come out with *Will’s Garden*—one of my all-time favourite works—you know, beautiful, beautiful. Just came out of nowhere, in my opinion. I just didn’t see it coming until it hit me like a ton of bricks.

Pointing to an example by Richard Wagamese, Richard contends that, when an Indigenous writer produces something great, “we’re over the moon” about it.

While celebrating such achievements, Richard also has a concern about reception. He says,

My worry is this. Jeannette Armstrong said in ’91 she could count on her fingers the number of people in the Okanagan Nation who read her work. And I was always struck with that, hearing that in her classroom at the En’owkin Centre. I was always haunted by that. I don’t think that we prioritize Aboriginal literature as much as we should in our own homes. And that’s why I’m grateful to organizations like Books for B.C. Babies or the NWT Literacy Council, where they prioritize Northern writers for Northern homes. I think sometimes that literacy isn’t our biggest priority and it needs to be. One of the greatest joys as a brand-new dad is reading stories every
night to our little boy, together. I think it’s the most beautiful thing in the world.

Richard says his son is “starting to see that what we’re doing is actually on those pages.”

This point about reading at home leads Richard to talk about raising his child. He confides that he would like his son to have what he had “growing up”: a house full of “stories, laughter, feasting, hosting, balloons . . . books, music, wonder.” He shares, “It’s really important to us that our boy read about the North, read about the world.” Richard speaks to the range of things he enjoys reading and watching on TV, but insists that it is “so important” to him that his family celebrate Northern and Aboriginal stories.

This insistence emerges in part from his experiences of reading in school, Richard explains, as such works were not available. “We never had that opportunity in high school,” he says. “I remember sitting there . . . going ‘why are we reading The Chrysalids?’” While he enjoyed some of the literature, Richard suggests that more connections could have been made between the literature they were reading and the community. For instance, he says, “the crime” of reading Shakespeare in his class is that, if “one of our instructors” had started out with, “Listen! I know you don’t want to read it, but this is about—you know how in Fort Smith there’s two families that hate each other;” and had invited them to “imagine” what would happen if that story had played out in their community, they would have been ready to understand it: “Oh my god! We gotta read it. We gotta get to the bottom of this.” Unfortunately, Richard says, “We never had that conversation.”

However, Richard counters, that experience illustrates why Indigenous literatures are so important: writers can tell the stories from their own communities. He explains,
That’s the beauty of Aboriginal literature: we can tackle those big themes in our own work and in our own languages. So what I love about *Three Feathers* . . . is it is based on a true story that happened in Fort Smith, but I changed the ending, and we’re working with our official languages. So it’s in Bush Cree and in English. Next month it’ll be in Chipewyan and in English, and in two months it’ll be in South Slavey and in English. We’re using the translators that we all know and grew up with. So it’s locally produced. I think that’s really important. We shouldn’t discount locally produced books. I mean, it’s with Portage & Main, which is a recognized medium-sized Canadian publishing house, but from here on in I’m not afraid to go with a local publisher if it means that our community is reading the stories where they can see themselves in it.

Similarly, Richard explains, his new book *A Blanket of Butterflies* tells a local story and enables readers to “see Fort Smith in the graphic novel.” He concludes,

That’s what I’m so excited about, is being able to tell stories from the North, with Northern artists, from a Northern perspective, with Northern editors and Northern translators. I think that’s what’s going to get our community members reading, ’cause it’s the gossip factor. People want to see who I’m writing about. It’s the juicy factor.

We joke a bit about this last part, imagining readers wondering whether they are featured in the books and picking them up to find out how they are being portrayed.
We talk about how Richard makes a point of connecting with education—for instance doing school visits to speak to students and giving workshops for teachers on Aboriginal literature—and I ask him why that work is important to him. He answers, We never had that chance. We never had people visit us at JBT. We never had people visit us at PWK High. We didn't have role models who were artists and entrepreneurs that I was aware of. We never had people who could say, “You can make a great living as a writer. You can make a great living as an entrepreneur. You can make a great living as an artist. Here’s how I do it.” And have those honest conversations with students. . . . Many of them, they already know what they want, college, university, trades . . . but I think, every once in a while, it’s okay to have somebody in and say, “You can make a great living as a writer.” Right now I work with, I think, thirteen publishers. And they’re all looking for Northern stories, right now.

At present there is a strong demand for Indigenous writing, Richard suggests: “I think the world, the international community, is very interested in what’s happening in Northern Canada and what’s happening from the Indigenous point of view, walking in two worlds every single day.”

He tells me a bit more about what it means to him to walk in two worlds in his daily life; for example, The other night . . . we brought caribou meat to Mini Freeman’s house that was given to me by a friend in Fort Smith. Out came the ulus and we now have drymeat, caribou drymeat in our fridge. . . . There’s going to be a singing on May 9th to determine the next Sundance this summer in Enoch,
and we’ll be there. I have two drums downstairs that are going to be gifted to two young men in this community. So, as an Aboriginal person, I live in the big city, but at the same time we’re sharing what we have. We’re cooking for people. . . . That’s ceremony. That’s ritual. That’s giving. And that’s who we are, I think, as Northerners. And I was told a long time ago, by a great man named Bernie Bergman, a true Northerner always leaves each person and each place better than they found them. And I really believe that that’s our culture. Share what you have. Cook. Bake. Give. Be there.

Sharing the stories and culture and “carrying that forward” is important to him, he says. He relates another example:

Every full moon, there’s all the little ones on the street, they’ll open all the spirit doors. See, all the little doors, they open up, so, all the little kids know, full moon, you have to come and open it. Every full moon we feed the birds with all the kids that want to come. We always honour the full moon, because the Tlicho Dene, traditionally, used to follow the full moon religiously.

This kind of tradition, Richard says, is “something that’s really important to me to pass on.”

Building upon this emphasis, Richard acknowledges the ways in which “technology” can contribute to preserving stories and traditions and to connecting people. He notes, “I’ve been recording Elders’ stories for the past 20 years.” Technology has enabled him and his collaborators to create something with these stories that they can give back to the community:
We’ve been interviewing 19 Elders in Fort Smith. And not only have we been recording them, to transcribe them word for word, we’ve also been recording them in super HDR with video cameras in perfect lighting. What we’re going to do is, we’re going to do a book. . . . We were going to do it as a gift, because I think our communities are really hurting right now. With all the progress, quote unquote, there’s also a lot of drugs, also a lot of addictions, right? Mental health is at the forefront of many conversations right now. We’ve had 13 funerals since New Year’s in our little community. So, what we want to do is we want to start honouring the families.

At his point in life, Richard says, “I want to honour Fort Smith as much as I can.” He wants to encourage others to do the same, whether they are “Ukranian or Mennonite or Cree or Sarcee,” and insists that technology plays a role in doing that. He says there are “no excuses anymore,” since technology is so readily available: “If you want to honour your Elders, you want to get the answers that you’ve been looking for, use your phone. Record the videos, the sound waves, the pictures. Get it down. Share it.”

Richard gives me a final example of the kinds of connections he has been able to make between people and stories by employing technology. He effuses,

The greatest joy of my life, as well as just honouring Fort Smith, and being beautifully married and having a healthy son, and living in a beautiful home . . . in a community that I care deeply about, with wonderful people, is I get to meet the great-grandchildren of the Elders that I used to drive around in the HandiBus twenty-five years ago and say “I knew your great-auntie and here’s a story she told me, and I have it as an MP3, and I can email it to you, but
here it is, word for word, and I’m going to email it to you in a sound wave. You’re going to hear your great-auntie’s voice—and I know she passed when you were a little baby, but you finally get to hear her.” So that’s what I love doing.

This, says Richard, is “why it’s so important,” why he loves “honouring, and recording, and sharing.”

As we draw our conversation to a close, I ask Richard what he hopes I will find in my research. He suggests that my study has “a good question, because it’s open-ended” and “people can interpret it many ways.” It is “useful,” he says, for writers to be given “a forum to talk about why they do what they do,” and shares this anecdote:

Like Jordan Wheeler said, there’s going to be years where you can’t write it fast enough. Aboriginal literature is so hot you’re selling stories before it’s even written. And then there’s going to be years when you can’t give it away. He’s on to something. I think that the international community can only hold on to the attention of certain things for so long. And what I love about your question is that it gives you a chance to reflect on your career.

Richard speaks to how he felt when “Lee Maracle came out with Will’s Garden,” Richard reflects, “This is 20 years I’ve been doing this and I love it so much, because even after 20 years you still don’t know who’s going to come out of left field and knock you on your ass.” Our conversation ends as we discuss Lee Maracle’s book.
4.4 Angela Varila (Pseudonym), Teacher (9 May 2015, Calgary)

4.4.1 Angela’s Introduction

Angela Varila began working with at-risk youth in the 1980s, after receiving a diploma in childcare work. She received a Bachelor of Arts in Child and Youth Care and worked with at-risk youth and families for ten-plus years. She received a Bachelor of Social Work focusing on Aboriginal and feminist perspectives. She continued to work with youth and families doing in-home counselling and therapeutic interventions. In the 2000s she did work in the field of sexual health with a number of community organizations, and then received her Bachelor of Education. She has since taught English, Social Studies, and Aboriginal Studies at secondary schools in Calgary.

4.4.2 My Conversation with Angela

I ask Angela to tell me about her work and her education to start us off. She describes her past and current positions in social work and teaching, summing it up by saying she has “lots of experience with working in the margins.” At the time of our interview, Angela teaches in a school with special programming that draws upon her background; the following year she will be teaching at a different school.

We begin to discuss where Angela includes Indigenous content in her teaching. She explains, “I teach Aboriginal Studies, so that whole curriculum is Indigenous and the textbooks were written by some Elders and Aboriginal people.” When “doing a novel study” in “English or Social,” she says, “I try and . . . use Indigenous literature . . . if I can” and if the students are “into it.” This point about interest leads Angela to observe,
I find, it’s ironic, because all the Aboriginal kids aren’t interested. Yeah. They just turn their nose up at it. Or they get really defensive and—so it becomes a fine line. You know, sometimes it’s like if I suggest something then it’s not cool enough. But, sometimes it’s just a real push back. Especially because I’m not Aboriginal, but then once we develop trust and stuff, then I can bring more forward. So it just depends on the student.

I ask Angela to say more about this, to guess why there is “push back” from Aboriginal students. Angela expands,

Well a lot of it is, our school’s unique, because our kids are [in this particular program]. . . . And so—you have to be careful how you push them, because you want to keep them on track, especially if I have them for a long time. . . . One particular guy has said to me specifically, actually more than one, they hate being Native; they hate the stereotypes; they hate being Native [in this program]. Because there’s so many of them, right? And I mean a lot of people think that [programs like this are full of Native students], but they’re not. But I’ve had that more than once so it stands out for me. And so for me to then say, “Oh, read this one by Sherman Alexie—you’ll love it,” you know, it’s a no-brainer . . . I’m just going to lose them.

Angela says that she allows students to “choose,” to “stick with” the literature “that they want to read,” and then she can try again later on to introduce other texts. The important thing “as a teacher” is “to hook them in . . . with something.”

I ask Angela how she feels when students do not connect to literature as she had hoped they would. She responds,
There are so many Native writers that I just—some of my favourite writers are Aboriginal. . . . You know when you’ve read this really good book and you want to give it to someone and say, “Read this. You’ll love it. It changed my life.” And then they don’t. And you’re like [sighs]. Yeah. . . . That’s part of being a teacher though, too . . . trying out a lesson or whatever and it doesn’t work, and you fall on your face, and it’s like, “Okay, well, I’ll try something else next time.”

Angela agrees that she wants to give her students literature “that will resonate with them” and is “relevant to them.” She points out that, while she may think a text will resonate with students, “if they’re not ready, they’re not ready, so I can’t force it.”

I ask Angela if she feels there is any “encouragement or requirement” for her to teach Indigenous content, aside from the mandate with the Aboriginal Studies course. She replies that her school leadership “would encourage it . . . as much as we can,” as they are “definitely of the mind, engage the kids, however you can do that.” She notes that her school invites an Elder to visit, and this Elder visits her Aboriginal Studies class; students are sometimes able to participate in ceremony as well. I ask if her students “connect to that” and she describes how “some of them do,” but thinks again of that particular student who has recently “pushed away from anything to do with his culture.” She mentions that “some of the non-Aboriginal kids” also “want to take part in it, and they see the value in the ceremony.”

We shift to talking about Angela’s experience with Indigenous content—the background she has accumulated and the way she positions herself in that work. She explains how she undertook post-secondary studies that were taught from “a First Nations
perspective” and had First Nations instructors. She says, “I have a strong background” in “Aboriginal perspectives,” and points to “participating in various ceremonies over the years” and “learning from different Elders in my lifetime”; these experiences have “taught me a great deal.” This connects to her approach: “So that informs how I come to be able to teach Aboriginal Studies, not being an Aboriginal person. Or even working with Native kids and having that awareness of my position.” Angela confides that she does not always see such awareness among her colleagues:

One of the teachers brought in a Blackfoot Elder to speak, and she talked about the residential schools and everything and [was] really good, and really powerful, and a lot of the staff just got really mad. It’s like, “If I have to hear another goddamn thing about Native people,” and I went just, like, “wow.” So, that really informed my practice, too, because I think everyone thinks that just because there are people who work with Aboriginals, that they’re all sensitive, but not a lot of people are.

She connects this lack of sensitivity among some staff members back to her students’ attitudes: “And so when a kid says ‘I hate being Native,’ I totally get it.” She adds, “It makes me really sad” and “we have a lot of work to do still . . . The conversations need to continue.”

I ask Angela to further explore what potential she sees for working with Indigenous texts. She shares this:

All of my students, it’s funny, they’ve all seen Smoke Signals . . . and they love . . . that movie. And the kids that have read . . . The Absolutely True Diary . . . they love that book too. The ones who connect to it . . . when we do
use it, it does go well sometimes. Some of . . . the more mature students . . .
have connected with Joseph Boyden and stuff too, so the potential is there.
She adds, “I wish I had more . . . exposure.” She notes the positive work she has done
with her students based on one list of suggested Indigenous texts for teaching and
remarks, “you just have to keep trying, right?” She tells me about how she shared
Richard Van Camp’s novel The Lesser Blessed with students: she thought, based on
“some of the stories that kids have shared . . . that they might connect to that.” It went
well, in that “they can understand” the characters’ experiences in the story: “I think for
some of them . . . they’re like, ‘yeah, I can see myself in this book.’” She notes again,
“and some of them don’t want to . . . like that one kid, that’s probably why he . . . doesn’t
want to hear the story of the drunk Native, because . . . he said . . . ‘I’m a stereotype.’”
We discuss a few more examples of students connecting with particular texts. While her
students do not necessarily “want to talk about their self-discovery and self-exploration,
especially not with . . . their teacher, . . . some of them will allude to it a little bit.” She
suggests “it might come out in their writing” on a text, that students might “share
something about themselves.”

Angela talks with me about how she considers community in her teaching. She
suggests that “any school is a community”—possibly in a “forced” way since everyone is
in the same building and “we see each other every day”—but feels that her school is
“unique” and that it is a “more tight-knit community” because of the nature of its
programming. She feels that, at her school, “the kids really like us and they really connect
with us.” She acknowledges that “what I do in the classroom” may contribute to students’
willingness to connect. She says, “it could be because of the literature, or how I’m
choosing to teach them how to write.” I ask her if she thinks the Aboriginal Studies course generates community in any particular ways. She responds with this example:

I think it does, a little bit, because when the Elder comes and we smudge . . . and we only invite certain kids in that are outside of the class, so I know they feel pretty special and included. . . . I think they feel maybe a little different, being a part of that class. And once a week we try to do fry bread. And so if we have a kid in there who’s learned how to make it from their kookum then they get to show off and shine and it’s really cool.

She concludes that this kind of experience is “good” and suggests, “that is a community that comes together through cooking a traditional food.”

I ask Angela what she believes are important issues for Indigenous education, given her experience working with Aboriginal students. She says, “I think getting them in the door, and keeping them engaged is huge.” Additionally, she says, “we have so much to do in terms of Aboriginal awareness with other staff.” She explains,

You’re met with that attitude that I told you about earlier. It’s like people are sick of hearing about it. It’s like, well, too bad. I think it’s our responsibility, especially as a non-Aboriginal person, to continue to raise awareness that Aboriginal kids learn differently. And their families are, and their sense of community and everything, and, time, and the whole worldview is different than this Euro-perspective. It’s like feminism and the male perspective. And it’s constant education of people.

About doing this “constant education,” she concedes, “you just get tired of beating your head against the wall.” However, she is dedicated and wants to persist:
And so to be able to work with kids, and educate them . . . it’s important that we learn about this stuff and move forward. And if the Aboriginal community needs more healing, than that’s what they need. And it’s not up to us to say, “No, you’re done. You’ve had your apology and your cheque and that’s it; you’re done,” because they’re not. It’s not over.

Angela sees this work as “ongoing.”

When I ask her what would further enable her work with Indigenous literatures, Angela has a few answers. She refers to the Indigenous education resource person she currently works with, but points out that this person is “super stretched” and it would be best to have someone “in the classroom once a week,” someone who can “say, ‘try this’ or ‘I’ll come in and do this with the kids.’” Also, she says it would be helpful to have “access to someone like you with the literature list of all the current stuff.” She points out, “I read it a lot, as much as I can, but then as a teacher there’s only so much time you can spend.” Further, Angela suggests it would be beneficial to have “access to an Elder” who was “a part of” the school, for instance who can “come to a staff meeting” and “see . . . the rest of” what goes on.

In addition to making these suggestions, Angela points to the potential benefit of expanding opportunities for collaboration and connections among allies and teachers doing Indigenous work across the city. She explains,

As allies, on the other side, we need to sort of be able to sound off. Or people need to hear our perspective too sometimes and I don’t think there’s any avenue for that in a lot of ways. So I don’t know how you would create space for that.
I ask her if she means that there needs to be more conversation around what it means to participate in that work or to be an ally and she agrees. She adds,

And maybe room for some mentorship. Someone like me . . . I’ve been doing this for a long time, but I could maybe talk to younger teachers who want to—well you know what it’s like when you’re first starting out and you’re all idealistic and you’re going to save the world. And that’s great, but to be able to maybe open some space for some mentorship to happen there . . . Like 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.

We discuss the (limited) opportunities that she has had to “connect” in these ways.

This discussion leads us to talk further about the Aboriginal Studies program. Angela says, “It shouldn’t be sitting on a shelf in my opinion . . . It should be in every high school as an option.” She points out that it is a “good option” for a variety of students, like those interested in “Social Studies,” and we agree that it should not be limited to or aimed solely at Indigenous students. From this point in our conversation, we extend into talking about the scope of my study and how it fits into broader Indigenous education work going on at my institution and elsewhere.

4.5 Rachel Baker (Pseudonym), Teacher (15 May 2015, Calgary)

4.5.1 Rachel’s Introduction

Rachel Baker teaches English Language Arts to students in grades 10 through 12. She completed graduate studies in English Literature and taught part-time in several other contexts before completing her Bachelor of Education in Alberta. She has been teaching
full time for three years at a large Calgary high school. While deeply aware of her responsibility to incorporate Indigenous perspectives in her courses, she finds this work challenging due to workload issues and anxieties around cultural competence and politically charged classroom discussions.

4.5.2 My Conversation with Rachel

As part of her introducing herself and her work, Rachel notes that she does not have “a very strong background in Indigenous studies.” She concedes, “I had many opportunities to acquire more than I did,” but outlines how her studies focused on other specific areas. She admits, “I’ve always felt it to be a risk to take on really political topics in my study of literature,” and reflects that “conflict avoidance” might be part of how she interacts with others. She also notes, “As a teacher, I’m still learning the balance between creating a safe learning environment, one where people feel comfortable, and being able to push my students to address controversial issues.” She describes a few of the ways in which she has been pushing herself in this area this year. She acknowledges, “My focus, in terms of methodology and that sort of thing, has been more consistently towards close reading, and I think I have that sort of formalist bias.” Rachel suggests that she has “studied enough theory to have a sense” of how formalist approaches to reading relate to “political theories,” but still, “close reading approaches are . . . where I tend to take my students.”

I ask Rachel if Indigenous literatures are available to teach. She outlines how the selection of resources works at her school:
We have a book room, and the novels there are the ones that are available to us, and if we want to teach other novels then we can request that the department spend some money to buy a class a set of those. So I know that we have copies of Thomas King’s *Green Grass, Running Water* . . . and I know that some of the teachers who have been actively building our collection of novels for the Knowledge and Employability program have been trying to purchase some fiction that has Indigenous themes.

To this she adds, “It seems to be primarily up to the specific teacher to make an effort to go out and find something beyond Thomas King.”

She moves on to discuss short stories, and shares the story of her first experience with trying to teach Indigenous literatures. She explains,

I arrived as a new teacher in a department that had a story by Jeanette Armstrong, called “Blue against White,” as part of a writing assignment for grade 10s, and we did it early in the year. They were asked to read it and write an essay on it. I was encouraged to use this assignment to match some of the other grade 10 classes. . . . They were asked to write about the importance of memory in that story and one of the problems that came up was that this story is quite politically complex, I think, and in some ways problematic, if you don’t take time to discuss it. She explains that she “was not really able to take time to have those discussions right away,” because “the following lessons were structured as essay-writing lessons.” This was “the first formal essay that they write in grade 10 . . . and so that next period of time
had to be focused on building those writing skills.” Rachel shares, “I was quite uncomfortable with how that went.”

She goes on to clarify what her concerns were with allowing the issues in this particular story to go unexamined. While students were asked to focus on “the symbolism of the blue door in the story,” they were not provided with anything to “contextualize” the protagonist’s experience of “coming back home to the reserve after having a bad experience living in the city.” Rachel was “concerned that that would reinforce stereotypes about where Indigenous people belong and whether the city is a good place for them.”

Rachel addressed this situation later in the term, during the class’ “short story unit.” She tells me,

I introduced another story, “A Short History of Indians in Canada,” by Thomas King. So that, in dialogue with “Blue against White,” allowed us to talk about stereotypes, specifically stereotypes about the city and the noble savage stereotype and all those things. So, it’s sort of borrowing a text to kind of help me make my point.

Another aspect of her approach was linked to the discussions’ structure and to her assessment strategies. She emphasizes, “Those small group discussions allow me to gauge where each student is at,” but also to “talk about the politics in a slightly more sheltered environment.” One “worry” she has with the “full-class discussion” model is that a student might be “quietly sitting in the classroom feeling upset about an issue and not speaking up because it’s a big room,” whereas in these small-group discussions, “I’m
there to catch it and talk about it.” As she finishes describing this experience, Rachel characterizes it as a “big sort of struggle for me at the beginning of my teaching career.”

Rachel notes that these “two pieces of literature” are the only Indigenous texts she teaches, and that, in preparing to meet with me, she has been “trying to figure out why that is.” One factor is, “I tend to go to things that I’m familiar with.” She points out that she does have time to read new texts, but that “in order to know what I want to teach about something, I have to have thought about it quite a bit.” Texts that she has studied formally, then, are ones she is more likely to teach. She says, “It’s also just having a sense of having to navigate the criticism around it” because “having a critical background that surrounds a texts helps me figure out what I want to emphasize in my teaching.” She states, “In terms of Indigenous literature, I have just enough criticism to make me cautious and afraid, but not enough to make me confident.”

I invite Rachel to say more about what preparation goes into teaching a text well. She notes that one reason she tends toward “close reading and formalist approaches” is that she is able to “sight read a text” that way: “In fact, if I’m running behind, I can do that just ahead of the students and teach them very well.” Students “need to know” how to read for those “literary elements,” and Rachel feels she “can teach them how to read carefully in those ways.” However, “Anything that involves a lot of historical context or a lot of socio-political orientation, that’s what’s going to take a long time.” The previous year, she had decided not to teach *To Kill a Mockingbird* because, she says, “I just couldn’t conceive of the amount of work that it would take to bring that historical context and make it accessible to my students” in the time available “for unit planning.” Rachel outlines some of the elements that go into putting together a new unit:
If I pick a new book to study, even if it’s one that I’m very familiar with, I’m remaking not only whatever material I deliver to the students in sort of lecture or conversation format, but I’m remaking all of the writing questions, all of the surrounding assignments, all of the unit tests—including the multiple choice, which is a huge investment of time—any handouts. I’m researching those handouts, creating them, basically desktop publishing them.

“What often happens,” she explains, is she chooses texts for which her colleagues already have prepared materials. Adding new texts to her repertoire is “a long-term thing”: “I’ll take one text per term or one text per year and try to prep that.” As part of this conversation, we note how Alberta’s Diploma Exams structure links to which skills and assessments are emphasized in high-school English teaching.

Rachel brings up Bill 44 as relevant to our conversation, meaning Alberta’s Human Rights, Citizenship and Multiculturalism Amendment Act, referring for instance to section 11.1 of this piece of legislation, which requires that schools notify parents if teaching will touch on the sensitive subjects of sexuality or religion. She explains her thoughts on this Bill:

I think it [Bill 44] is an issue for teaching Indigenous literatures, because it specifically mentions religion, and then you need to kind of navigate how much of that applies to Indigenous spiritualities and beliefs, and so how much of that needs to have written notification to the parents. Also any satirical content that is related to Christianity or any other religion, which does happen in those literatures, is also sort of flagged by Bill 44, and we have to think about how our parent community is going to respond.
The requirement to notify parents means that “it’s extra work to teach texts that come in under that law.” Rachel says, “Unfortunately those texts tend to be the ones that we put off because they’re extra work.”

I ask Rachel how the curriculum shapes which texts she chooses to teach. She notes, “The major thing is genre,” but “within that we have quite a lot of freedom.” However, she says, “I would say the curriculum does clearly put Indigenous content as part of what we’re supposed to be teaching.” Connecting back to a comment I previously made about addressing the many forms of diversity among students, Rachel identifies Indigeneity as “the only one that’s so explicit in our curriculum.”

Rachel tells me more about how her educational background affects which texts she feels comfortable approaching with her students. She expresses that what is needed is “the confidence that I know how to not make major faux pas.” She builds on this point:

I feel like for Indigenous literature, there are a lot things to be careful of, because different Nations have different traditions, and I don’t really know the specific ones. And my impression is that narrative is often . . . it’s like you ask to be able to tell a story or discuss a story or pass on a story, and so not really knowing the protocols around that is tricky. You don’t want to misstep.

Rachel points to the “idea of bringing someone in,” such as a “guest speaker,” as a possible strategy but points out, “That’s just way more difficult in practice than it should be, and I, as a third-year teacher, have never brought in anyone to any of my classes.”

Rachel considers her situation as a relatively new teacher and the possibility of developing her capacity as she progresses through her career. She says she is aware that “there are resources that you can find,” such as “handbooks” on “Indigenous literature for
educators.” She has had trouble locating such resources for the high-school level, she explains, but also says, “I still don’t necessarily know where that material stands in terms of cultural appropriation” or “how that material was gathered, who it’s speaking for and all that.” I bring up her earlier comment: “You said earlier, you know just enough to feel intimidated,” and she responds, “It’s only intimidating because it matters, right?” She continues,

I mean it matters because of Canada’s colonial history, and the damage that has been done, and all of the work that’s still being done to help communities flourish, and help make it possible for communities with different histories and often contrasting priorities to be able to coexist and live together. And a classroom is a place where you have to live together, so it matters a lot to get it right. Not that there’s a right answer—I mean, it matters a lot not to get it wrong. To do it sensitively and thoughtfully.

At this, she remarks, “Honestly sometimes the job is just so busy it’s hard to do anything thoughtfully.” Rachel points to a “sense of letting yourself off the hook as a survival skill as a new teacher,” but also to “a sense of shame for all the things you could be doing.” She insists, “Teachers are passionate. We want the best for our students. We want to be giving them opportunities that matter, and anything that blocks us from doing that is really frustrating.”

Returning to which strategies might work for introducing more Indigenous literatures, we discuss the TPGP (Teacher’s Professional Growth Plan) and professional development as options. Because it is “already in the structure, where there’s time set aside for us to do some professional development,” Rachel suggests that setting a
dedicated goal within her TPGP might encourage her to “focus in on something,” such as introducing a new “story or a poem.” She mentions that she has “done some professional development at Teachers’ Convention” and came away from that with “a list of books I could look at”: “part of the problem is that I don’t know the canon of this field, so having a list of where to start is very helpful.”

She would like to see “an anthology” designed to help teachers with this work. It might include some of “the historical background and the authorial background” that she needs to prepare, along with information like where each text is “situated in terms of First Nations literature as a field,” “who wrote it and what are their major concerns,” and some “footnotes” and “glossaries” to help readers understand the elements in the text. She explains further,

For example, if I’m working on doing a close reading of a text with my students, there could be techniques or allusions that I might not catch because I’m lacking some of the cultural references. If I had a companion resource that supported me with that aspect, I could approach that text more confidently.

She notes, “That kind of thing might be out there . . . but I haven’t come across it.”

Rachel thinks through where she sees the emphasis to teach Indigenous content. At her school, “there hasn’t been a lot of attention focused on it.” The only “pressure” she really feels comes from knowing “it’s an emphasis in the curriculum.” Having done her “Bachelor of Education” in Alberta a few years ago, she says, “It was clear in my teacher education that that needed to be part of what we’re teaching,” but there was “not really a ‘how to.’” Rachel is aware that school authorities in the city have Indigenous education
resource people, but describes how so much teaching support is done within departments: hers is “very collaborative” and the usual thing is, “If there’s a teacher at your school who knows a lot about this stuff, you talk to them.” Given that Indigenous content is not an emphasis among her peers, she says, “I think if I didn’t make it a priority myself, I could very easily go on not teaching Indigenous literature and nobody would notice.”

I ask Rachel if she has Indigenous students in her classes. We talk a bit about numbers of students and the ways in which they will “self-identify” in her class. She observes that the small-group discussions she described earlier led a few students to speak about being First Nations or Métis. She says she is careful not to “push them” to do so: “I don’t want them to be forced to identify themselves as Aboriginal . . . and I don’t want them to feel, if they do self-identify, that they are being put in a position of cultural token representative.” She notes also, “I don’t want to assume how much knowledge they have about their cultural background, and part of that is just from my own experience sort of being identified with a particular religion and then the assumptions that people make.” Again she points to how discussing assumptions and stereotypes in relation to “A Short History of Indians in Canada” allowed students to make connections to their own experiences with culture and identity.

As we approach the end of our conversation, Rachel takes up the issue of why Indigenous literatures matter. She responds,

I think it’s important for all of our students to be encountering—one of the things that I talk about when we do those two stories is how Thomas King’s story is satirical and it deals very directly with stereotypes. And “Blue against White,” Jeanette Armstrong’s story, in some ways fits with some stereotypes,
which the students are able to identify. I don’t want to oversimplify that story obviously, but it risks reinforcing a stereotype, if it’s not discussed or contextualized. . . . Thomas King’s story makes us think about stereotypes almost in the abstract, and Armstrong’s story makes it very concrete and personal.

These two texts offer differently useful approaches: “It benefits all students to encounter issues around Indigenous communities in Canada in both those ways.”

Rachel notes that students encounter Indigenous content in other school subjects, particularly “Social Studies,” but that studies in English enable a particular kind of engagement:

Being able to talk about it in English, in ELA, lets us take advantage of that property of fiction where you get to know a character, sort of as a person, as a fictional person. It’s very different from talking about historical legislation. There’s a sense of emotional immediacy, and a sense of the emotional stakes of those cultural interrelationships.

She values the way that students are “able to encounter it through literature.” That is, It’s because literature opens up questions and speaks to them in a way that includes thoughts and emotions, so both the abstract concepts—what are these relationships like, what goes into an identity, all of those things that we think of as part of cultural politics—and at same time this specific person, this character, what is it like for this person? . . . 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.

She notes that young people are “aware of the cultural stakes of everything” and
“insecure about their own biases,” but that, compared to teachers, “they haven’t had as
much time to develop tools to think those things through.” As a result, Rachel feels, “It’s
a very important part of my job as an English teacher to be doing that,” to be supporting
students with this learning. Rachel concludes, “I’m really glad it’s in the curriculum, and
that’s why it’s so hard to know that so many of us don’t do a lot of it.”

4.6 Alice Curtis (Pseudonym), Teacher (16 May 2015, Calgary)

4.6.1 Alice’s Introduction

Alice Curtis is a teacher by trade, but a learner in her everyday life. She has been
teaching for six years now, mostly English Language Arts. As part of her own personal
and professional journey, she has started to learn more about Canada’s First Nations and
the importance of their stories and ways of knowing. In her classroom, she tries to
incorporate Indigenous literature in order to help her students gain a better understanding
of the relationship between all Canadians—First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and non-First
Nations. Her hope is that education will be the means to create change in Canada.

4.6.2 My Conversation with Alice

As Alice tells me about herself and her work, she begins with her interest in
Indigenous literatures:
One of the reasons why I find myself drawn to . . . Indigenous literature is partly because of how I grew up. My family is full of storytellers. I have no Aboriginal background whatsoever, but my dad is famous for telling stories. She names the “excitement mixed with fear” that her dad’s “Sasquatch” stories inspired.

Growing up in Manitoba, she tells me, she was immersed in Métis and First Nations culture and she “learned” about Indigenous topics “at school”: “we went to Louis Riel’s house all the time . . . We had voyageur festivals and it was just such a part of my life.” Things changed when she moved to another province, where the way of thinking was more that “Louis Riel was a rebel and he deserved to die.” About her new school, Alice says, “We studied First Nations for, like, a week, and then we moved on to other ‘important’ Canadian history, and I remember being so confused.”

I ask Alice if she teaches Indigenous literatures. While her “goal is to teach more,” she tells me, “There seems to be no support or resources in the schools I’ve been at to support that.” So far, “It’s just been poetry and short stories.” Although she does not teach as much Indigenous literature as she wants to, Alice notes that she makes connections through non-Indigenous texts. For example, while teaching To Kill a Mockingbird, she was “bringing in this idea of Idle No More and that idea of discrimination within Canada, and it’s not just in the US.”

Alice explains, “It’s helpful when kids have taken Social” Studies before they take her class, “because they learn about residential schools and some of the legacy that that’s had.” However, she adds, I’m not quite sure how much so I always start with that conversation, “Okay, what do you know?” Because I don’t want to assume that you know, and I
don’t want to assume that you don’t know, so let’s share our knowledge together about what we do know and so it’s—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?

In her teaching, Alice explains, “I like to do a lot of discussion, and I like to do a lot of sharing of knowledge.”

Alice speaks about the range of reactions among her students to discussions around Indigenous issues and forms of discrimination. She mentions that her students “come from a lot of different backgrounds.” She shares this anecdote:

I have one kid who is an ESL student and he had no idea. He wasn’t taking Social Studies and he came up to me after and said “but this Canada! This is happening in Canada?” We were talking about residential schools and this idea of loss of identity... He’s like, “this isn’t the Canada that I know, that is broadcast throughout the world.” And so he was shocked to learn Canada had this dark side to it that no one really talks about.

Reflecting on how receptive her particular students are, Alice wonders whether such discussions might be “very different with kids who have families who have been here for generations,” as they would “feel maybe more defensive.”

Via a story I share with Alice about a racist incident I had previously witnessed, we shift to talking about the importance of teaching people about Indigenous issues. Alice connects it to “this idea of, well, how do we get people to stop—doing that and recognize and realize?” We agree that this work is “complicated” and “difficult,” and Alice adds,
I think it’s easy to continue to be ignorant. . . . That’s why I want really want to start teaching more Indigenous literature, because how do you stop newer generations from having that opinion and being open to a multicultural country that looks at its, you know, not just who comes, but who was here?

She feels it is important to work with students to challenge that “ignorance” and the impetus for “assimilation” around Indigenous people.

I ask Alice if she feels any directives, such as from leadership or curriculum, to teach Indigenous perspectives. She responds,

No, no. There is nothing in the program of studies. It says one third of your authors have to be Canadian. It says nothing about Aboriginal, First Nations . . . Clearly this has been something that people don’t know how to approach. . . . I love Canadian literature and now this whole new world has opened up and I can’t get enough of reading First Nations, Métis, and—and I think what a shame that we’re so focused on American literature.

Alice begins to suggest why more American literature gets taught. She points out that there are “guides for it” and prewritten “questions you can Google online” as well as “multiple choice tests already made.” By comparison, “It’s really hard to be supported in trying something new.”

At her current school, Alice remarks, “no one else teaches any Aboriginal literature.” She tells me,

I’ve had a conversation with colleagues . . . they approach it as, “Well, yeah, of course we can teach it, because if we’re going to teach something new, we would just teach, like, a new story, just like anything else,” but I don’t think
they realize the background knowledge that comes with trying to teach that, and the work that it would be. And I think they’re a bit naïve in saying, “Oh, well, you just add it in, just like any other thing.” That encourages me, on the one hand, that they’d be willing to do that. But on the other hand, if they really sat down and were actually serious about it they would realize that there is more to it than just throwing in a short story or talking about a poem. There’s more, like you said, more emotional investment, more background knowledge.

She suggests, by comparison, “Everyone knows about American history, so it’s easy to teach Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman,*” for instance.

I invite Alice to expand on this point about preparation, on what is involved for an English teacher to teach a text well, and Indigenous texts in particular. She responds,

Well, there’s that comfort level. . . . So I want to teach a play. Well, it’s easy to pick up *The Importance of Being Earnest.* I read it in university. There’s a movie about it. There’s tons of literature that surrounds it. Other parents would know what it is. Kids would scoff at it, but then once they looked online they would see that there [are] Sparks Notes so it wouldn’t be a huge issue. But . . . trying to convince my learning leader to order [new Indigenous texts] . . . is a really hard sell, because it’s unknown. The themes of it are unknown.

Alice describes how “when you’re teaching a text there’s awareness of the culture around it,” such as whether it is “well known,” or whether students or parents will find information or resources related to it when they “Google” it. For Alice, this means “there
is a real risk involved for teachers when you stick your neck out and try and teach something that isn’t supported in . . . the real world, not just the education world.” We have a brief discussion about “controversy” and the dynamics around what gets considered too “controversial” to teach.

Alice suggests that a lot is required for teachers to feel supported to teach something new—that they need to be “supported by the universe” or else “it’s really hard.” One factor is school budgets, as “the money to order the books” can be an issue. Schools or departments might feel, “Well, are you going to stick around to teach them next year? If we order these books, they’re just going to sit on the shelf and that’s a waste of money.” We talk about how staffing and budgets work, and whether it is easier for departments to stock mainstream materials, because any teacher coming in can use well-known texts, whereas it is possible that something specialized will, as Alice puts it, “sit on the shelf.” Alice adds, “There’s a lot of hostility too around doing something new, because that money could have been used to buy . . . another class set of To Kill a Mockingbird.” She acknowledges that this hostility arises because of the scarcity of resources.

We end up talking about temporary contracts. Hoping each temporary placement will turn into a more permanent one, Alice tries to determine whether her approaches to teaching will be well received in each department or school. She describes her “perception” of how “it’s an interesting place, being in a temp contract”:

It’s either, toe the line and get a job, or else stick your neck out . . . because, you’re not around to—like as much as I want to build . . . I’m done at the end of June. And who knows where I’m going to be the next year? So, it’s been
really frustrating trying to build my own body of work . . . The energy that’s required to do something new is—sometimes I don’t want to do it, because I know I’m only there for a year. . . . I feel like I don’t have any continuity.

Alice’s feelings around trying to teach Indigenous literatures very much connect to these material circumstances.

I reflect back to Alice what she told me about taking up Indigenous issues while teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird* with her grade 10s, and ask her what she thinks about teaching mainstream texts in such ways. Alice considers the work she did with her students around that novel. “Building up to” the novel study, she says, “we spent two days just having group discussions about stereotypes.” Thinking about the significance of these discussions, Alice suggests that it is sometimes “hard” for teachers to make space for them, given that “there’s so much that you have to get through.” However, it is worth it to have “those important conversations that kids remember,” as “it means so much more” to students when, as they are reading, they can connect “back to” the “themes and ideas” they have discussed and “that they’re able to have an opinion about.”

Alice turns her attention to how texts are taught in high school English. She asks, “Does the text drive the course? Or do the skills and the ideas that come out of text drive the course?” She suggests that, among other teachers, she sees “a lot of that old idea of, ‘I know all the answers and the text drives the course and I teach by genre’” as opposed to gathering texts around the themes and skills the teacher wants to explore and adapting plans to address emerging ideas. Alice says, “I think there is sort of a divide within schools” around how teachers “approach literature” and “approach teaching.” We connect what Alice is saying to the current curricular shifts in Alberta, including inquiry-
based learning. Alice mentions learning from another teacher about reading through the Circle of Courage, for instance examining a text to see which characters are “being generous” or “learning independence,” or how “belonging” is “being demonstrated.” Alice says, “that idea of inquiry lends itself to that circle and how everything is connected and . . . that opens up such a great gateway for talking about Indigenous literature. She speaks to *Monkey Beach* as an example: “You can’t separate the berry picking from the going to East Van and trying to live and party,” because “they’re connected.”

“Pulling in different literature,” Alice emphasizes, is “a great way to introduce Indigenous ways of knowing.” Building on my question about why Indigenous literatures matter, she responds, “There is so much potential for understanding,” and adds, “I think that we have lot to—and I say ‘we’ as a non-FNMI—have so much to learn.” She expands,

Why is it so significant? Because look at what we’ve done . . . and we don’t ever talk about it. And every month something new comes up. They got them to plough a field, but it was a graveyard. Or we tested the vitamins on students and starved them to death. . . . We didn’t treat these people as humans. And I think it’s really important that we recognize that, so that we understand, okay, so here’s this Native person, drunk on the sidewalk. Well why is that significant? . . . Why is that person here? What’s their story and where did they come from? And that idea of, in a lot of film, and even in *Monkey Beach*, that violence and that prevalence of drugs and alcohol. Why is that something that is just sort of acknowledged and not, like, shocking? . . . I think that is so important for students to learn and see the background
Here’s this whole culture reeling and trying to come to grips with what happened to them. They haven’t had parents for generations. They’re trying to cope with all this abuse and trying to figure out how to live as they want to live. . . . So I think by teaching Indigenous literature, you look at, okay, how can we help this to heal? How can we understand someone else’s perspective?

This kind of learning will enable non-Indigenous people to “celebrate” Indigenous cultures, rather than denigrating or shaming them.

Alice expands upon her own connections to Indigenous knowledges and cultures. She declares,

I have no FNMI background, but this idea of even me feeling so connected to medicine wheels, and I know that when I was little my grandpa would take me to see the ribstones near where I grew up, and that idea of feeling that sacred space, and what a shame, that, I think, so many people don’t have that experience . . . That’s why I think it’s so important, is that we understand that there’s a whole culture, and what’s been happening. And this resurgence . . . of literature and why that’s happening, and this idea of healing through storytelling, and why we need to aware of that, and to teach that and to be—education should be on the forefront of saying this is important, but instead we’re like, we don’t know how to deal with this, so let’s just teach this American author who everyone knows, and your parents’ parents’ parents read it.

She speaks emphatically here and acknowledges that she feels “passionate about that.”
I ask Alice next if she knows if she has FNMI students in her classes. She admits, “I think that a lot of people, maybe . . . wouldn’t feel comfortable saying that because of a lot of stereotypes, but I hope that they would.” Without specifying whether she refers to her own feelings or those of other teachers, Alice connects the possible “hesitance to teach First Nations literatures” to the feeling that “you don’t want to offend anyone.” She describes a conversation she had with her students about how to speak respectfully with other people about their ethnic backgrounds and how it is important not to make assumptions about where people are “from” based on how they look. She reflects,

I think that English lends itself well to having those conversations, but not all teachers would feel comfortable having that conversation. And so how would kids ever feel comfortable when all you’re reading is all these dead white guys? Like I feel that’s all—English Canadian high school classes are either Margaret Atwood, Margaret Laurence, or dead white guys from the U.S.

I echo back to her the notion that it is beneficial to have other perspectives.

Alice volunteers that she has questions about introducing new texts, such as how to “gauge what is appropriate,” pointing to how she feels alone in doing this teaching. I ask her what she feels would help her to teach more Indigenous literatures. She replies,

Suggestions. So, like, novels, plays, short stories, poetry. And that connectedness. So we’re reading *Monkey Beach*? This story would work really well with it. There’s a poet that would work really well with it. Here’s a movie. Perfect: they all deal with the same things at the same level. Okay, here’s a great short story by Thomas King. Here’s a really great article that would go along with it. Here are some things that are happening in the news
that would go along with it. There’s just none of that built around any text . . . There’s so much out there but we don’t know what level it’s at or you don’t know where things would link. . . . Alberta Ed has nothing like that. Their resource list [of approved texts], they have a few but it’s mostly all novels or non-fiction, but there’s no resource list that’s organic and growing.

She explains how it would be useful to have resources that explore the “themes or topics” that “come up” in certain texts or the literary elements, such as “symbols” or “character development” that certain texts use effectively, so that she could “pull them in” based on what she needs to teach.

Alice explores some of the tensions around different ways of teaching and assessing learning in English, such as around “creative projects” and whether they are considered less valid than more traditional modes of assessment like essays, which are used throughout high school to prepare students for their Diploma Exams. Alice expresses hopes for future changes emerging from the shifts in the Diploma structure:

“It’s, hopefully, fingers crossed, going to change now that the Diploma’s worth less, and now that there’s more focus on that classroom work. I’m really hoping, because I know a lot of schools teach to the test.” However, at present, disciplinary and pedagogical conventions affect whether Indigenous literatures are valued. Alice asserts,

Everything is about deconstructing texts and pulling out quotations and writing and writing and writing and writing, but . . . there are six language arts and it’s been really difficult to try and show that there is importance to storytelling, there is importance to representing something, there is importance to listening to a story instead of just reading it.
We explore some of the challenges that all teachers are facing in Alberta as they work to shift approaches and embrace innovation while maintaining academic rigour and discipline-specific skills and knowledge. In relation to integrating more Indigenous literatures into this context, Alice remarks that it would be “amazing if learning leaders” and “veteran teachers would be the ones to take this on and say ‘okay, here’s my experience, and here’s what I know works and how can we translate that,’ even for teaching new texts.”

We bring our conversation to a close here, and I invite Alice to add any last thoughts. She voices her opinion that, “In teaching, often you feel like you’re alone doing new things. So it’s exciting to know there are other people who are passionate about some of the same things.” She is glad “to know that work is happening around this”; she says, “Just to know that . . . people recognize that there needs to be support is really encouraging.”

4.7 Robin Green (Pseudonym), Teacher (20 May 2015, Calgary)

4.7.1 Robin’s Introduction

Robin Green has been teaching in junior high and high schools throughout Alberta for over thirty years. Passionate about student voice and choice in all aspects of education, as well as democratic living and learning, Robin has introduced thousands of students to the Circle of Courage philosophy as a way of being in a world where many youth feel disconnected from their own lives. Robin has a strong belief in the power of narrative and connection to land as a way of finding passion and creating resiliency and
has most recently become involved in moving Indigenous knowledge into mainstream
education.

4.7.2 My Conversation with Robin

In describing the origins of her interest in “Aboriginal education,” Robin points
first to a number of family factors. For instance, she says, “We lived a lot of life outdoors
and so spent a lot of time camping and fishing.” When she was growing up, her father
worked for a time at a nearby First Nation and the family made some connections there.
She notes that her grown children also have some interest in Aboriginal literature, which,
circuitously, leads us to discuss how pervasive Thomas King’s literature is now, whereas,
Robin says, “There was none of that, that I ever heard of, when I was going to
university.”

Robin tells me about her current teaching context. She has taught a range of
subjects, but “mostly English,” and has recently also taught Aboriginal Studies. She
describes the “dynamic setting” of her school, which comprises specialized programming
and has a diverse, changing population. Robin tells me how she has been working to
incorporate the Circle of Courage into her teaching as a “philosophy or value system”
that helps to “talk about who we are and what we do and to create that centeredness for
kids.” Robin describes how she consulted with a local Blackfoot Elder in bringing in this
Circle model “because I didn’t want to appropriate anything.” She tells me how this
philosophy connects to her beliefs about democratic approaches in working with youth.
Robin says, “I think the kids need to have some of those foundational notions of who
they are in the world.” I ask her about the number of FNMI students at her school and she
explains that “it fluctuates” and that “the most we’ve had is” about 8% of the school population.

Returning to why she began teaching the Aboriginal Studies courses, Robin suggests that it was not only about having Aboriginal students: “It was more something that I had an interest in, and I thought that it—some of my teaching was infused with some of the ideas and so I wanted to pursue that further.” She speaks a bit about her students and shares that one student from a previous year has, since graduating, “had this resurgence of being Métis” and has “become a part of her community group and advocacy and all kinds of things.” She moves on to say,

The more that I’ve learned about First Nations culture, the better I understand my students. And they’ve taught me a lot, too, about listening to what they’re saying, and the time it takes to process, and how their worldview is different and their experience is different, and—there just needs to be a different way of talking and listening and understanding what they need.

She mentions how teachers “can do that” if they are able to “get to know students”—pointing to school structure, size, and climate as factors that affect this ability.

I ask Robin to say more about adapting teaching to better meet Indigenous students’ needs. She expands:

I think part of it is assessment, a different way of thinking about assessment, and time needed for students to process and to understand. And to explain an understanding of literature, to choose some different literature . . . I think it’s really about programming, that kids need to have more time and space to do certain things, and to create some different opportunities to engage family a
little bit if we can. It might be more meaningful for them, because parents have difficulty trying to get kids to come into the school and do some of the work outside of the school. Parents would like academic recognition for the things that students are doing in their community as part of their education, and working that into how we evaluate what they know and what they’re able to do might be important as well.

Robin works to incorporate such approaches in her teaching.

I ask Robin next about how she has learned about FNMI cultures and perspectives. In her experience, “The greatest learning I’ve had is talking with people and meeting with Elders.” She also points to her jurisdiction’s Indigenous education resource team and says that one particular team member “has been really a great resource.” She tells me how this resource person supported the initial planning for the “Aboriginal Studies course,” helping Robin to “create an experiential course for kids,” to “book Elders,” to take care of “honorariums” and having “protocols and all those kinds of things.” She adds, this resource person “created opportunities for me.” With this guidance, Robin was able to connect her students with various Indigenous knowledge keepers and to bring them to various cultural sites and out on the land, for instance “walking out with Elder Narcisse Blood.” She has built her experience up in these ways:

Being aware of different things through different people who said, “Hey, you should go to Fort Calgary; they’re doing a little thing on the making of Treaty 7” before they even started the major production, and so I went down there and talked with Michael Green who gave me a link for later. Or someone would say, “You should come to this Pow Wow,” or “you should read this,”
and so it’s just being part of the community that wants to help you learn more that is great.

She compares this to “being a new teacher and people giving you their things,” when people are “just trying to build your capacity.” Building on that support, Robin explains,

I created opportunities for myself and then just immersed myself in the things that were going on. I attended conferences, went to Sweat Lodges in different areas of the province to learn different teachings, created a personal library of Indigenous authors or about Indigenous issues, enjoyed “craft night” with my friend [name] who taught me some Cree traditions.

Robin emphasizes that she has “listened a lot to many people and their ideas.”

I tell Robin that I think some non-Indigenous people feel “hesitation in taking on this work or doing that learning” and ask if she is willing to discuss how she has been “able to think that through” for herself. She responds,

I don’t think I’ve had a problem imagining that there was something I really couldn’t learn or teach for any particular reason. I am very conscious of protocol. I think because of some of the connections I’ve had to the land, and when I thought about “sign posts” in my life, what I’ve read, some of my experiences and people I’ve talked to and engaged with, I just thought it was good work to do. . . . It was becoming a passion of mine. . . . I just thought I should just jump in there and do it.

She could have “overthought it,” she says, but “I decided that I wanted to make it fun for me and my students, and informational for me, and exciting and meaningful, and that the students (and other knowledge keepers) would help me do that.”
We talk a bit about what it takes for teachers to feel that teaching Indigenous content is something they can do. Robin recognizes that some teachers are “fearful” about doing this work. She quips, “I’d be fearful to teach mathematics!” I ask whether she means the preparation involved in teaching outside her area of expertise and she counters that she “knew there would be preparation involved” in teaching Aboriginal Studies, too, but that the amount of preparation was not a deterrent:

It’s a different kind of preparation; it’s preparation around land and story and culture and so many things that I think people would be interested in, and I never really felt fearful about that. I always thought that someone would tune me in if I was doing something wrong.

She speaks again about the various resource people she is able to draw upon, and adds, “I always felt that if I overstepped a line or if I had some questions, that I could ask someone.”

To illustrate this point, Robin shares a story of an experience where she made a mistake related to cultural protocol in an Indigenous context and had it pointed out to her. About this experience, she relates, “I just felt terrible.” However, she says, the Indigenous people in that situation explained it to her and “realized that it was just an honest mistake that we made, and they forgave us, but I’ve never forgotten that.” Coming out of this experience, Robin says, “There are times where I’ve wondered about things, and I’ve talked to someone and said ‘so do you think this is right?’ and I’ve talked to students too about appropriation.” Robin emphasizes, “I learned. I mean that was heart stopping for me to make a mistake like that, but I got through that, and people were gentle with me, and so after that I guess I knew that someone would correct me if I did something that
was inappropriate.” We discuss how these are valuable conversations to have with students as well.

We shift into discussing what kinds of Indigenous texts Robin teaches. She mentions that she “usually” uses “poetry” because “that’s an easy in, where kids can relate to the emotion of it.” She mentions that she gets students to look at “colonial perspectives” through works like Duncan Campbell Scott’s poem “The Onondaga Madonna.” One “part” of the literature “that I look at,” she says, is works in which “you’re kind of caught between two worlds.” She mentions the short story “Blue against White” as an example, as “this girl is caught between” two worlds in that way. She describes how her students engage with this theme because they “perceive themselves as different from the norm—whatever that means.” She says, “Sometimes that comes through in Indigenous literature as well . . . and that’s really something that our kids can relate to.” Robin also describes the kinds of projects her students do; for instance, “They’ve done some visual projects . . . Some of them have done some research projects and gone back to their parents and their Elders and been able to share some stories from that.”

When it comes to a novel study, she says, “we haven’t really” done Indigenous literature. She mentions that she has taught The Education of Little Tree, which, she says, “is not really necessarily Indigenous literature,” but provides “the ideas of the connections to the land and connections to people.” Robin adds, “I might look at some other novels, like The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian” by Sherman Alexie. However, “We’re in a limited budget situation too, so mostly that’s why I do poetry, because that’s really easy, to bring in poetry or a short story.” She considers, “Really the
start of so many units in English or levels of English is about identity, and time and place, and who you are, and the context into which you’re born.” She says, “So, it depends on what your central question is for the year, but I think lots of literature could fit for that.”

I ask her about other kinds of Indigenous texts and media that she teaches and she lists a rich selection, giving credit to her students for bringing in some of them. She mentions songs by “Drezus, Northern Cree, A Tribe Called Red” as “the current favourites,” and lauds work by “Buffy Sainte-Marie.” She says they have worked with Drew Hayden Taylor’s “Seeing Red Over Myths,” have had “some debate over schools’ sports teams and logos,” and have looked at many “current events” in their “non-fiction” and “media” units. She uses the Aboriginal Studies textbooks, but not exclusively. Robin lists

Authors like Maria Campbell, Tomson Highway and Richard Wagamese . . .

The films Muffins for Granny, We Were Children, and Where the Spirit Lives are powerful films about residential school. Sometimes the kids find the things themselves; like in film we use Reel Injuns or Dances with Wolves for particular reasons.

She focuses on the movie Smoke Signals, which “Aboriginal students really like, because they’ve seen it and it’s familiar,” but also “because it lets people laugh with them about things about their culture, some very sad or difficult aspects, and so it lays out some of the stereotypes.” Students can then discuss questions like “Why do we have these views, and what are the stereotypes that First Nations people have about non-First Nations people, and how do you use the language, and who gets to say ‘Indian’?” Robin also mentions using “YouTube videos, like Don Burnstick” and “Lakota Legends, also called
“Dreamkeepers” the latter of which has “got different story telling techniques in it,” to which “the kids really gravitate.”

Expanding on storytelling, Robin describes how she has her students “write their own stories.” They study “the way Aboriginal stories are told”—their elements and conventions—and the way “you have to figure out what the lessons are.” Then, Robin says, “I invite students to do things in a particular way,” for instance writing a “creation story” that will “adhere to” the conventions they have studied and include particular cultural elements. “I’ve had some really amazing stories,” Robin says; her students “do well with that . . . and they seem to find it easy to write that way.”

When it comes to taking up current “issues” in relation to Indigenous content, Robin and her students use a number of approaches. For instance, she says, “Our kids are quite artistic” and have created “depictions of some of the issues for First Nations people.” Some students got involved with Idle No More and brought that into the classroom. “I think they must be learning a little bit more in Social Studies,” Robin says, “because they’re now starting to equate that with some of the other things that they read about.” She explains how “we’d talk about residential school, and we’ve watched part of the Truth and Reconciliation hearings, and that was quite powerful.” Robin wants to mention the program “8th Fire,” which “is really good”; students “can relate to” 8th Fire because it features groups like “Winnipeg’s Most” and because (host) “Wab Kinew is a rapper.” Robin makes connections again between student engagement and the strategies she uses in assessing student learning.

I invite Robin to respond to my questions around community and how Indigenous literatures might have an impact for students. She reflects,
I think it offers a great starting point, to talk about literature and community and to make those connections for kids, because they don’t make it for themselves. Their community is the online community and social networking, and so their particular community where they live, the land they live on, or how they live, or work community, that doesn’t really exist—a community beyond their friends.

Robin says she has been thinking about how to “connect kids to what might be possible for them to revisit and to connect to in their own community.” She proposes, “A way of doing that would be to start with having an Elder come in and just talk about how identity is connected to land, what story means to them and story means to their community.” She argues,

When kids look at identity, I don’t think they get to place as part of their identity, because a lot of times they don’t really know or talk about where they came from. So they don’t really know a lot about their grandparents’ lives or great-grandparents’ lives or how they came to be in this city, in this place. You just are. And I think it’s different . . . in First Nations culture. That’s the first identifier, when someone introduces themselves, it’s “where are you from and who are your parents?”

So, Robin suggests, “To have an Elder come in and share the importance, to maintain your culture and to recognize your identity and your community and always have that to come back to, would be empowering for kids.”
What she would then do with that, Robin envisions, is “have them do some work around their own community.” She is already able to do this kind of work in her Aboriginal Studies teaching:

We did study the Aboriginal communities and First Nations and Métis and Inuit, before contact, and stories and place and time and what was the world like and what was the land like? And then I said, “Okay, now you go and research your own.” . . . They really learned, because I asked specific questions about what brought them here. What brought your parents and your grandparents here? And what brought them across the ocean? And why did they choose the jobs that they did? And why have they lived in this city for three generations? . . . So once they started researching, it became really interesting for them, and they could understand more about who they were.

Robin describes how, in doing this work, she and her students focused on “connectedness,” learned about things like “how people receive Aboriginal names,” and shared stories, alongside their Indigenous education resource person.

Connecting to family members to learn more about their own stories and relationships prompted rich learning for students. Robin also talked to her students about who “the storytellers” are in their families and “who is going to tell the stories” in the future. Robin explains the discussions that emerge from such questions, such as around How do you spend time, and how are you going to be able to tell those stories to your kids? It is the importance of story, because we talk about cultures who have lost their stories and lost their language and then are losing their culture.
as a result of that. I said, so you want to maintain that family story, that family culture, because your kids are going to ask questions like that of you. She describes how such dialogue is generative and “mushrooms” out from there.

I share with Robin some of my own experiences with reading Indigenous literatures to contextualize my own cultural history and identity; I also share some of my thoughts about why Language Arts teaching is “a great space to be able to explore” such questions. Robin responds,

Exactly that. And I don’t think that kids go, “Oh, why are we reading this South African poetry?” or “Why are we doing that?” I mean that’s the obvious place where you can just throw in there whatever you’re interested in and passionate about, and why not First Nations literature? I think they would connect more to that because it’s right here and now. So South Africa is there and Germany is there . . . Like I said before, [our Indigenous education resource person] said, “It’s cool to be Indian now,” so it’s cool to learn something about the people that you’re hearing about and living beside. And around a lot of dinner tables, I can imagine that if there is discussion about First Nations people, it was more of a political thing, and what’s out there in the media, and what people believe, and the stereotypes.

She points out that many “kids look for a cause” and “get a little bit righteous about what has happened to Indigenous people and how they are treated and what the beliefs are.” These students will then “go home and debate at the dinner table,” which is “important too.” Part of changing popular perceptions about Indigenous people, she notes, is to share
more “celebrations of First Nations and Métis and Inuit people” and the “positive things” that are “happening.”

I ask Robin what it takes to teach Indigenous content well and what supports she thinks will encourage teachers to try doing more. She explains that she personally likes “having a mentor that I can go to all the time”—such mentors might be designated Indigenous education resource people or Elders, for instance. She says it works to “have a go-to person to ask the questions” that emerge as the teaching progresses. She points out that “the Internet isn’t a huge resource” for “Aboriginal literature,” compared to how “there are lots of resources” for “all the classical literature.” Generally, “having someone come in” for “professional development” is helpful because teachers need “the opportunity to ask questions.” Additionally, it would be helpful “to have some kind of a resource list” because “new teachers go and they look at what are the suggested resources” or texts, as well as “ways of engaging.”

Robin is able to provide some mentorship for other teachers. She would like to do further work to “incorporate more Indigenous ways of knowing” across the “curriculum.” . . . because I don’t see why that can’t be part of science and . . . mathematics and certainly a bigger part of Social Studies and art and foods and all of that.” She suggests “it would be great if you could have someone seconded to create some kind of resource list or curriculum guides.” She starts to say, “because I think that’s the biggest problem, is finding the resources,” but then disputes,

And yet when you look right in our textbooks that we have now, like I’m looking at the grade 10 . . . Resource Lines . . . 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.

She acknowledges that teachers “want something that” their particular groups of students
“can speak to,” but she contends, “These [Indigenous] stories would absolutely speak to
everyone as well.”

When it comes down to it, Robin intimates, “I don’t think it’s a difficult thing to
start.” She insists, “If a person wanted to teach Indigenous literature, I think you just get
the go ahead; you just get the funding; you talk to people and put out some feelers; you
look on the Internet.” Further, she says, “it’s not an add-on. It’s just an integration into
what you’re already doing.” The place to start is “talking about land and connections to
land.” From there, “you move from land to story” and onward from there. She gives this
final advice:

I think you have to have an Elder or knowledge keeper involved. You have to
have somebody to come in and locate that for you, because otherwise there
might be an attitude of, “Who is this person to tell me about this literature and
these experiences and how does that person relate to that experience?” I don’t
feel it in my school, but I feel that a teacher might feel like, “Who am I to
discuss the Indigenous experience? Because I am settler, but I’m okay to do
African or I’m okay to do this and that, but I’m a little nervous, because it’s
right here and someone might take me to task for this. Or I might do
something wrong, or I might offend, or it might be uncomfortable for these
students.” And, you know, discomfort isn’t a bad thing. I think if someone
was uncomfortable you could have a conversation about that and figure out
where to go from that.

Wrapping up our conversation, Robin enthuses, “I think you just have to go do it.” She
concludes, “I preface my teaching about Indigenous people with ‘These are my teachings,
and if you have been taught differently, I am open to that and we can bring that into our
learning.’”

4.8 Jesse Archibald-Barber, Writer (8 July 2015, Regina)

4.8.1 Jesse’s Introduction

Jesse Archibald-Barber is originally from Regina and is of Cree, Metis, and
Scottish descent. He began his post-secondary studies at the Saskatchewan Indian
Federated College before completing his B.A. in English at the University of Victoria and
his graduate degrees at the University of Toronto. Presently, he is an associate professor
of Indigenous literatures at the First Nations University of Canada. His recent interests
involve Indigenous theatre and performance.

4.8.2 My Conversation with Jesse

Jesse begins by introducing himself for the interview, situating himself in relation
to his ancestry and his work. I ask Jesse what has brought him to his various engagements
with literature. He responds, “I always had a love of reading, like a lot of people” and
describes his path through “journalism school” and into “English.” Notably, he says, “it
was a couple of my teachers who really inspired me.” He elaborates on what inspired
him: “English is very empowering. . . . Literature represents life and meaningful human
experience in all its areas. So it was that dynamic universality that the subject brings.” He
adds that this is “what’s nice about teaching English as well, is you can talk about any
subject . . . depending on whatever the literature is, whatever the stories are about.”
Teaching, then, “never really becomes monotonous, because you can always teach new
stories, which then have new subjects, new areas of our society to talk about.” He enjoys
working with students and relishes those times when “you can see it in the look in their
eyes when you’ve taught them something totally new.”

I ask Jesse what kinds of texts bring on those kinds of moments in his teaching.
He responds, “A lot of First Nations stories are pretty intense” and “most Indigenous
literature is inherently politicized to begin with.” He suggests that this adds “another
dimension to teaching Indigenous literature,” a “hard political edge” that is “current.” He
says, “When you teach Indigenous literature, you’re teaching about all of the pressing
social issues that we’re dealing with today, like residential schools.” Giving the example
of teaching literature by Tomson Highway, Jesse insists, “It freaks a lot of students out,
including First Nations students.” He reasons, this happens because “most teenagers” are
“learning about their own history for the first time in university” or are learning to
“articulate it for the first time.”

Speaking further about what kinds of texts he teaches, Jesse tells me about how he
has “switched to a more digital format.” He gives his “first-year classes” the title “Digital
First Nations” and teaches primarily with “digital media” instead of print anthologies. He
notes that students do not “have to buy books” because everything is “online.” This
approach “expands the range of works” and enables “cool new assignments.” It is also
“refreshing for our students” and fits with that “new generation.” He relates, “As they
say, if it’s not on the phone, it doesn’t exist.” Students are using their “phones” for “taking notes, recording,” and bringing their notes “when they get up to give a presentation.” Jesse exclaims, “It’s a completely changing world and it’s exciting, so I’m embracing it and running with it.” Working with digital media “broadens the range of the material we teach” and makes learning “far more accessible” for students.

We continue to discuss Jesse’s teaching. He tells me about the kinds of “short films” he incorporates and how he gets students to “analyze news stories.” He notes, “There’s no shortage of controversial news coverage of First Nations issues.” He explains how he teaches students “to analyze what’s not being said in the news story,” to “deconstruct” it or to understand how “an opinion column” in The National Post will be very “different” from those in the Globe and Mail or in “our more local Indigenous-run papers.” He transitions, “So, news, film, but obviously . . . we always begin with oral traditions, though, and poetry.” Additionally, he says, “Of course every semester I try to bring an Elder into the class.” He describes, “We do the whole thing, you know, give tobacco, make ceremony, and then the Elder will speak to the students. For many it’s the first time that they’ve experienced something like that. So that’s important as well.”

Jesse explains why connecting with Elders is so important. He says, “Elders are our most important teachers here” (at First Nations University). He explains, “We have resident Elders” and describes them as “people who don’t pass judgment: they listen and they have that—I don’t want to use the word gravitas, because it’s not about being heavy, but they have that wisdom and experience.” If students are “having problems, the Elders are there for them, always.” Jesse explains, “Some of our students, when they first come . . . might be too shy or intimidated to go into the Elders’ room, to approach the Elders.”
However, “If you bring the Elders into the classroom,” this lets students know that “the Elders are approachable.” This connection to Elders is “important” for students, Jesse continues, because “it’s easy to get discouraged.” There are “enough obstacles and challenges in our lives already,” and going through post-secondary education “can cut deep into one’s soul and one’s confidence.” Elders are supportive to students; also “of course they carry on traditions; they’re the knowledge keepers.”

Jesse connects this role of carrying on traditions to “storytelling,” and “literature.” He develops this point:

Oral storytelling . . . really lies at the heart of Indigenous culture and history; that is how history is passed on. That’s how the culture is preserved, so that’s why I feel that Indigenous literature really has a central role at the university—obviously connected to languages as well.

I tell Jesse that I think studying Indigenous literatures involves more than exploring aesthetics and meanings in texts and, rather, entails connections to culture and to community. Jesse agrees,

Aesthetics, or at least Western aesthetic standards, they become almost secondary when studying Indigenous literature, because—and that’s not to say that Indigenous literature doesn’t have the same levels of aesthetic quality; it’s just . . . a different aesthetic altogether—but it’s always that historical, material connection.

Indigenous literature also emphasizes “spiritual” connections, Jesse asserts:

That’s one of the actually really beautiful things about teaching Indigenous literature, as opposed to just Western literature. Postmodern, contemporary
Western literature is all about deconstructing the text and emptying it of any kind of metaphysical center . . . whereas with Indigenous literature, that spiritual center is just assumed. It’s a given. I find that actually more liberating . . . because you’re free to just be yourself. . . . Any kind of spiritual or metaphysical impulse you have, you don’t have to be self-conscious in this environment about those. It’s openly embraced.

Jesse connects how spirituality is embraced in Indigenous literature to how it is embraced at First Nations University: “The prayer tipi’s in the centre of our building.” He gestures to the prayer tipi, nested inside the campus’ vast, glass-windowed central tipi, in which we are sitting.

We turn to Jesse’s writing, particularly his beginnings as a writer. He explains that “being inspired by the great literature” made him “want to pursue it.” He says, I’m finally at the stage where I’m starting to publish, and so I have a few pieces coming out, so that’s really exciting. I’d have to say, in terms of style, it’s all rooted in my own background, so Métis, Cree, Saskatchewan. It’s certainly what Thomas King calls associational style.

Expanding upon this term (King, 1990b), Jesse describes his writing: “It’s associational in the sense that it’s a free-for-all. I’ll draw on strands from all kinds of cultures to make a story work.” He describes this as “lots of fun” but also as “self-exploration,” remarking, “It’s funny; maybe I should have done that sooner than my 40’s, but I guess it took me that long to finally be that comfortable with myself to actually do that without flinching.”

I ask Jesse to add to this point about self-exploration, to say more about why he writes. He answers,
I’ve always been careful not to foist my beliefs and ideologies on others. I’m certainly not trying to do that through my writing. I get a lot of enjoyment out of thinking up the ideas in my own writing, and so I hope that other people can derive some pleasure from reading my writing, and some insight, on the more self-reflective stuff.

I ask him whether he thinks about his work in terms of “responsibility,” and he affirms, “One’s always thinking about how one’s work and teaching and writing is going to be received.” He thinks about “if it’s coming from the right place,” he explains:

That’s the anxiety. Is my teaching, is my writing coming from the right place? . . . Is it coming from an authentic place? Now authentic, that word is a very slippery term, especially in the context of Indigenous writing . . . but it is meaningful.

Together we clarify that he uses the term “authentic” intentionally, invoking its complexity. He explains that this question—“Is it coming from an authentic place?”—is “the check I use,” that “I’m always asking myself.”

Jesse gives reasons as to why he uses this “check” about where his work is “coming from.” He says, You don’t want to stray too far from reality, or you don’t want to stray too far into idealism. It’s really easy to slip into those kind of Western stereotypes, to the point where we even stereotype ourselves. I find that all the time. If I’m trying to select, say, material to teach by Native authors and there’s a story . . . depicting an everyday life of a person—you know, getting up and making breakfast and going to work—versus a story . . . that has some sort of central
metaphor of a spirit bear or something, I choose the spirit bear story. I teach that one, but why? It’s obviously because it fits some expectation about what Native literature is.

I reply that one might also tend to select the “politically charged” literature—the stories that contain difficult elements like trauma or addiction in ways that might help readers to unlearn stereotypes for instance. Jesse responds, “So much of our literature is about victimhood . . . and resilience.”

Reflecting on that observation, Jesse illuminates how it “can get a little daunting and depressing” if “you just fill up a whole semester with literature that’s focusing on victimization.” This is why, he says,

I definitely try and mix it up, at least, with the literature that focuses on trauma and victimhood, and is of course sharply politicized. That leads into one of the real struggles of teaching Indigenous literature. . . . Maybe every professor says this, but I almost feel like there’s an extra level of energy needed to teach Indigenous literature, because you’re having to negotiate all of these feelings and issues. And it’s one thing if you’re teaching the literature to Indigenous students—

He pauses here to explain, in “our classrooms here, it’s not just one or two; over half the class is First Nations students. A lot of them are driving in off the rez every morning, right out their communities.” He goes on, “So you get that mix of First Nations students and Canadian students and some international, and that creates a lot tension.” For instance,
When you’re teaching a Tomson Highway story, when you have victimization and sexual abuse and cultural genocide and all of that, First Nations students . . . get radically self-conscious about it, because it’s about them, and the Canadian students get all—you know there’s that phrase “white guilt”—that you can tell that they’re struggling with.

He notes, “I reject the notion of white guilt; I keep that out of my classroom.” So, he continues, “It creates a lot of tension in the classroom.”

Jesse describes his approach to this tension by building upon a concept from his colleague “Shauneen Pete, who’s an Indigenous Education professor at U of R.” He explains,

She calls that phenomenon “curriculum discomfort.” I love that phrase because I think it really captures it, because you have, a lot of this makes the students, makes anyone feel really uncomfortable, but of course the response to that is not to avoid it but to face it head on. So the way I try and negotiate that is just by getting everyone in the same arena, like by emphasizing that, no matter where you come from or who you are, this is our shared history. First Nation, Canadian, whatever, we all own it. We all descend from it.

I add, “And are responsible to it,” and Jesse echoes, “Responsible, that’s absolutely right.” He says that talking about this with students “certainly helps break the tension.”

Also, he describes, “Emphasizing that the whole point . . . is empowerment through education and knowledge . . . opens up all kinds of new experiences for the students.” He has students come out of these conversations expressing feelings like, “I’m so glad I
know our history now.” Jesse suggests, “In that sense, you can transform something traumatic and victimizing into something liberating.”

I guide our conversation back to Jesse’s writing, asking him to connect the ideas about “empowerment” he mentioned earlier in relation to teaching with that question of whether his work is coming from the right place. Jesse goes into more detail,

I don’t have too much anxiety about whether my writing’s coming from the right place, because I know it is if I’m just being honest . . . When you first get the story out, you just want to get it out with no censorship, because you don’t want any blocks or inhibitions. But once you start editing, you have to be like, okay, is it going too far making this point? And so it becomes an interplay between . . . the assumptions that people already have, the stereotypes that are kind of built in.

In his writing, he says, he tries to “bring issues that are significant and common in our culture.” He describes one of his short stories as an example. This story is set “billions of years in the future,” but its “central issue” is the question, “How do we keep oral traditions alive?” This is an “age-old question” but one that “I tackle in a new context.” Another story, Jesse enumerates, takes up the question, “Can some ways of keeping traditions alive actually be destructive to oneself and one’s families?”

While many of his stories address “issues” like these, “some stories are just for fun, just nonsense.” He justifies writing fun pieces:

I don’t just want to focus on victimhood or bang that drum . . . In my teaching and my writing there’s got to be at least a good measure of uplifting, self-empowering messages and themes and stories. Otherwise what’s the
point, right? . . . The last thing—especially young people, the last thing our First Nations students want is to be coming here from the rez and then have a mirror shoved in their face about how awful things are for them. . . . I’m not the one to hold that mirror.

Students get “enough of that already,” he suggests. So, “I try and focus on fun stuff, not in a kind of Pollyanna, naïve way but in a good way, in a responsible way.”

Stepping off from there, I outline some of my investments in this work and bring Jesse to my central question about why Indigenous literatures matter. He responds,

For all the reasons that you’re talking about . . . that resilience, that empowerment, that preservation, but if I were to single out one thing, it’s that they provide that connection to our culture in a very intimate way, and historical. Like I said, a lot of young people, no matter what culture . . . don’t really know about their culture. . . . It’s that connection to culture which allows or helps people be a little more self-reflective—and without that there is no empowerment. That’s the first step, I think, is that self-reflection . . . It helps one grow in the sense that it enables one to look in that mirror I was talking about without flinching, to look at their own past, to overcome that discomfort or anxiety. That’s one of the most important things about self-growth.

He concludes, “Literature does that in a way that no other discipline can really provide.”

I ask Jesse why literature can do this. He speculates, “It’s that suspension of disbelief . . . that’s at the front of most literature.” There is “something about suspending,” he theorizes, “there’s a process that opens that gate into the consciousness.
So it’s far more intimate in that sense. It’s something that really gets inside you, inside your body and your consciousness.” He compares this to “most other topics like political science, history, philosophy,” which are “still kind of external, kind of objective, whereas literature . . . is an internal process.” I suggest, analogously, that literature challenges that Western way of approaching knowledge where knowledge is external; it’s a thing you can objectively study. I share with Jesse a connected idea from another conversation, specifically the notion that it can be easier to learn about difficult things through literature because readers can empathize or identify with what is going on, and he agrees.

I give Jesse an opening to speak about the editing work he does, bringing together anthologies of Indigenous creative writing. Again I share with him a comment from another conversation: I tell him that listening to this writer describe how people come together to make books (writers, artists, translators, publishers) showed me that community can also be fostered through the creation of literary texts. Out of this, I ask him why working on anthologies is important to him. First he describes his work on “the Saskatchewan Indigenous writing anthology.” This collection, he says, “is super important to the province.” He was “inspired to do that by Manitowapow,” a collection published in Manitoba; his response to that book was to think “we’ve got to do one here too.” He hopes that “every province will do one eventually.” In his opinion, “there are a lot of people in Saskatchewan” who are “unaware of just how rich our Indigenous writing traditions are in the province.” This anthology shows people how rich those traditions actually are, he says:

A lot of literary historians mark the beginning of Native literature in Canada around, in the early [19]70s . . . and then they characterize the period before
as kind of a period of voicelessness, quote unquote. But when you actually do go and do the research and go into the communities and look in the archives and talk to Elders, you realize that that idea of voicelessness is really just an empty postmodern concept come up with by some European theorist or whoever, because it—our past is rich with storytellers. Every decade, going back, is filled with stories, writings.

He notes, “maybe not all of them are published by mainstream presses, but they’re out there.” Another “important” effect of this anthology, Jesse suggests, is that it “promotes writing and literacy.” He explains, “that was the goal of, the object of *Manitowapow*, was to promote Aboriginal literacy initiatives, so I’ll carry that on with—I’m calling it *Kisiskatchewan*, which is the Cree word for Saskatchewan.”

Jesse tells me about the other anthology he is working on, as well, which is “called *Decolonizing the Digital* . . . the subtitle is *First Nations Online Presence*.?” This one is “looking at . . . ways in which First Nations and Aboriginal writers are using the Internet as a vehicle of decolonization.” He connects this back to his teaching work and the “transitions” he is making in “converting” his “classes to a digital form.” He describes this mix of “digital humanities” and “First Nations studies” as “Digital First Nations.” This anthology represents issues that “a lot of people are into,” particularly youth, and he hopes that the book will be “received well.”

We are coming up to the end of our time and I ask Jesse if he has any final points to add. He looks through my list of questions and chooses to answer this one: “Has literature influenced how you think about communities? Have communities influenced
how you think about writing?” He responds by going “right back to the beginning of this interview, how I ended up back in my hometown.” He shares,

What’s nice about being back home and teaching is I feel completely at home. When dealing with all these difficult issues, there’s no anxiety about who I am or my identity or what I’m saying or—and what I’m writing as well—to the extent that I feel like I can’t move. Say I was offered a job in Victoria or somewhere paradisical at twice the pay. I might not even take it, because how would I write? You know? How would I teach? I’d be up-, I’d be unrooted. . . . I almost feel like I would lose some kind of purpose. . . . I think community is so important in that sense. How you feel at home or not.

In returning to this topic, Jesse suggests that “we’ve come full circle” and we should “leave it there.”

4.9 David Alexander Robertson, Writer (9 July 2015, Winnipeg)

4.9.1 David’s Introduction

David Alexander Robertson is an award-winning graphic novelist and writer who has long been an advocate for educating youth on Indigenous history and contemporary issues. He has created several graphic novels, including his newest series, Tales From Big Spirit, as well as the bestselling 7 Generations series. He was a contributor to the anthology Manitowapow: Aboriginal Writings from the Land of Water (2012) and is currently working on the upcoming novel, The Reckoner. His first novel, The Evolution of Alice, was published in fall 2014 and won the John Hirsch Award for Most Promising Manitoba Writer.
4.9.2 My Conversation with David

David brings education into our conversation right away. In describing his work, he says,

I’ve done a bunch of graphic novels [and one novel] on First Nations history and contemporary issues and culture. . . . Whatever I work on, I try and have some educational value in it. . . . I try and do a lot of . . . school visits and guest lectures at education institutions in Manitoba and outside of Manitoba on my writing and what it’s about. And in my work too—for several years I’ve worked in the communities, and now directly with the schools, trying to provide additional resources for students and teachers.

David works to provide resources that help students and teachers “to learn more about Indigenous history and culture and languages.”

David speaks about what brought him to writing and when he started “wanting to write about Indigenous topics.” He explains,

For me writing was just always natural. . . . There was an assignment, a writing assignment of some kind in grade three. And I think it was for poetry. And I didn’t want to do the poetry, because I felt a little embarrassed about it . . . so I ended up actually hiding in the closet in the back of my classroom . . . and I wrote in the dark, with these—you know those foolscap and those big red pencils. And I ended up writing a bunch of poems that day. . . . My teacher, when I handed the poetry in to her, she made it into this binder . . . and from
there I went home and I told my mom, “I want to be a writer, Mom, I want to be—” I think I said, “I want to write a world-famous book,” I told her.

David describes how continued writing poetry and prose through elementary and junior high.

He shares an experience from “grade 10,” noting that he was “kind of this goof ball in high school”:

We had this assignment to do a poem . . . so I worked on this poem super hard for a week and handed it in to my teacher. And when she was handing the assignments back she didn’t give mine back, and she asked to see me after class. I went to see her and she had my poem there and she said, “I don’t think you wrote this. I think you copied it.” So I was devastated because I’d worked so hard on it. She accused me of plagiarizing it. And so I went home to tell my mom, because that’s what boys do. And my mom . . . was upset that her son was upset. So she went and brought the teacher all my drafts . . . so then she finally believed me and . . . then she’s like, “I want to put you in all these advanced writing courses” and everything, and I said no, because I was so put off by it. So I stopped writing for a long time.

He explains, however, “I got back into it in university.”

“Eventually,” he says, he “started to think about doing graphic novels,” and he tells me about his motivations for doing this work:

I grew up really disconnected from culture. My dad is Cree—he’s from Norway House—but I was never connected to that when I was growing up. So I didn’t know anything about my family on that side, really, or really my
culture or that side of who I was. And that had a really profound effect on me, as it does I think with youth still today. And so I grew up feeling like I wasn’t whole. And I had a really negative view, as a kid, of Indigenous peoples. I bought into all those stereotypes, and there was nothing for me to learn in school about [the] truth. So, as an adult, I felt that if I had had that then I would have been in a better place, spiritually, mentally, and from an identity standpoint. And so, I really started to think about what I could do to put it into schools, because I was missing that. . . By that time I had become more connected to the culture. I worked to learn more about it and finally got to the point where I was kind of proud to be part Cree and call myself an Indigenous person. So I wanted that for other youth, because I saw, working in communities, that there was a lot of that same sort of feeling. And so I started to do graphic novels, because really I just thought originally that graphic novels were just cool. And I thought if you could put them in a context of Indigenous culture, history, language, that kids would learn a lot, because they’d be so pumped to read from the graphic novels, right?

He sums up, “So that’s why I really got into doing the writing that I’m doing now on those topics, and so I’ve been going at it now for seven years.”

David describes how his books have “done very well in the education system across Canada.” They have also “done well outside of schools,” “which is great,” he says, because “the conversation needs to happen in schools and outside of schools.”

Kids need to be learning about these things in class, and they need to be going home and having a dialogue with their parents or their siblings, or their
friends . . . That’s how ignorance gets spread, by dialoguing between each other about things that we don’t know about. So if we know about them, then we learn more positive things, and I think that’s my whole goal in writing the stuff that I do.

I tell David about some of my own feelings about working to reconnect to my heritage and bring those experiences into my work, and we transition to talking about what literature can do in that context.

I suggest that literature “has a capacity to draw people in” and encourage them to connect meaningfully, and David agrees. He 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. . . . If you give them a graphic novel, like on residential schools, what you’ll find is the students are way more apt to want to read from the textbook after they’ve learned from the graphic novel, because they get excited about it, right? Then they get curious about the history, and then they want to read more about it. It’s just innate in kids.

Such material is thus an “entry way,” he says. He cautions, “I would never say to a teacher, just use this graphic novel only,” because, while what his work addresses is “important,” he says, “I scratch the surface.” It is “the teachers’ job to dig deeper into that and provide students with more information.”

I ask David why he works in particular with graphic novels—what it is about that medium that appeals to him. He shares that he began with graphic novels in order to reach young readers: “When I was growing up, I only read comic books, graphic novels,
and so I thought they would be pretty cool to bring into a classroom. Kids would get excited about them.” Over time, he has learned that “there are a lot of technical reasons why they’re so great, and a lot of it has to do with the genre and the existence of storytelling through images and words.” How these elements connect in the “graphic novel format . . . helps students to retain more knowledge” and “provides a deeper context to the storytelling.” He suggests that these qualities of graphic novels are “important” for young readers, “especially when you’re talking about less sophisticated readers, readers that are harder to reach”—such as “boys,” “students with learning disabilities,” or students “with English as a second language.” However, he adds, graphic novels are “also great for more sophisticated readers because . . . they have, often, more complex plots or story structures.” David insists that graphic novels are versatile: he has “seen them being used in a grade four classroom” and then “gone to a university to lecture on the same book.” David also points to how the graphic novel “connects with a more ancient form of communication,” given that some of the earliest human communication was “through pictures”: people created images and “those images in sequence told stories.” He suggests that this long history links graphic novels to “blood memory” and is “another reason why they connect so well with our youth.”

David responds to my questions about what his books might offer to young readers. He speaks to his interactions with students in classrooms. “They learn a lot,” he says, and the “knowledge” they gather from the books is “sophisticated.” He explains how he spends “a lot of time” (possibly more than he spends on the “words you see on the page”) on the “visual nature” of his books, such as “how the images connect.” He says, “I work a lot with the illustrator in making sure that they sequence in really
interesting ways, but in ways that you get the best knowledge transfer possible.” Speaking about particular texts he has written, he replies, “The ones that are most important to me are the ones on residential schools and missing and murdered Indigenous women.” Not only are these “two topics . . . really important to me”; they are “topics that, as Canadians, we don’t know enough about, or don’t appreciate the impacts of.” He adds, “*Ends/Begins* and *The Pact* in my *7 Generations* series, *Sugar Falls*, and *Betty*, . . . they all tell stories about either the residential school system or the epidemic of missing and murdered Indigenous women.” These books tell these stories “in ways that are very powerful, because of the images. And because of that, people retain that knowledge more effectively.” David describes a scene from one of his books, a disturbing scene of sexual abuse in a residential school. He contends, “You could read about that in a textbook . . . but I don’t think it would . . . stick with you as much as it would by actually seeing it happen.”

David acknowledges that this emotional impact is “difficult.” Teachers have asked him, “What’s the level of appropriateness in bringing this into my classroom if I’m a junior high teacher, or if I’m even an elementary school teacher?” He suggests that this is “a decision teachers need to make, but always within the context of what’s important for the students to learn as Canadians.” It is also relevant to consider “what they’re exposed to outside of the schools.” For instance, he explains,

The argument I usually make is to have teachers think about, if you’re in junior high, and your students are at home watching *The Walking Dead* . . . Gratuitous violence—really grotesque violence—I mean, great show; I love it. But if they’re okay seeing that, then why can’t you show them a scene
where that sort of abuse that happened to our Indigenous kids in history can be exposed to these students in ways that are sensitive but powerful?

David shares, “I have a daughter that is in grade six and a boy that is in grade four. Now they’ve both heard, in their school, racist comments about Indigenous people.” He reasons, “if these kids who are saying these things are exposed to that sort of knowledge at that age, then why can’t we expose them to truth at that age?” He adds, “If my daughter wasn’t armed with that knowledge to talk to a kid about something racist that they’ve said, or to tell the teacher about it, then what’s going to happen? It just starts with something small and it gets bigger.” We discuss how knowledge spreads through families and communities.

This leads me to ask David how he thinks about community in his work, and if he thinks about issues like “representation” or “responsibility” as he focuses on the issues he writes about. He answers,

I always think about community, but I think of it in a broader perspective of—we’re all in the same community. We all need to look at it that way, that our successes are tied to each other and our failures are.

He describes discussions he often has with students in classrooms, bringing up ancestry and culture and inviting them to think about how much they know about each other. He says,

I tell them that that’s what we need to be doing; we need to be making the effort to know each other, because if we don’t, then we’re making judgments about each other, without knowledge. And then I relate that back to that historical context of Indigenous peoples and have them think about that a lot.
But always the conversation is, “How do we function as a community, and are we making the effort to understand each other?”

While “it’s a simple act—generating knowledge for each other,” David says, “It’s also difficult” and points to the extent that “we just don’t do it.” He concludes, “So I think about community from a larger perspective first.”

David says, however, “I do, obviously, in working with a lot of the First Nations communities, think about what’s going on in those communities, too, and how my work will affect them.” He continues,

As much as non-Indigenous kids don’t know about Indigenous culture, Indigenous kids don’t know about their own culture. So, my books, I always write them for Indigenous kids, so they understand a bit more about where they’ve come from, what they’ve been through as a people and how it’s affected them. Same for non-Indigenous kids: what’s happened in this country to Indigenous peoples? What has been the effect on them? And then, how does it affect us as Canadians, right? . . . From a community perspective in terms of First Nations communities, that’s my focus there. I’ve been to communities where I’ve worked with them for over a year, and there’ve been seven or eight suicides. So why is that happening? And what can we do to prevent it? I’ll start a dialogue about it.

“So those are always my focuses,” he says, “in terms of community.”

I ask David how he thinks about the future or about the resilience of Indigenous communities. He responds,
I just think knowledge. I think it always starts from a place of knowledge and truth. And I think that’s actually the only place it can start. So, from my perspective, I play a small role in building that foundation. But if we’re going to be anywhere positive in the future we need to start from a good knowledge base—from a place of truth, and acceptance of that truth. And when we do that, I think that there are only good places that we can go—and that’s the beginning and the end for me.

We agree on this point that such work has a lot of potential, and that there is a lot of work to do. David adds,

I have a small role in that. I do the best that I can with the work that I’m doing, but what people have to recognize is that they all have a role. That’s the same thing I tell kids: “You all have a role.” Especially kids, right? . . . One thing I’ve always said: as adults, we’re responsible for our youth and we’re responsible for providing that information to our youth. But our youth are responsible for tomorrow. So, there are two levels of responsibility there, right? And so that’s the conversation I try to have with these kids is about their responsibilities, my responsibilities, and to take it seriously.

“Kids are amazing,” David adds, and “they act fully on the knowledge that’s been provided to them.”

Making this point leads David to emphasize the sources of young people’s knowledge. He relates,

One thing I ask kids is, “Where do you get knowledge from?” and they say, “Oh, like, my friends, my teammates, my family, my teachers.” So that’s a
big group to be getting knowledge from. And they only act on the knowledge they have, so we need to be giving them the right knowledge.

Adults, David suggests, have “unlearned” the ability to “look at someone and” and not “judge them.” Sharing an example from his own childhood, he suggests that children are able to “accept those differences without thinking about them.” This is what we need to do, he argues: “We need to accept that we’re kind of the same, but that we have different stories. We need to know those stories.”

As we approach the end of our time, I ask David to speak to my big question about why (or whether) Indigenous literatures matter. He answers,

I think it’s vitally important, because I think that’s one of the main conduits of information for our youth, and our adults. It’s how we are going to learn about our histories and how our histories affect us. . . . There is a movement now within Indigenous communities, too, and Indigenous artists, to start sharing stories through our literatures. We’re, we were an oral tradition within our cultures. We’re recognizing now that we need to shift how we pass down stories, and I think literature is one of the ways that we’re doing that. And the great thing is that literature is reaching out beyond our communities into our non-Indigenous communities as well. . . . There’s a growing movement of reclamation too, where people, Indigenous writers, are working to reclaim our histories from how they’ve been told in the past by non-Indigenous peoples. That . . . is very important, because a non-Indigenous person is telling stories, even a century ago, or even decades ago, from a non-Indigenous perspective. So, in telling stories from that basis of understanding,
we’re losing something. If we can have more Indigenous peoples, talented 
Indigenous peoples in literature, making the effort to tell our histories from 
our perspectives, that’s where I think a lot of great change is going to happen. 
So, I’m one of those. There’s a growing group, and I hope it continues to 
grow. And one of the things that we need to be doing as artists is inspiring 
youth to do that, because they’ll grow up and they’ll be the ones doing it. 

David finishes this thought: “I think we have a responsibility in that way, too. Not just 
telling the stories but inspiring youth to tell the stories.”

I give David space to provide any final comments before we conclude our 
conversation. He suggests,

For me, it’s what we talked about before recording, just making sure that we 
are generating the right resources, whether it’s literature or performance art or 
music, to share knowledge in really engaging ways, and that people know 
how to utilize that knowledge. I think a big piece of it is in the education 
system—and my dad and my mom are both educators and that’s probably 
what influenced me to get into it—is to ensure (and my dad’s a big advocate 
of this)—but to ensure that we’re making the effort in teacher training 
programs, whether it’s in education or otherwise, incorporating that training 
on how to facilitate that knowledge transfer from the right perspectives, and 
the right ways to youth. Whether it’s at a university level or a junior high, 
high school level, elementary school level. . . . You can develop the 
resources, great, but you also need to have teachers who are able to utilize 
those resources in efficient ways . . . always from a place of understanding.
Now we need more Indigenous teachers, but the reality is, we need more non-Indigenous teachers who can do it the right way.

With this last point, we wrap up our time together.

4.10 Katherena Vermette, Writer (10 July 2015, Winnipeg)

4.10.1 Katherena’s Introduction

Katherena Vermette is a Metis writer from Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. Her first book, *North End Love Songs* (The Muses’ Company) won the 2013 Governor General Literary Award for Poetry. Her work has appeared in several literary magazines and anthologies. Her recent projects include a novel, *The Break* (House of Anansi), and a short documentary, *this river* (National Film Board of Canada).

4.10.2 My Conversation with Katherena

To begin, Katherena introduces herself and her background. I learn from her that she has connections to various kinds of education work, and then she speaks about her writing:

I’m a Métis writer. I write poetry and fiction and children’s lit. I am from Winnipeg. My family is Red River Métis so we’ve been here for a very long time. . . . My perspective of writing, it really centers around Indigenous experience, particularly my own story. I find that I’m often overly obsessed with the idea of permission, and whose story I have permission to tell, and whose stories certain people have permission to tell. I’m still trying to figure out how to tell my own story, so I’m very much concentrating on this one.
space. So I do write a lot about this place, about Winnipeg, and about the
North End, and about inner-city children, and those kinds of experiences.
She imagines that her work will someday “move outward from that” but “at this point”
her writing focuses on “on figuring that part out.”

I ask Katherena what brought her to writing and whether schooling was an
influence. She tells me this story:

I started writing when I was young, and I don’t remember why. I remember
very specifically that it was the summer that I moved to the North End,
actually, and we had extra school supplies. We had an extra Hilroy notebook
that my mother gave me and said I could do whatever I wanted with it. And
for whatever reason I chose to write a poem. I have no memory of learning
what a poem was or learning anything about that, but, given the opportunity
to do whatever, I chose to write a poem.

She admits that she wrote “very poorly rhymed, bad metre poems for way too many
years.” She suggests that one of her teachers must have taught her “how to write a poem,”
because, she says, “I did not have a literary household. My parents always read . . . but it
was not poetry. Poetry was nowhere.”

While she does not remember where her “connection with poetry came from,”
Katherena remembers reading *In Search of April Raintree* at the age of “about 12, 14
maybe.” She describes her experience of connecting with that book:

That was that work that not only spoke about this place, but spoke in that
voice that was so close to—and I wasn’t in the foster care system, but there
are a lot of similarities: she’s a Métis person, and she was speaking in this
voice that was so close to and so familiar to me. That’s really where I opened my eyes to the idea that I could write and I could write about this place. I didn’t have to try some silly Iambic pentameter that wasn’t cooperating. It just really opened that possibility for me, in an incredible way . . . I know I wanted to be a writer. I know I wanted to be an artist . . . but I didn’t know that I could be.

This was an “ah-ha moment” for her: it was “that eye-opening moment where I saw, through Indigenous literature, what ended up being what I wanted to do with my life.”

This realization and her growing practice of writing also “happened in the classroom”:

I went to a very small inner-city, well North-End school, and it was very under-resourced in a lot of ways. We had a really nice group of dedicated, non-Indigenous, teachers that somehow were very Eurocentric in their methodology and everything like that, but they were also very genuine people. I was very lucky to have them. And that’s where I got that book, and where I kind of started writing. I started writing a very journal-based, cathartic, emotive writing for really a long time, all through my teenage years.

She talks a bit about adolescence—her own and her daughters’—and how much processing it requires. Katherena describes her writing at that time in her life as an “outlet”:

It was a huge coping mechanism for me. I know that I wouldn’t have survived if I didn’t have that outlet and I didn’t have that space to—just that
thing that I started doing, which was scribbling in journals, trying to articulate my experience, my emotional map, which fascinated me and almost distracted me from everything else that was going on.

Her writing was “a survival mechanism.”

As Katherena tells me more about how her education supported her writing, she effuses, “I’ve been very blessed with many great teachers along the way.” She speaks particularly about “a creative writing class” she took “in high school” and how that teacher exposed her to formative literature:

What she provided me was with poetry, and again very Eurocentric poetry, but that’s where I learned things like T. S. Eliot and e. e. cummings, and I became quite well read in all of that poetry. Any kind of something different, any kind of some different way to express a feeling, because—still self-obsessed, sixteen. So totally living in my own brain, and really just looking for ways of figuring out newfangled, interesting ways to talk about my own experience. It was very emotionally centric for a really long time, but I also got into the idea of Imagist writing, and the idea of writing about what you see, like the Romantics, and the Imagists.

As she built this familiarity, she says, “That’s when I really started noticing that what I was seeing wasn’t what these poets were seeing.”

While she believed she could be a writer, it took some time for Katherena to believe that Indigenous experiences could be portrayed through poetry. She explains,

For a while I wrote what I thought I was supposed to write, I think until I was in my twenties . . . It was through Indigenous poetry and reading and being
exposed to Indigenous poetry that I realized, that I found a cadence and an
approach and perspective that isn’t in European poetry. Again it was that
moment of familiarity, that moment of kind of light shining on something.
And I realized I could write what I see, just like all the poets do, but I could
write it from this perspective and write about what I actually see, and that it is
just as poetic as all of those other things.

This realization, she emphasizes, “was a slow release,” but details, “That’s when I started
writing about the inner city. That’s when I started writing about people.” At that point,
she says, “I didn’t want to write about myself. I went through this big switch . . . I just
wanted to write about what I was seeing.” She turned to more Imagist writing, which she
describes as “painting pictures” without “impos[ing] emotions.” She explains, “I
approached my world with that lens . . . searching for beauty.”

Many of the poems in North End Love Songs originate from this search,
particularly the “bird poems.” Looking around her, Katherena was “searching in these
tables that are really represented very negatively out there in the world, and looking
further.” She explains, “I’m making these character sketches of these women and these
girls and really trying to show how they’re beautiful.” The poems ask, “What is beautiful
about them even though so much about them is not necessarily perceived as beautiful?”

Returning to the European and Indigenous in her writing, she states, “That is what I try to
do with poetry . . . is to blend those two worlds.” She characterizes these influences like
this: “Indigenous poetry is so rooted in storytelling and so rooted in voice, very specific
voice, and very powerful voice,” while “European poetry is so aesthetic and lyrical . . .
and almost tries to be distant from, and not be intimate.” Katherena insists, “I want to be very intimate. I want to tell a story.”

Our conversation shifts as we come around to discussing literature’s impact. Katherena remembers an instructor—again, she notes, “I had great teachers”—during her honours degree in English. This professor asked a question that resonated strongly for her:

She had this big question of, “Is it still valuable even if it’s not considered good?” And that just blew my mind! Because as a writer you’re constantly trying to be good and then you go into this publishing world, particularly as an Indigenous artist coming from an Indigenous perspective, you immediately are met with this wall of disinterest because of what you’re writing about. Katherena connects this disinterest in Indigenous writing to the larger context of how receptions of poetry are “completely subjective.” She points out, “I look at Canadian literature and so much of it doesn’t necessarily interest me.” Although this subjectivity works both ways, she argues that Indigenous writing bumps up against Eurocentric standards of what is valuable:

But when you’re writing from an Indigenous perspective with those things of Indigenous poetry—the voice, and the story, and the cadence, and it comes from this oral tradition that is very different from the European aesthetic—so people don’t relate to it. And people don’t necessarily think of that as poetry. So you’re automatically, and for so long I was in this category of not being good, because I was writing something different, . . . and many of my friends have had similar experiences, writing as an Indigenous person with Canadian
literature. The idea of good is so incredibly subjective . . . particularly when it comes to poetry . . . So yes absolutely something can be valuable even if it’s not considered good, and from the perspective of Indigenous literature, for so long it’s been looked on through a European lens and then it’s been considered bad.

Katherena points to *In Search of April Raintree* as an example of a book that is written in “a non-style style” that is “very conversational.” She says, in this book, Beatrice is “not playing into any aesthetic. She’s not playing with metaphors. She’s telling a story. It’s life story.”

Katherena expands upon this notion of life story to portray one important function of Indigenous literature. She says, “So much Indigenous story is telling life story, because . . . Indigenous literature is still at that point of introducing Indigenous people to non-Indigenous audiences.” She contends that other kinds of literature “started that way” as well, but points out how it fits with Indigenous traditions in which “you introduce yourself and you introduce yourself by where you come from.” She describes learning more about this from her “friend Duncan” (Cree writer Duncan Mercredi):

> When I was putting my first book together, Duncan said that my book has to do this; it has to introduce me to the world. . . . If you don’t know how I grew up and where I grew up and my place in the world, you understand much less about me. So that’s what I did and that’s where the book’s centered on, and I think that’s what many Indigenous artists do.

Such introductions are important for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Katherena emphasizes, “Indigenous students need to see those voices that they know and
that are familiar to them. They need to see those reflected in what they read and what they’re exposed to in their school.” However, “Non-Indigenous students need that too, particularly if they have no concept of Indigenous culture at all, which happens in so many communities in this country.”

I share with Katherena some of the investments that inform this study and some of the contexts through which I am thinking about literature and education. She picks up on the idea of stories being more effective than facts at teaching certain concepts. She responds,

I think there’s value with both. But I think the stories are always the way in. They are the accessible way. Particularly when they’re conversational. Particularly when people can read them and they’re at their level. . . . Stories are the way that people relate to that experience.

She suggests that stories are effective at fostering “empathy” because “you learn that through talking about people’s experiences”:

If someone were portraying their experience in residential school, you know that they’re a kid. You know that they’re vulnerable . . . and what that experience is like. You can imagine, because this is what we do when we read things . . . but then when we read statistics, they’re cold. I can read statistics all day long and I’m not necessarily tying them to one person, but if I can tie that to one person that I can relate to, that I have a commonality with, then suddenly it’s like . . . I’ve made a friend. We can talk about any kind of experience, but if you have, say, a friend with that experience, you’re more connected to them . . . and you realize how close it is.
In her view, stories enable this kind of empathetic connection.

Katherena invokes empathy as necessary for non-Indigenous Canadians to build deeper understandings of colonialism. She says, “Where settler Canadians I think don’t relate to the residential school question is because . . . they don’t have a medium. They don’t have something similar—unless they read a story about it that they connect to emotionally.” She expands,

Art is there to make you understand emotion in some way that you might not have understood it before. . . . Poetry does that because it’s trying to paint a picture using different words than you would normally use to describe it, and therefore you see it in a different way, and that’s what stories do too; you actually—and we need that empathy, and that’s what I think is lacking, and that’s where people hold onto, where settlers would hold onto those prejudices, because they don’t have empathy, because they’ve never been taught to be empathetic towards Indigenous people.

Without empathy, Katherena suggests, settler-Canadians “don’t understand.”

To build on this point, Katherena brings up an example from a local school district, “where it was mandated: they needed to have different, more Indigenous education in every single grade level. Every single core subject had to have an Indigenous component.” This mandate had its challenges:

Then you had all these teachers who had been around for about ten years, have absolutely no training in Aboriginal education, and they’re teachers—teachers are tired, teachers are overworked. And they’re suddenly told they have to do something, but they have no inroads . . . So then they get resentful,
because they don’t feel trained, because they don’t feel supported, because they don’t understand how to connect with this work. Katherena proposes, “You have to get the teachers on side with how they can connect. What do they relate to? What really caused them that moment of empathy?” Building that connection is necessary to motivating such teaching:

Whether it’s a child in residential school, whether it’s lack of clean drinking water, whether it’s poverty, whether it’s—whatever issue it is, you have to go through it through empathy. Otherwise you don’t care and you’re just going to be throwing out statistics to your classroom, and they might have all the facts right, but they still don’t have a connection to it. They still haven’t changed anything, and they still don’t see how it relates to them. Empathy makes you, 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, whether—whatever connection we have.

Such connections motivate teachers to learn more.

We move through a few discussions of education and of how important it is for non-Indigenous Canadians to learn about Indigenous histories and experiences, which leads us back to discussing how Katherena thinks about her own writing. She reflects,

I remember in the process of writing my poetry book . . . at some point my editor told me I had to decide where the activism paused and the poetry started. . . . What I write about is socially charged; it’s culturally charged. I don’t know why, other than that’s just part of the experience that I live.
She pauses here to refer to a line by an Indigenous writer—either Jordan Wheeler or Drew Hayden Taylor, as she says both take credit for it—who maintains, “Just to be born Indigenous in this country is a political act.” She explains, “Indigenous people were not supposed to be here in 2015. They were supposed to be eradicated.” So, she says, “Just to have any sort of cultural pride, cultural experience, in and of itself, is a political act.”

While her writing may inherently be political, Katherena does not write (primarily) with that purpose. She explains her thinking on this point:

There is a lot of social awareness, and maybe it aspires to be activism, in the work, but there’s also poetry there. There’s also writing there. When you get down to writing a story, you can’t write about a big social issue. You have to write a story. . . . When I write stories, I write primarily about Indigenous women, Métis women, who are inner-city residents, who have all of these things that are familiar to me. . . . As a critic, and as an academic, you can look at it being like, “Oh this is representative of this, and oh this is representative of that,” but as a writer my only activity and my only job is to write a story. I have to really let that social part go when I write a story. About this social dimension, she says, “I have to just trust that it’s going to come in,” without trying to “put that in.” It is fine to “include those parts” if a “character is going through those experiences, but I can’t be didactic with it.”

However, Katherena returns to the admission that “we’re still at the point where having those characters . . . is still revolutionary. So just by being Indigenous my characters are political.” This politicization exists “even if we’re telling a mundane story,” she insists, illustrating this point with an example from a writing workshop where
she was confronted with readers’ assumptions that her “characters were white,” when they were meant to be Indigenous. “It was striking to me,” she says, “how people make that assumption all the time, and how that completely non-political story . . . was political.” Reflecting on this, Katherena suggests, “That ambassador role comes at you really automatically and very naturally. You have to own it and take pride in it, and try to be as responsible with it as possible.”

I ask Katherena what she hopes her writing will accomplish. She replies, “My only job is to tell my story. If anyone can relate to that, like one person, then that’s all I can do.” She adds, “What I find amazing is when people tell me that they look at something in a new way because [of] something that I wrote.” “That’s magic,” she says: “I know other people do that to me all the time,” pointing to writing by Richard Van Camp and Warren Cariou as examples. She continues,

I don’t feel comfortable being a representative of any—but you are. You are. I identify myself as a Métis person. I am a representative of the Métis Nation no matter what. . . . You end up being a representative of who you are all the time, and you want to be as good an example as possible, because that’s your job. And though I’m not necessarily comfortable speaking for other people, because . . . there are so many different opinions, I’m also recognizing that people are thinking those things when I am talking. That I end up being this representative.

This dynamic leads her to emphasize, “This is my story” when she writes.

Katherena links this emphasis back to her earlier insistence on “what we’re allowed to say and whose stories we’re allowed to share”:
We don’t talk about this enough in Canadian literature, and in mainstream art culture in general, where cultural appropriation abounds. This idea that as writers we can tell absolutely any story we want, from any perspective, is wrong. . . . I think there’s also a responsibility there of being able to write something with permission. If you’re writing from a culture that’s not your own, or from a people that’s not your own, you need to get permission. You need to make sure that you’re including the community in doing that. We are long past the time where I think that non-Indigenous people need to tell Indigenous stories. I don’t think we ever had that time, but . . . now it’s become a very politically charged idea for a non-Indigenous person to tell an Indigenous story, because there is an Indigenous person who can tell that story better. I think we have to be really careful to make sure that we tell our own stories.

She gives an example from her own earlier work as “an early childhood educator.” She was creating stories for children “based on the Seven Teachings of the Anishinaabe people”: to do this, she worked with peers and Elders to ensure the stories were appropriate, and she wrote from her own perspective.

I invite Katherena to consider my broad question of why, or whether, Indigenous literatures matter. She responds, “They do, because as much as our experiences are universal in some [respects], . . . no one can tell that story like the person who lived it.” Such stories “are incredibly valuable”—not only because they “validate those voices,” and “not only because if we don’t listen to them we’ll lose them.” By this she means, “In many cases our Elders now are just speaking and sharing these stories and . . . there’s an
immediacy to having them share their stories.” It is important that “Indigenous literature provides the space for that to happen”; in fact it creates “so many open spaces.” She clarifies:

When I say Indigenous literature, I think about the literature made by Indigenous people, whether they feel Indigenous or cultural or not. Because I think that that perspective is one that is lacking in the world and I think that we’re only beginning to come into—we’re kind of just hitting our stride. . . .

Those voices are still absent in so many places. She suggests, “We’re still working at getting to that point of representation.”

Developing this point, Katherena characterizes the majority of literature as having been written by “white men over 50.” While these may be good stories,

We need to hear other stories. The stories that I’m interested in reading . . . are the ones that haven’t been told yet. There are so many stories that haven’t been told. There are so many people that are just coming into their power to tell stories. I’m so interested in what our young people are talking about, because young people coming up behind me . . . are the fastest growing demographic in this country. There’s a huge amount of people who have a completely new perspective and completely fresh ideas and fresh ways of looking at things.

It is important to listen to young people, she says: “There’s so much that we can learn from them. Just like there’s so much we’ve learned from the people that have come before us, we learn from the people that come after us.”

This insistence leads Katherena to share one “last story.” She tells it like this:
My dad loved John Wayne. He loved John Wayne movies. I remember movies like *Dances with Wolves* and *Last of the Mohicans* were really big in our house, just because they had Indians in them. . . . Even if they were the bad guy, even if they were completely unintelligible. . . . And that’s kind of sad, thinking about it, that those were my role models. . . . Now my girls have grown up with my crazy life and all these crazy role models. . . . My dad’s always been fiercely prideful of our culture, and I’m very lucky and fortunate to have had that my entire life, but I still had this other world that showed me a very different side of it. And my girls are just further down that line of knowing, and they come in and they have a completely different perspective. They never have seen a John Wayne movie that I know of. So it’s something different. I’m really curious as to the things they’re going to come up with—and then their children and then their children.

With that final evocation of pride and knowledge growing across the generations, we close our conversation.

4.11 Warren Cariou, Writer (11 July 2015, Winnipeg)

4.11.1 Warren’s Introduction

Warren Cariou was born into a family of Métis and European ancestry in Meadow Lake, Saskatchewan. He has published award-winning works of fiction and memoir as well as critical writing about Indigenous storytelling and literature. He co-directed two films about Aboriginal communities in western Canada’s tar sands region and has written numerous articles, stories and poems about Indigeneity and petroleum. He has worked
with several of Canada’s most accomplished Indigenous storytellers to promote cultural sovereignty through the performance of traditional narratives. He is a Canada Research Chair and Director of the Centre for Creative Writing and Oral Culture at the University of Manitoba.

4.11.2 My Conversation with Warren

As we begin, Warren describes “Meadow Lake,” where he grew up, as “a place where the difficulties of the colonial relationship . . . were very visible.” He explains how there were “a lot of First Nations people,” “a lot of Métis people,” and “a fair number of European settlers,” and how his “family was right in the middle of those communities.” He describes his dad’s side, a “gigantic family” of Métis people, “very boisterous, love to dance, love to have fun—and storytellers” and how he grew up amidst this family and “in this milieu of storytelling.” He also describes his mom’s family, which has “Norwegian” and “German ancestry,” and tells me how he grew up “between those two poles of very different communities.” Warren explains that he “didn’t fully understand” growing up that his “dad actually was Métis,” and adds, “It was really only as an adult that I came to understand what it meant.” He explains, “given that [Meadow Lake] was so racially divided and there was a lot of tension between the Native people and the white people, we thought that was the divide but in fact it’s much more complicated than that.”

Warren relates, “my adulthood . . . has been trying to reclaim that part of my identity and understand my connection to Métis communities, . . . also being sure that I’m not forgetting the other side of my identity.” He expands, “I think that part of Métis identity is that is that it’s always a negotiation” and adds, “As Riel says, we want to
honor our fathers and our mothers.” In his writing, he explains, he has been “working through and trying to understand” his identity and his community. He has been able to witness how his community has recognized that “so many of the people that we thought were white people in Meadow Lake are actually Métis.” He says, “Now there’s a pride there that was not there when I was growing up.”

I invite Warren to share a little more about what brought him to writing. He tells me, “Right from the very beginnings of my earliest memories,” there was “storytelling in my family”:

There’s a picture of me, which I actually have in Lake of the Prairies [his memoir], where I’m sitting on a child’s potty and I’m writing . . . I clearly can’t write yet (I was like two or something). So I had this idea that I was going to record the things around me, and I actually have very strong memories of having those old Hilroy writing tablets. . . . It really always, for me, comes from storytelling, and my desire to be a writer was . . . always because I wanted to write down the stories. . . . Maybe partly because of my mom’s side of the family and their shyness . . . I felt like, all these amazing larger-than-life aunts and uncles and my dad, I couldn’t quite do that, but I could write it down. . . . The storytelling . . . informs the writing that I do, and then that’s also why I ended up working in film . . . It’s a . . . desire to create a story out of other people’s stories.

He describes for me how this desire plays out in some of his recent film work and in his work with storytellers at the Centre for Creative Writing and Oral Culture, as well as in his academic work.
I ask Warren if anything in his formal education influenced this path. He mentions having had “a couple of English teachers in high school who were pretty supportive,” and one in particular who “encouraged us” to “dream big.” She “knew about the wider world,” he says, and “wanted us to think about other things beyond the borders of Meadow Lake.” This teacher was “an inspiration” but would also “challenge us”: “She was very directed toward saying, ‘okay, this is good, but I expect that you can do better.’”

This anecdote leads Warren to suggest, “Our Aboriginal writers, now, sometimes they lack that.” He explains,

I think even some published writers also are at that level where they could go to another level, but they’re already getting accolades for what they’re doing. So in my work as an editor, I work with some Aboriginal writers who are already really good and try to raise that bar . . . because I think it’s great to have a receptive audience, but if the audience is being receptive just because they think, “Oh isn’t it good that a Native person wrote this,” that’s very patronizing.

He relates this point to discussions at a recent workshop he co-facilitated on editing Aboriginal writing. For instance, participants there were discussing what it means for there to be “a real demand now amongst publishers for Indigenous stories.” Warren suggests that this demand is “great,” but qualifies, “I think a lot of times the publishers don’t understand what they’re actually looking for. They just think ‘this is hot.’” Publishers “sometimes . . . don’t understand” how Indigenous writing is “different.” It’s “so interesting to see,” Warren says, how “Aboriginal writing has reached a point where it really is one of the hottest areas within Canadian literature.” By comparison, he
explains, “when I started my PhD [in] 1993” and wanted “to do it on Aboriginal writing . . . I was told, ‘that’s not a field.’” So “things have changed a lot for the positive,” and “a lot of voices are being heard now . . . but I think we still need . . . those standards to be high.” He argues that it is important to “be sure that the reasons that these writers are being published and promoted are the good ones.”

I ask Warren what motivates him and whether he thinks about community in relation to his work. “Community,” he responds, “is a nebulous concept,” but it “often takes the form of family, or takes the form of particular individuals that you have a relationship with.” He explains,

I think it’s much more common for Indigenous writers and Indigenous scholars to be thinking about: “How does my work represent my community in the larger world? . . . What will my community think about this? And am I being ethical in my representations of what I’m doing here?”

He points out that “non-Indigenous publishers” do not necessarily “think much about” such questions around responsibility to community. He describes how, “if something is inaccurate” or “really shouldn’t be brought into the public domain and it’s published, the person who is going to get flack from that is the Indigenous person who’s involved in it,” along with “the community.” He adds that this “may not be a legal issue, but it will be another kind of issue, a much more important one.”

Warren connects this discussion to “the notion of who you’re writing for,” meaning “what community you’re representing.” He argues,

As an Indigenous writer or Indigenous scholar, I think your work always does represent more than your own perspective, whether you want it that way or
not. But I think for most artists and scholars in that position, it’s not like they would want to not be associated with their community; that is who they are.

So I think that developing and fostering that relationship is part of their work. I ask him how he understands this for himself. “That’s complicated, in a way,” he replies. For “Métis people, very often it’s complicated because [of] the definitions of what is Métis” and of how “you connect to the community.” He explains, “not really understanding” or “identifying myself as Métis when I was growing up” contributes to the feeling that it is “still an ongoing negotiation.” He shares, “I’ve been really welcomed by people in various Métis communities—I don’t think there is one Métis community—. . . and been encouraged to explore the complexities of my perspective on Métis identity.” “I think I’ve felt blessed by that,” he confides, by “some of the Elders that have come to talk to me and have. . . gone out of their way to help me and to give me advice.” Warren reflects further on these connections:

I think it’s a little different when you see a writer who comes from a very specific—especially if it’s a smaller community. . . but there they speak for that community whether they want to or not, and then maybe there are problems with being seen from the outside to be speaking for your people in a tokenistic way. I think with Métis it’s a little different because there is such a broad panoply of different kinds of Métis.

“For me now,” he explains, “it’s more really about specific relationships with specific people.” He speaks a bit about ranging perspectives on Métisness in his own family and says, “People’s ideas of themselves are very fluid” and “subject to revision, and that’s not a bad thing, necessarily.”
In response to what Warren has shared, I reciprocate, sharing some of my own family experiences and feelings around being Métis. For instance, I tell him how friends and mentors have taught me that “it’s not really about your own identity questions; it’s about your responsibility questions,” which helps me to focus on what work I can contribute. Warren expands on this idea:

I have thought about this and read about this for . . . maybe 20 years [and] I still haven’t got a final easy definition of who I am, and I don’t think I probably ever will. I do feel more like I have allegiances and connections, really close connections to particular people and particular family members, but also others who have . . . given me the gift of showing me what my role could be, you know to help me with that. . . . It comes back to relationship and how you act rather than just who you are.

“Or claim you are,” he adds, pointing to the potential for issues if “Indigenous identity is purely performance based.” He says, “Someone who knows that they are not Indigenous and pretends to be, obviously there’s a problem there.” However, he explains, “within Métis contexts there was a lot of shame for a long time and a lot of people didn’t want to talk about things, and so trying to come out from under that, there are a lot of people who are uncertain where they really come from.” He adds,

And I think the general public, the non-Native public especially, just want to know, “Are you or aren’t you [Indigenous]?” And that goes right back to John A. Macdonald. That’s what he wanted. And in fact the Métis—he was okay with Indians being Indians, he was okay with the settlers being settlers but Métis could not—that was not an option. And he enforced that—with
guns. . . So I think that’s very noticeable in the history of the Métis, but just the amazing historical fact that the Métis continue to exist and are flourishing now is a pretty incredible thing in the face of all of that—that there are so many people that say, “We are still here. We are not going to be erased by your need to draw a boundary.”

Warren finds this continuance “fascinating and inspiring.”

I ask Warren if he sees the literary arts as part of that flourishing, and he affirms that they have “been crucial.” He connects to our earlier discussion of “models and mentors” and explains, “One of the other people who I didn’t meet at the time but who I was very influenced by nonetheless was Maria Campbell.” He tells me this story:

Her nephew Stan was in my class . . . He came to class, and he was all proud, like “This is my aunt. She wrote this book. My auntie wrote this!” and I was like, “No way! Really?” and so . . . Maria Campbell was—though I didn’t meet her for years—she was the first writer that I thought is a real person who’s still alive and I’m connected to through my friend. So reading *Halfbreed* . . . was a big thing for me, to know that somebody . . . who is Métis, who is Aboriginal, could write a book . . . That was a big inspiration. Obviously *Halfbreed* had a big impact on the national consciousness in terms of . . . say[ing], “Look, we are here. We are still here.” . . . A number of other texts in that [19]70s and earlier era did . . . have a real impact and bring the national attention to the fact that Indigenous people haven’t disappeared as they were predicted to do. But at the same time those writers also—really as
Maria Campbell did for me when I was a kid—they provided a kind of role
model for others all across the country.

Warren sums up his answer to my question by saying, “I think writing has had kind of an
outsized impact, actually, on people’s ability to understand or to picture the validity of
their culture.”

Shifting our conversation back to storytelling, Warren contends that writing has
an outsized impact for what are “in some ways unfortunate reasons.” He explains,

Within our Western system of education, we’re educated to think that a book
is the ultimate form of an idea. And so when it becomes a book then there is a
sense of accomplishment and pride . . . It’s a commodity that has an
intellectual cachet to it. I’m conflicted about that because . . . I work with
storytellers and learn from storytellers and some of them don’t have books,
and most of them are largely unknown. They don’t get anywhere near the
cultural attention that they should. And our stories generally—traditional
stories of Indigenous communities but also everyday stories that are told—are
almost invisible in a lot of contemporary culture, mass culture. So I find it
interesting that it’s when those stories are turned into a commodity, and
placed into this system of literary value, then they can be celebrated. Whereas
the oral stories are not. . . . I think there is still a very strong colonial bias
toward text and one of the reasons I’m so interested in stories as performed
stories is because they are very resistant to commodification.

Together Warren and I connect these ideas to oral culture and to efforts that writers make
to put oral elements into written texts.
I ask Warren to say more about why storytelling and oral culture are important. He says this is an important area of consideration in his current work, as he is trying to understand “the value of oral storytelling as oral storytelling” and “that relationship that happens when a storyteller is telling a story.” He goes on to say,

I think, for all our rhetoric about orality, . . . in the academic world and in the larger non-Indigenous community, and also I think in a lot of Aboriginal people as well, we have been colonized to think that it needs to be commodified to be valued. That it needs to be turned into a book, or it needs to be recorded, to be saved, quote unquote, because that sort of salvage anthropology thing goes on with storytelling, and I do it too. But I’m very conflicted about that because when you record it, you think you own it, but you don’t. And to me the story actually doesn’t exist in that thing anymore. . . . It’s not that there’s no spirit of the story in there, but there’s a lot more to the story than just that individual telling that gets recorded or than that commodity that circulates as a thing. 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. So I’m trying to understand . . . what place oral stories have in the contemporary world, and so much of what I see is this real mania for recording them. . . . To me, if a story is just recorded and then archived somewhere, then it is dead. It’s just a thing, just like everything else in the capitalist world. If you take the time to actually learn it and remember it in your body, and share it in some other way—where it’s
appropriate, with the protocols that are attached to it, if they are—then I think it has a different life.

Warren notes that recordings can be used as part of keeping oral stories alive, and shares the example of storyteller Louis Bird using recordings as part of his process of learning stories from Elders and making them “part of who he is.”

Warren brings in the notion of “the story as a fragile thing” and “orality as a fragile thing” through which “we can see the state trying to interrupt Indigenous cultures.” He refers to Anishinaabe writer Basil Johnston’s (1990) phrase, “one generation from extinction,” in making this point. That is, he says, “If you can just stop the transmission of all that cultural information from one generation to another,” then “a particular Aboriginal community and their culture is disappeared.” Warren counters, “I think orality is stronger, though, than that might make us believe.” This way of “always thinking about stories in relation to loss is a problem, because I think stories are about plenitude and about relationships that are personal and present.”

I share with Warren some of my own thinking around stories and relationships, as well as relationships in learning. I describe my growing understanding that, when teachers ask me for support and resources for teaching Indigenous literatures, what they actually need is a way of working out those relationships, because it is not finding the material that is difficult, but rather developing a relationship with it. I explain how I am thinking about how best to support teachers with such challenges. Warren points to one of his own ideal approaches, which is to “access enough funding to bring a storyteller or two into my class.” He says, “One of the factors in the devaluing of storytelling is that sometimes it’s just thought, ‘Oh that’s for kids,’ which is really unfortunate . . . because
these stories are not simple.” Certainly they “often” have “elements” that “are meant for
kids,” but “there are layers” of complexity. He suggests, “I think there may be some
possibility within the school system for making that a part of the learning process around
Indigenous literatures.” There are opportunities in teaching Indigenous literature to
“foster” understandings of “the contemporaneity of Indigenous oral cultures.” He points
out, it “may not be possible” to “have a storyteller come into the class,” but there are
“many wonderful resources online.” For instance, “great storytellers” have “posted their
own stories” and it is possible to “at least have a video or two that the students can
interact with” and then pursue through further inquiry. He says, “I think that’s one thing
that digital technologies have been enabling: . . . thinking more about performance as
something that is shareable in a broader way than it used to be.”

Warren brings our discussion back to written literature and writers who seek to
“apply techniques from oral storytelling . . . and to mimic some of the things that
storytelling can do.” He says, “I think that can be transformative for readers” and
expands,

Thomas King is one of the ones who comes to mind . . . He’s writing this
high postmodern kind of writing, very complicated, very sophisticated, . . .
very aesthetic . . . and yet it also is in this conversational kind of idiom at
times. I think that’s very interesting for readers who are not familiar with
Indigenous cultures to get a sense of—this can be really complicated and
seem extremely simple at first, which is what stories at their best always are
. . . I think that it’s something that we’re moving toward: . . . more openness
toward thinking of the apparent simplicity of an oral story being able to hold
all the complexity that any kind of discourse can hold. So that, I think, is something that’s also great in terms of Indigenous literatures in the classroom, and for younger readers as well, because there isn’t that barrier necessarily that high levels of diction and things like that are going to pose for the kids, and yet the work can be as complex as any. . . . I think it brings a better awareness of the multiple levels of meaning that language can hold. I connect these points to the ways in which young people might be taught about histories and social issues, or learn them through stories. Warren mentions the frequently taught book My Name is Seepeetza, pointing out its “simplicity” alongside how it “contains so much” and “is getting at our very difficult history” by “opening the discussion.”

Warren builds upon this example, suggesting, “The standard historical, chronological timeline approach doesn’t really give people an opening to understand the personal impact.” That is, “Statistics and all that—they’re important, but stories make it so much more personal.” He elucidates,

That question of issues and how we teach all of the horrible things that have happened here in the history of the colonial project—to me, I think the stories are a really good way of doing that. Also . . . they make it more personal, which can make it more traumatizing . . . so I think that has to be kept in mind . . . but I think that the imaging oneself into a situation—literature is very good at that, and more standard, straightforward history is not necessarily so good at that.

Warren and I share some thoughts around teaching difficult material and the emotional experiences students may have in such classes.
We come around to the notion of empathy. Warren explains that he actually does a “unit on empathy” with his students in his first-year courses because “one of the things” literature “is really good at is creating or fostering empathy.” He continues,

That makes a way for the students to think about things, not just in those very technical terms of, here’s colonialism, we need to know about that, we need to know the apparatus of how that was deployed, and we need to know, maybe, the psychology of the colonial imagination and how what it’s really all about is just theft of land and resources and trying . . . to ignore the existence of Indigenous people. But, I think, 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 argues that this kind of perspective is “more of a potential building ground for movement toward reconciliation or movement toward some kind of action.” Reflecting on his phrasing, he says, “Maybe reconciliation is too grandiose a term, but movement toward some kind of working through.”

Focusing on the emotional aspects of learning such material and the need to support students in processing it, Warren suggests,

When this comes to the level of curriculum where we’re talking about slavery or we’re talking about colonialism of the Americas, imperialism, . . . it becomes too much about facts and figures. And of course those are crucial to bolster the stories, to recognize the truth of what has happened. But it’s such an emotional thing that, that’s what we need to—and I think probably more so with young readers as well—to try and give them the opportunity and the
tools to deal with this emotionally. And I think because often—and I think we see this in the public discourse as well—there are a lot of people who just don’t want to think about it, about what’s happened and how they’re complicit . . . I think there’s a psychology of guilt there and people just respond by shutting that out completely and othering everyone who wants to say, “Hey, we need to deal with this.” But it’s an emotional thing; I think people need to go through a whole emotional process.

Warren speaks about his experiences of taking students up to “Native communities” in “Northern Manitoba.” He shares a story about students talking with “community members” about “living conditions.” He describes watching some of the “non-Indigenous students” go through a kind of “traumatization,” in which “they suddenly recognized the reality of this: this is not just a technical thing that they learned about in school. This is real.” He thinks they were “surprised” because “they thought they knew it, but they actually didn’t know it at all, because they hadn’t had a relationship with somebody who was experiencing that.” While it is not always possible to take students into communities or to have “community members from Northern Manitoba come to every classroom and say ‘this is what my life is like,’” Warren suggests that “literature can help us that way: . . . a story can help to do something similar.” For students, getting “a sense” of “someone’s life” from a story “can go some way toward them thinking about and working through the emotions of” the experiences that story describes.

Warren brings these considerations to the broader context of Canada. He discusses,
As a nation we are at the very beginning of trying to work through the emotions that will have to lead to some kind of action later. But just after the TRC now we’re just in this very raw moment. . . . A lot of Canadians don’t want to think about it at all. There are a lot who do . . . but I don’t think they really yet have figured out how they’re going to approach that, how they’re going to process their complicity in what is still happening— not just what has happened in the past, but was is still happening as well. So that . . . is an emotional process. It’s one that involves the unconscious a lot. And again this is the kind of thing where facts and figures don’t really work very well. And so I think that’s where stories and literature can really help us. It can take us into that space where it’s about a relationship or we’re starting to get a sense of the real impact on real people’s lives. . . . 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 are not Native but who want to learn more and just want to get a sense of what it must have been like, or what it still is like. . . . This popularity, for lack of a better term, of some residential school memoirs in the last little while . . . A lot of Canadians really want to understand not only how could this have happened but what was it like for someone who actually was in it.

It “can make a big difference over time,” he maintains, “for people to understand that.”

We discuss further the increased reception of Indigenous literatures. Speaking from his experience of “being here in Winnipeg,” Warren says, “it’s very interesting because we have such a large and vibrant Indigenous community.” He describes how,
At my Centre we often have Aboriginal writers, or storytellers, and have events, and we usually have them downtown or the North End, and we get huge turnouts all the time, and lots of Aboriginal people coming to the events at bookstores as well. So . . . it’s not just the non-Native audience out there, but there’s such a support and pride that people in our communities feel when they see, “Hey, there’s somebody, who’s one of us, who’s telling a story that’s important” and they really support that and they really enjoy coming out. And I think that’s true to a probably lesser extent in other communities: just that the fact of so many Aboriginal people here in Winnipeg makes it very noticeable.

It is “a fantastic thing to do the work that I do,” he says, and “to be in this place.” He acknowledges that, while he has focused so much in our conversation on the work of storytellers, he has to “give a lot of credit also to the writers who have” brought “some of the teachings that are there in the stories” or “the ways in which the stories approach narrative” in the “literary realm.” He points to how “crucial” it is that this work has the “effect” of “making people feel proud of who they are.”

Warren shares examples from the reception of his and Niigaan Sinclair’s (2012) co-edited collection *Manitowapow: Aboriginal writings from the land of water*, which had a large number of well-attended book launches across the province and was well received by Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences. “To see all the Aboriginal people who came out” to each “launch and to see the pride in their faces was incredible.” He says, “For Indigenous people, I think there’s a great sense that our stories can be shared and we can now have access to them again if they’ve been lost or ignored.” With
collections like *Manitowapow*, people are able to “look at the richness of what’s been accomplished in our communities.” This book was also “a bestseller,” indicating more interest and a broader readership than Warren had expected. He says,

This is a really great way to see how literature can remind people of the value of their stories and can build pride and build a sense that, “Hey we do have something really valuable to contribute.” . . . So that can be on the level of *Manitowapow* where there’s a huge event with lots of writers and lots of community members who come, and there’s such an amazing sense of community well-being that becomes a part of that. But I think . . . it doesn’t have to be on a big celebration level. It could be also . . . an individual young writer or young student who just reads that and says, “Hey, you know, I might be able to do that.” Or, “These are stories that people value.”

Warren points out that it is a “new” phenomenon, “for Indigenous people to feel that their contributions and their culture” are “valuable within the communities” but also “outside of the communities.”

This feeling that contributions can be valued is “really important,” Warren says, and explains,

So much of what I see in my own hometown also is how shame becomes internalized. . . . I’ve seen that play out in people’s lives in really tragic ways. From early on, I see that some of my friends that I went to school with—wonderful, amazing, intelligent people—ended up on tragic paths, and I don’t know that it could have saved them . . . but I think having a sense of pride and a belief that your contribution can be valued is—it has an incalculable effect.
on someone’s future. And I think really seeing the stories being celebrated, and seeing that they’re valued, in a book form, can build that.

Warren returns to how he has “been criticizing the book as a capitalist commodity,” and how “it is partly because of that cachet that the book has within the capitalist system that we feel it as the ultimate validating object.” However, he notes, “that can be used for good, too.” That is, “Editors, artists, writers, have been able . . . to help build the pride a community can have, by bringing these stories into a book form.” Warren mentions an “anthology of Métis literature” he is working on with Gregory Scofield and says, “There’s a lot of room for more” collections like this from “other Indigenous communities.” For instance, “there isn’t an anthology of Cree literature that I know of.”

In closing our conversation, I ask Warren for any last emphases he wants to make. He reiterates what he has said about the importance of “fostering a sense of pride in the people.” Building on that point, he describes, “Going up to various Northern communities as well and seeing when we can have a writer come from that community and give a reading and what effect that has on the students, that’s amazing.” As a last emphasis, Warren asserts his “ongoing commitment . . . to try to find a way to give storytelling and storytellers more of a prominence.” He says, “I think we need to do the same kind of thing that’s been done for literature, to show the world, look how incredibly important and engaging this is.” While this work is taking place, “it’s at an earlier stage . . . in terms of the broader sense of its value.” Warren concludes, “So that’s something that I think hopefully our educators can be a part of as well, by trying to incorporate storytelling into the classroom as much as they can.”
4.12 Sharron Proulx-Turner, Writer (22 September 2015, Calgary)

4.12.1 Sharron’s Introduction

Sharron Proulx-Turner is a member of the Métis Nation of Alberta, originally from the Ottawa River Valley Métis. She’s a two-spirit nokomis, mom, writer and community worker. Where the Rivers Join (1995), a memoir (Beckylane), was a finalist for the Edna Staebler Award for creative non-fiction. what the auntys say (2002) was a finalist for the Gerald Lampert Prize for first book of poetry, and she is reading her blanket with her hands (2008) was shortlisted for the Governor General Award. She has two additional books, she walks for days/ inside a thousand eyes/ a two-spirit story (2008) and the trees are still bending south (2012). One Bead at a Time (as told by Lakota Elder Beverly Little Thunder) will be released in Spring 2016 by Inanna Publications, York University, Toronto. Sharron is published in several anthologies, journals and magazines.

4.12.2 My Conversation with Sharron

Sharron asks me to listen and take notes as we speak rather than using a recorder. After our meeting, she reviews my rough notes and enriches them with her own words. All quotations, for this conversation, are from these written notes.

Sharron begins our conversation by situating our conversation in place—we met on a beautiful autumn afternoon in Calgary—and expressing her thanks:

Before I begin I would like to thank the Creator for this beautiful day, for the sun coming up one more time in my life. For bringing us together like this. I would like to thank the Peoples of Treaty 7 Territory—the Stoney, the
Peoples from Tsuut’ina, the Peoples of Eden Valley, the Blackfoot Peoples.

Always, the Métis peoples.

Next, Sharron tells me about when she started writing. She says, “I’ve always written,” and shares, “I had dyslexia and a severe speech impediment when I was small and in the 50s they thought I was ‘retarded’—but after passing an intelligence test, a lady in the school helped me and taught me language, writing and speech skills.” She shares,

Then in grade four I was required to write a poem for a poetry contest. I had a poem to hand in that I’d painstakingly written, and then woke in the night the night before the due date with another whole poem in my sleepy mind. I won the contest with that poem and I was convinced for years I’d cheated because I wrote a poem that came to me in a dream.

Sharron tells me, “Growing up, I didn’t have any privacy at home, and I married a man in my early twenties and lived without privacy there as well.” However, she continued writing: “I carried on my need for expressing myself in some small way and I would write on little scraps, napkins, bits of paper like this”—she shows me a small paper from her pocket—“and then throw them out afterwards.”

By throwing out these slips of writing, she says, “I was able to maintain my privacy,”

Or so I believed. Just after I returned to university in my early thirties my marriage fell apart. On the final day in the marriage house I went from room to room to check that nothing was left behind. On the top shelf of the closet in the room I used for drawing and sewing were dozens of small pieces of paper—a shock for me. He had retrieved them from the trash over the years,
saved them, and put them here for me to find. I felt violated and hurt and speechless. I sat on the floor of the room and wept. I wept for my children, for the years they’d been subjected to this man’s wrath. I wept for myself. For all women and children trapped in abusive relationships. I was afraid to be on my own. Petrified. My poverty would be stifling. Palpable. I knew that. There on the floor I started to read the notes out loud, one after the other and I felt hope from my own words. The final note I read I said I would write my story. And I would. I sat on that floor and thanked the Creator for everything I had, took the notes, and threw them back into the garbage—not because of shame—but to begin to let go of the weight of that past. I knew I could. In that moment, I knew I would, through my writing.

Sharron tells me that, “To speed up that letting go process, I was going back to school, to university again.” She describes the steps that brought her from Eastern Canada to Alberta and to her continuing education.

“The truth is I wasn’t especially interested in university. I was lost,” Sharron says about coming to Alberta. “So many people. So few Métis and Natives. To make matters more complicated, I was and am a very introverted person and I was super shy.” So “What motivated me?” She explains,

My Métis grandmother wanted me to go to school, to university. I wanted to give back, to my family, to community. My grandmother said something like, ma petite, you have what it takes. It’s your duty to go to school, for the generations who follow. I didn’t know the first thing about post secondary. It wasn’t part of our family history and like you said about yourself, I was
interested in escaping into literature, not sharing my ideas—written or otherwise.

“Yet over the years,” Sharron tells me, “reading and speaking about my writing has helped me to speak and write better, and more.”

Sharron describes her studies in Alberta. “I settled on a literature / composition class with Aritha van Herk,” she tells me, “Not that I knew who she was at the time. I’ll admit.”

She was an icon and she was (let’s just say) a firm teacher. But she did something that changed the course of my life. Aritha van Herk got us to write an “essay” in exam booklets at the beginning of term. A couple classes later, she returned the booklets by first slamming them down on her desk and declaring in a broad-stroked booming voice that only two people passed. I was one of them. She wrote a comment on in red ink on a recipe card (which I wish I still had) that said, “This is no essay but you sure as hell can write.” I had no idea. I learned [later] that she was a writer, from one of the men on the cleaning staff when I left a book behind in her classroom.

Sharron describes how she deduced the “formula” for writing A-grade academic essays during this time.

Later in her studies, Sharron “took creative writing courses with poets Chris Wiseman and Fred Wah.” She outlines how her practice developed through this experience:

Chris Wiseman taught me to lose my fear and Fred Wah (another icon with firm mannerisms), though stuck as he was on one poetic movement, was very
good at helping people to understand the strengths in their writing. I was
shocked at first that we had to read our writing out in class and I guess that
was when I really started writing. Both of the men were excellent at getting
us to think through our role as writers. But most of my knowledge and
understanding about my writing came from the other students in the classes. I
took the courses in the later 1980s and it was 1990 before I published. To this
day, I am a slow writer, so I have written 5 books. The sixth is coming out in
the spring, 2016, a memoir spoken orally to me by Lakota Elder Beverly
Little Thunder.

She tells me more about this memoir, emphasizing, “It will be in her name and the
royalties will be hers, of course. It is her story as told to me. I kept to the spirit of her oral
story.” She adds, “Hers is a beautiful story. I am fortunate to have had this experience.”

I ask Sharron about community and how she thinks about her writing. She
responds,

I am a Métis writer; I can’t write from another perspective. Each of us is
unique; our experiences are different. For example, my mom was fostered out
as a farm slave during the late 1930s and 40s, called the “War Years” by the
government. This was the excuse or “reason” used at the time, but the real
goal was to take the Métis out of the child. My history has affected me, and
my children, and my grandchildren. Yet it amazes me how much our
community is growing and has grown—despite the internalized hatred, the
pain. As my mom used to say, these memories are caught in our DNA. They
are part of us. We are walking miracles, she would say. We survived the brutality. We can, and we will, survive the healing.

She reiterates, “So I’m a Métis writer; I can’t be anything else.”

Sharron speaks from her experiences editing “collections of Native, Inuit and Métis writing” and sitting on “granting juries.” She points to perspectives from “some White, mainstream editors,” who have asked, for instance, “Why do all Indigenous writers write about the same things, over and over again? It’s just so boring, and bad writing.” She has seen, also, that “the lowest ratings are consistently given by mainstream jurists for the Native writers.” Sharron analyzes this issue:

Native writing is pigeonholed. A round peg in a square hole. Non-Native people’s expectations of Native writing are generally extremely myopic. In some ways you can’t fault people for that, because they are trained that way. But what of people on juries? What of people who really should know? It’s important for many people to understand that Western education is limited, let’s say in its scope. It’s dead / live wealthy white men and women (on juries and in the texts read), and that has not changed much: My grandkids are reading the same books I read when I was a kid, and that was 50-something years ago. It’s still a big problem.

She suggests, “Things are beginning to shift, but from within the Indigenous communities themselves more than from anywhere else.” She adds, “Having mandatory Indigenous studies courses throughout school—for everyone—from the beginning with the little ones to the end of university would be a good beginning.”
Sharron tells me about visiting a social work course once where students were “planning to work with Native people” but “didn’t even know whose land they were on or what Treaty Territory they were living on.” They “had not read a Native author”—though they had heard of “the radio program Dead Dog Café hosted by writer, educator and university professor Dr. Thomas King.” We discuss what attitudes these students might have had about their future work with Native people. Connecting back to respect for Indigenous perspectives, Sharron tells me, “At the time I did my Master’s, I was not allowed to refer to Indigenous women’s theories of writing or theoretical works.” By comparison, “Today I understand that has changed, otherwise you would not be working on your thesis today.”

Sharron tells me about her experiences teaching at the post-secondary level, working to incorporate Indigenous and anti-racist content and pedagogies and encountering both validation and serious opposition. She connects her thoughts on audience and writing to her experiences teaching:

My intended audience is Indigenous (Native, Métis, Inuit), and whoever else may benefit. It was the same when I was teaching. The students I was concerned with first were the Indigenous students. If they were comfortable enough in any classroom then I knew it was a good environment. Generally, when the Native students were comfortable, the non-Native students were not. But I have to say overall (I taught a lot of classes at Mount Royal) students were appreciative of what they learned.

Extending this last point, she explains, “I still hear from people today—new people and ones I continue to hear from—and it’s been a long time, 15 years at least.” From “both
Indigenous and non-Indigenous students,” Sharron says she hears that “their experiences in the classroom were life-altering (in a good way).”

Connecting back to my other conversations with teachers, I ask Sharron how she would advise teachers who are struggling with the potential riskiness of teaching Indigenous literatures or concerns about backlash. She counsels,

Don’t work alone. Find someone(s) who are like-minded, and if they are non-Native, seek out those true allies. There are some. Check out the “Indigenizing Education” efforts across Canada that stem from the Truth and Reconciliation Recommendations. I would say, too, look up the texts that are recommended by community members, by Native educators and Elders who are helping in the education area. Most urban schools, for example, have advisory Elders and Native Support Workers, who advise teachers and students. I would say if you are urban, reach out to them. There are lists and some Indigenous texts there that are recommended by Native writers and educators. Google Native writers. 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.

We discuss other potential challenges facing teachers. For instance, Sharron says, “Parents? Non-Native parents may complain, but then a book written by a Native author is no different from this or that other recommended text.” In saying this, she connects to Alberta’s lists of recommended resources for English, which do include some Indigenous authors. Sharron continues, “I would say to teachers too, get yourselves a thicker skin. Be
diplomatic and kind, but firm. Sometimes the most unexpected people will complain and sometimes a thick collective skin is needed. So, again I recommend, don’t work alone.”

Sharron cautions that certain feelings can disable teachers from standing up for this work. She advises,

Also, if you are White, put your white guilt in the cupboard. If you are a Person of Colour watch out that guilt doesn’t creep up on you, too. In a three-day workshop for Native women and women of Colour several years ago, the facilitator—Lee Maracle—guided the women to come together in solidarity and understanding. During that workshop Lee Maracle declared, “guilt paralyzes.” Having been raised Catholic, the truth of this stuck with me. Guilt is something that takes away both passion and compassion. Guilt is a waste of time. Guilt paralyses.

Although “non-Native” teachers may at times feel “afraid they’re going to do something wrong when they teach ‘Native content’ in the classroom” or may “get continuous pressure from certain parents about what they’re doing,” Sharron exhorts,

It’s so important for the teachers to stand their ground, to remain sensitive to the material. Parents and other teachers who have issues can always come and visit. Come to the classroom. Invite the Elder and the Native support workers. In Native cultures, we do things in an active and participatory way, in an experiential way. People expect to sit back and be lectured to in Western classrooms, but that ain’t gonna happen in some Native teachers’ and allies’ classrooms.
Offering this advice, Sharron emphasizes the importance of “decolonizing.” She says that is “the first concern, from my point of view. We have all been colonized.”

Decolonizing is “hard work,” Sharron says, but teachers have avenues of support and that work can have an impact. Sharron reflects,

Demystifying our different ways is a start. As a student of literature, as a reader and writer, I ask, what better way to help begin that decolonizing process than to read a book? And talk to real people. As I mentioned, urban schools all have Aboriginal teams that teachers can bring in and consult with. That would really help them if they were having problems: to get to know those Native peoples on the Aboriginal teams.

As for the fear of getting things wrong, Sharron advises,

Try not to be afraid of making mistakes. We all make mistakes. If we didn’t make mistakes we would never learn. That sounds corny, and can be difficult to accept, but as a writer of poetry and prose, as a Métisse woman in today’s world, I’ll quote my Aunty, who has said to me, a mistake is a gem—like turquoise or ammolite or sweetgrass or sage. A mistake is a learning tool for success, my girl, so suck it up. It is what it is.

I tell Sharron how these perspectives resonate with what some teachers have said about learning through mistakes and the significance of the work despite its challenges.

We return our conversation to writing and her reasons for writing. Sharron shares this with me:

Elder and artist, writer and photographer Shirley Bear once told me, “It is your duty to write.” She went on to say that, like all the arts, writing is a gift.
When Creator gives a gift it is our duty to share that gift. My Aunty said the same thing. My grandmother.

Sharron tells me how these perspectives bolster her continuing writing and counteract insinuations that she is “wasting . . . time” or should feel “shame.” Sharron shares this:

Deepest truth be told, I write because I have to and I write equally because I love to. It’s because I write a lot of autobiographical material that the process of both the writing for me and the reading for the reader can be difficult in the extreme. I experienced more trauma than most people and I am able to share some of that trauma, to be a witness to atrocities in my lifetime that involved not only me, but too many others who are not able to write, but who are readers. I find reading the stories of others helps me in my life in deep and meaningful ways. I hope my writing can help others and at the same time be not too frightening to endure. According to my mom, living through heinous childhood experiences changes our DNA. We must get it out, she would say.

Through the arts is one important way. I feel this in my bones.

Sharron emphasizes, “In all this, I try not to write about others. I was taught that you do not tell or write somebody else’s story.” Nodding to our conversation, she says, “It’s one thing if you have permission, like you do in this project, in writing.” As an example, she says, “I work with many Indigenous students. I don’t write about their stories.” I reply with an acknowledgement that research has to be careful not to prey upon others’ stories.

Sharron questions “government-run programs” that contribute to “knowledge-making theft” as they gather and disseminate “personal stories” and “traditional stories” from Indigenous peoples, and suggests that, in her experience, “Most good work is being
done in education.” She lauds the work and knowledge of “teachers in schools” and remarks, “I would say that Indigenous ways of knowing are more respected in education disciplines overall, though my own knowledge in this area is limited.” She notes her awareness that “at [the University of Calgary] they are trying to implement change.” We discuss a number of experiences and ideas emerging from this topic.

Returning to the relationship between literatures and learning, we talk about what impacts can be made when people read Indigenous texts. Sharron says,

People learn about Indigenous peoples from Indigenous literature—through all the arts. People who hold Western values don’t realize, when reading the “classics,” people are learning about (mostly dead, White, male, UK/American) White people. If only people could get a sense of love and pride for who they are (all peoples) instead of having their backs up and backlash at the ready. I think it’s key to people’s understanding of where we are and whose land we are on, to be able to understand that the future holds the potential for something very different for partnerships between non- and Indigenous peoples, government aside. Through the arts. Nobody’s going anywhere: There are no White peoples going back to Europe or other, newer immigrants going anywhere else; we’re all here to stay.

These partnerships also matter, Sharron says, because “the Native population is growing at an exponential rate.” Sharron adds,

We are going to have a much larger number of artists and writers and dancers and actors and singers, teachers and lawyers and doctors and judges and even politicians, Mommys and Daddys, Nokomises and Mosoms and auntys and
uncles and cousins, sisters and brothers—you name it—twenty years from now. And still more peoples will be coming out of the Métis closet and claiming their identity, more Algonquin peoples and other oppressed Nations. This point builds on an earlier part of our conversation, in which Sharron describes the historical violent repression of Métis identities in Québec, where she has ancestral roots. She states, “It takes fortitude to be Métis,” and shares, “My Aunty says when Quebec wakes up there’ll be six million more Indians.”

When it comes to learners in schools, Sharron emphasizes, “The important thing for me is to have a child go into a classroom and see themselves represented in something they’re reading.” She thinks of her grandchild’s education: “Even with all the books and all the arts available in this glorious system, for example, my granddaughter has not read about herself in school.” Sharron shares this experience, noting “My granddaughter gave me permission to tell this story with her guidance”:

In her Language Arts class, she was writing a futuristic story about the effects of pollution on all peoples. Her story was about what can happen, but also the character development was powerful and the plot was complex. The story took a few weeks to write and she kept showing me her progress and her process. I was fascinated by her level of understanding, not just of the world around her, but of the mechanics and structure needed to write a good story. I was humbled by her talent. When she was ready to include her conclusion she was so proud the audience was still uncertain as to what would happen next. I said to her something like, “You’re almost finished your story and your audience doesn’t know your character is Native.” Her response was, “What if
they aren’t Native?” What else can they be, I wondered aloud? I said to her, you pick up a book by a Native writer and they will say who they are and where they’re from somewhere in their bio. If they don’t say, the reader can assume the author is White and the story is appropriated by a non-Native person. “That’s true,” was my granddaughter’s response. In the end, though, she decided her character would just blend in, like they do at school. She just wanted to give back, she said. She was embarrassed to represent the main character(s) as Native in her story. Yet in the end, she showed her main character and her main character’s family is Native after all. Why, Kokum (my granddaughter) wanted to know when I read the rest of her story? How?

Several characters from the same family pass away from a rare cancer caused by the level of pollution. When the main character passes, the way her passing is represented by the author is something taught from the character’s (and the author’s) culture. What the character experiences at her end-time would be foreign to a White person.

Looking at her granddaughter’s experience here, Sharron says, “There’s that shame again.” She suggests, “A beginning solution is to have students see themselves represented in what they are reading in school, and that way be ‘given permission’ to insert themselves into their work in a conscious way.”

Sharron shares her convictions about Indigenous learners’ perspectives on education and its impact. Speaking from her teaching experiences, she says,

When I asked students “why are you in school?” the answers from Native students almost always were just like my granddaughter’s: “to give back”—
whether they were urban, rez, or from wherever. . . . A friend of mine recently graduated from a Masters degree in Law from the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon. The man who is the Chancellor for the University of Saskatchewan, Blaine Favel, is an influential Plains Cree leader. At the graduation . . . he talked about how Native students see their role in education, giving back to community, giving back to family. He said, “how different would this place be if everybody saw their role that way?” Now that would change the world!

“So,” she says, “Our voices are small, but they are—large. You are going to influence a lot of people my young friend, and that’s what we do as writers.”

### 4.13 Daniel Heath Justice, Writer (2 October 2015, Six Nations of the Grand River)

#### 4.13.1 Daniel’s Introduction

Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee Nation) is Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Literature and Expressive Culture and Professor of First Nations and Indigenous Studies and English at the University of British Columbia. He has published and edited numerous works of criticism in the field of Indigenous literary studies, including the recent *Oxford Handbook of Indigenous American Literature* (co-edited with James H. Cox). He is also the author of two volumes in the Animal Series from Reaktion Books (UK), including *Badger* and the forthcoming *Raccoon*, as well as the epic Indigenous fantasy novel, *The Way of Thorn and Thunder: The Kynship Chronicles*. 

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4.13.2 My Conversation with Daniel

Daniel and I begin our conversation under special circumstances, at the end of the second day of the Indigenous Literary Studies Association’s three-day Inaugural Gathering, *The Arts of Community*, held at Six Nations of the Grand River. That event focused on many of the same questions underlying this dissertation, and by the time we held our conversation we had already participated in a full day of events and discussions around Indigenous literatures and communities. Earlier in the day, for instance, Jeannette Armstrong had spoken about the significance of stories in Okanagan contexts. That evening, Daniel had been part of a panel in which Métis writer Joseph Boyden was invited to discuss artistic responsibility, exploring his (Boyden’s) controversial portrayals of Haudenosaunee histories in his novel *The Orenda*. Our experiences at this Gathering inflect our conversation and lead us to begin right away with the big question of why Indigenous literatures matter.

When I ask Daniel this question, I remark that he is drafting an academic book under that exact title and is well positioned to respond. Daniel shares these thoughts:

Indigenous literatures matter because we do. Because Indigenous people matter. And Indigenous peoples matter. Literature is our voiced expression of being in the world, and it enters a world where we are presumed to be already erased or where we are expected to disappear. And our stories, our fiction, our plays, our poems, our songs, all of these embodied story-ways affirm the rightness of our belonging in a world that is so wounded, and so ruptured, but to which we still hold a significant claim.
So, “That’s why,” he says, “when it comes down to it, that’s why our literatures matter: because we do.”

Turning to what his own creative writing does, specifically his “fantasy” writing, Daniel suggests, “its ambitions are kind of modest.” He says, “What I have really appreciated in readers’ responses is that people who feel like they are not included in mainstream fantasy have responded very nicely to these stories because they see themselves in it for the first time.” His favourite response from a reader was, he quotes, “Thanks for thinking about us chunky chicks.” He says, “That made me cry. It was just the most beautiful thing.” His “female protagonists,” he explains, are “full-bodied women.” Such representations are important to him:

I want my books to speak to Indigenous people, to queer folks, to women, and to the freaks, and the outsiders, and the weirdos, and the people who don’t feel like they have a place in the world but who are fundamental to the beauty of what this world is.

“If my fiction does anything,” he insists, “I hope that’s it.” He hopes that his writing will “find its way to the people who need it,” and confides, “I write it in a lot of ways to 13-, 14-, 15- year-old me, who would have just loved to see himself in fantasy worlds that were not written for him.”

I share with Daniel some of my experiences reading his creative work and identifying with his characters. As I talk about this, I try to grasp whether such experiences are about bringing one’s whole self to something, or validating identities through reading, or being reflected in stories. I ask him how he thinks beyond this notion of reflecting people’s existence when he theorizes the imaginative work that writing does.
Daniel responds with a story about one encounter with a non-Indigenous student in class who was “resistant” to the Indigenous text being studied—who was struggling to “relate to” it. He describes how he encouraged this student to consider her reaction. He explains how this conversation went:

“If you’re looking for something that kind of reflects your experiences, you’re looking for a mirror, right?” And she said, “Yeah,” and I said, “Well, if you’re looking in a mirror, you only see yourself. So you’re reading these Indigenous works to only see you. Where’s the Indigenous person in that?” And she kind of stopped, and the whole class was like, “Whoa,” and I said, “No, really, I mean I’m not being facetious here. Should literature be just a mirror or should it be a window?”

Daniel is careful with this metaphor, pointing out that it can “also be problematic.” However, he emphasizes that looking through a window means that what you see is “not only about you”:

It’s about others in that relationship and it’s about another world beyond you. . . . Even for those of us who want to see something of ourselves, I don’t think we’re looking for a mirror. I think we’re looking for a window into a world that includes us. I think we’re looking for stories—and images and possibilities and dreams and visions of reality—wherein we are part of the narrative. We are part of the story. We are part of the experience.

There are times when “we need just to see what we’re comfortable and familiar with,” he acknowledges, but cautions that “looking . . . just for a reflection can only really lead to
narcissism.” Summing up his response to my question, he says, “We’re not looking only for ourselves. I think we’re looking for ourselves within a bigger context.”

I continue with the metaphor, asking Daniel what he thinks about teachers’ responsibilities in bringing students to look through the window. He responds,

I think one of the things that we are called upon to do is to make sure that we are preparing students for the work of that window. You don’t take students to the 80th floor and throw the window wide open and push them through . . . You don’t necessarily only want to do it on the first floor, either . . . So I think part of the teacher’s responsibility is to take a look through that window first. Make sure it’s safe. Make sure there’s something to see. Make sure that you’re giving them everything they need for that, if you’re going to open the window—because I don’t think it’s enough just to have the window there. You have to open it up, smell the breeze, experience what’s beyond it. And what you may have is smoke and smog; it might be an unpleasant experience, but that’s also appropriate sometimes.

Ultimately, the responsibility is about “making sure the students are prepared as best you can and then giving “them the opportunity to figure what they want to do with” what the experience.

We pursue this notion of opening the window and engaging with what is outside. I ask Daniel if he feels it is important, in teaching and studying Indigenous literatures, to connect with people and communities beyond the classroom. He insists that it is: “If we don’t, then were just in a gallery” or “even in a sarcophagus.” We go back and forth a bit more with metaphors, exploring questions of how teachers can bring students to
meaningful experiences and learning while also protecting them. For instance, sometimes a “peephole” is “the safest” option, Daniel suggests, and “sometimes the whole damn wall is glass.” Sometimes, “instead of a window, you have a door.” The thing is, he says, “That’s part of the teacher’s job is to assess—as best we can. We’re not always going to get it right,” he points out, but we need to be “prepared to look after the student, no matter what happens.”

I ask Daniel how he thinks about responsibility as a writer, connecting the question back to the panel discussion held earlier that evening. Daniel answers,

Well, I think writing is dangerous. Even at its best it’s dangerous. And fundamentally I think we are called upon to do the best we can with what we’ve got, to learn the lessons we can, but to not go into the world with the intent of harm. It doesn’t mean were going to be successful . . . The best of intentions can go awry. . . . It’s sad, and it’s scary, but it’s true. Any power can be a power for evil just as well as for good.

The most important things, he says, are to try to “tell the truth as best you can” and to “do no harm.” Daniel points out that he has grown into this “philosophy” over his career, learning from his own missteps. He reiterates, “You’re not always going to get it right, but I think you try.” Then, “If you don’t, learn from it and do better.” He adds,

I’m not a writer who believes that it’s my right to write anything I want to. I think that’s actually a really dangerous presumption. There are some stories that I have wanted to tell that I decided not to tell, because the hurt it would cause was bigger than the help it would bring. And it’s not just about me.

So, he says, “I think very carefully about what I write.”
A particular aspect of the responsibility question for Indigenous writers, Daniel suggests, is how people take up writers’ work. He states,

You can’t control how people are going to take it . . . but I just think you have to think about responsibility. Partly because if you are an Indigenous writer, no matter what your connections are to your community . . . you have to write in the context of settler colonial realities that have already misrepresented Indigenous peoples and other marginalized peoples to a horrifically negative degree. And if you don’t understand that context, you’re going hurt people. You may still hurt people understanding that context, but at least, keeping that in mind, you’re less likely to be sloppy.

“Context matters,” he repeats: “No work of art exists in a vacuum. You have to understand it in the context of a larger conversation.”

We shift into discussing literature in relation to education, and whether literature—reading it, responding to it, discussing it—is inherently educational. In Daniel’s opinion, “You don’t go into it [writing] necessarily expecting that you’re doing teaching, but you have to go into it knowing that you’re impacting somebody’s life.” That is, “If your work is actively working to hurt people, you’re going hurt somebody. If it’s actively working to heal, it may heal. The thing about words and stories, even entertainment, is they are teachings.” We talk about the film Guardians of the Galaxy as an example: it is an entertaining movie that some people “just enjoyed,” and by which others were “deeply moved.” A piece of art “will always be educational for somebody,” Daniel suggests.
Audience is a consideration as well, I reflect, and I bring up the complexity of writing as an Indigenous writer, knowing that Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers may take up a text in very different ways. Daniel replies,

Partly I’m not writing for a non-Indigenous audience, first of all. If they read it, love it, awesome . . . but they’re not the ones I want to get it—first. I want us to get it first. And they can get it; there’s nothing, there’s no great deep mystery or magic in any of the stuff I write.

“Any thoughtful reader,” he thinks, “can find” what his texts have to say.

In thinking about how audiences might take up his work and what his responsibilities are as a writer, Daniel says that he actually focuses more on gender than on Indigenous content. He explains,

I do try to think about that very much in terms of gender, just to make sure, as best I can, that I’m not writing problematically about women and trans folks. And thinking about gender in a way that is not furthering misrepresentations that are already out there.

He recognizes how “women have been so central” in his learning and shares, “I don’t ever want my work to be something that a woman or a trans woman or trans person reads and feels like they are less human as a result of having read what I wrote.” He asserts that of course he does not want to further misrepresentations of Indigeneity or queerness either, but says he is aware, “I’m part of that in ways that—I’m not vulnerable in the same ways in terms of gender.” Daniel reiterates, “I don’t want my writing to ever make already marginalized people feel further dehumanized.”
I acknowledge the risk that Daniel takes in insistently portraying women and trans characters in his creative works and ask him how he thinks about opening up those spaces through those representations. He affirms,

My friend Alice Te Punga Somerville, who is a Māori literature scholar, she talks about her work as always opening up space. And her job isn’t to close down space; it’s to open up space. And that resonates deeply with me. I think that’s my job too. . . . If I don’t write female and trans characters into my world, then my world actually is not a world that speaks to a huge number of people in my life. If I don’t write Indigenous people into my world, obviously it’s completely lopsided. And if I don’t write those characters in, then we’re back in worlds where—you know, 90% of fantasy worlds do that already, so why would I need to replicate those exclusions?

Daniel reiterates, “I may get it wrong, and if I get it wrong, I’ll certainly work to do it better the next time.” He describes how he will “always test it with readers for their experience,” telling me that, for his Kynship books, “I think all of my beta readers were women, and most of them are queer. And one of them was my mom.” He repeats that he does not assume he is “going to get it right” but rather does the best he can and with the hope that “people will let me know.”

Building on this viewpoint, I bring our conversation around to dialogue with teachers’ perspectives. I describe some of the questions and concerns from the teachers’ interviews related to teaching Indigenous literatures and give Daniel some of the context surrounding teachers’ perspectives. I then outline to Daniel the differing views on making
mistakes that emerge in my conversations with teachers. I ask him what he would say to teachers who were struggling with a fear of getting things wrong. This is his response:

You’re totally going to screw up. Just like Indigenous teachers screw up. That’s the nature of the beast. We’re going mess it up. And what’s going to work for one group of students is not going to work for the next one. So part of it is to own your imperfection. No one expects that they’re going get it right on other stuff all the time. In some ways that fear of it being perfect can work to lull teachers into a sense that the fear is the work. But the fear isn’t the work. The fear can keep you from doing the work. And you’re going screw up, but you’re probably not going destroy your students.

Building on this latter idea, Daniel advocates “keeping things in perspective.” One mistake—such as saying “‘Indian’ instead of ‘First Nations’”—is “probably not going to destroy their entire lives.” He reassures, “This is important work, but it’s important in the big picture.” What do you do if you make a mistake one day? “Own it, come back, apologize, fix it if you can.”

Daniel tells me that he also gives his students this advice about keeping things in perspective “when they’re teaching”:

Yeah, you may mess up, but there’s a huge difference between messing up honestly, being a thoughtful, nice person, and doing something that destroys a student’s sense of self. There’s a whole world of difference between pronouncing names wrong and mocking somebody’s name. There’s a whole world of difference between focusing too much on violence in the work by an
Indigenous writer and normalizing that violence as though that’s the only thing that is about Indigenous people.

Mistakes are inevitable, but sometimes, too, “you’re going to get it right.” And of course, “You can’t learn to get it right if you don’t risk screwing it up.” It is what you have to do, he says: “You learn. You work, and you do better, and you cut yourself a break. You cut your students a break.” Daniel warns, “If you go in with the expectation of perfection, you’ve already failed. And you will convince yourself not to do the necessary work, because it’s not perfect.” He asks, “In what other thing we are expected to be perfect?”

As a cautionary comparison, Daniel points to the phenomenon in which “some guilty white liberal folks . . . feel like the guilt is the work.” He points out when people are so “scared . . . to get it wrong,” there is an “implication” that “Indians are so mean,” or an “implicit expectation of offense or violence or rage.” He concedes that “once in a while there’s going to be somebody who kind of has an unreasonable reaction, just like in every population,” but says, “I get a little impatient with that” fear or hesitation:

It’s a real response, but I think that it’s a response that can disempower. And it’s a response that can make people feel like that is what they need to do, is just feel guilty or just feel scared and they’ve done the work. Well no, that’s not the work. That’s your shit you have to deal with.

This kind of learning is “always scary,” he says: “If we’re too comfortable we’re probably doing something wrong.”

We shift our conversation back to the teachers’ conversations, and I share some more of their ideas and concerns with him. We talk about some of the material issues that came up in so many of those conversations, such as lack of relevant education and
struggles to access resources. I ask Daniel what he would say to teachers about why this work is worth doing despite the challenges. Before answering, he reflects, “I’m also speaking from a position of real institutional privilege. So I can get impatient, because I don’t have those kinds of obstacles in the same way. We have our own obstacles, but they’re not the same.” As to why teachers should do this uphill work, Daniel responds,

The only way things will be better is if we do that. It won’t happen otherwise. So if they truly believe this is what we have to do, then we’ve got to do it. If it was easy, it would have been done by now. They are being called to carry that bundle. It was never a call that was meant to be easy. They will not see it change in their lifetime, to the degree they want to, but if they don’t carry that bundle, it won’t be lighter for those who come after.

It is also important to know that “they’re not doing it alone” and that “there are a lot of resources out there,” so “part of it is to build those networks, to make those connections, and to draw on the expertise of the people who are there.” Ultimately, they have “to risk it. If they really want to change things, they’ve got to do the work.” Daniel connects this point to the broader involvement of non-Indigenous people in working for change. He says, “It can’t only be on our shoulders. The problems weren’t started by us. The burden wasn’t created by us. The solution cannot be left only to us, but the directions have to be led by us.”

As we come to the end of our time, I give Daniel the space to add any final thoughts. He expresses his excitement around this project and acknowledges “the profound need, especially for high school students and for students in the public school
system,” that it is trying to address. I thank Daniel for the mentorship and encouragement that he shares with me as we close our conversation.

4.14 Suzette Williams (Pseudonym), Teacher (12 November 2015, Calgary)

4.14.1 Suzette’s Introduction

Suzette Williams is an ambitious teacher who has her sights set on making learning personalized and relevant. She has been teaching at an inner-city school for 6 years and is grounded by the dynamic educational needs that her full spectrum of learners requires. Task design has become her most significant educational tool in delivering evocative content. While recognizing the need to make learning meaningful through personal connections of context, she sees how the choice of literary text is limited in schools where shrinking budgets have created ballooning classrooms. She firmly believes that establishing the importance of Aboriginal content would create space to order class sets of literature that would benefit all learners.

4.14.2 My Conversation with Suzette

Suzette and I start our conversation with some background on her teaching. Suzette taught English overseas, she tells me, and “fell in love with learning.” She says, “As I started taking more literature courses, it just sparked this huge passion in me.” Suzette notes that her passion for English means she sometimes finds teaching it “overwhelming”: “Sometimes even just the way the kids react or don’t react to the literature, . . . I almost take it personally when they don’t like it.” She finds that splitting
her energies between English, an option subject, and a leadership role “balances out” her teaching day.

Suzette explains how she starts her grade 10 classes with a short story unit and specifically with Thomas King’s “Borders.” She explains why:

The focus for grade 10 is identity, and that story [“Borders”], at its heart, is about identity. It teaches about when to compromise, when not to compromise, and the way that Thomas King tells a story, how he weaves in the heritage and the mythologies and the symbolisms [and] the oral storytelling, it’s a great way to start off because it’s got so many explicit examples of storytelling.

She remarks, “Unfortunately, that’s it”; this story, with some accompanying Massey Lectures material from Thomas King’s The Truth about Stories, is the only Indigenous text she explores.

Suzette builds upon this remark by detailing which novels she has taught and which novels are available as options. She adds,

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 choose from. And so 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.

She adds that teaching grade 10 offers “interdisciplinary . . . connections with Social Studies” connected to Indigenous peoples, such as the portion of the curriculum dealing
with “historical globalization,” and describes some of the strategies she and collaborating teachers use to make these connections.

I encourage Suzette to give an example of experiences teaching King’s “Borders.” She outlines how the first time, she felt she “skimmed the surface.” One particular concern was that she had some First Nations students and “didn’t want to step on their toes.” By comparison, when she taught it this year, she felt she had more contextual knowledge, understood the story better, and was more confident in bringing her First Nations students into the discussions, such as being “aware of when to kind of nudge them to offer information and input and where they could show their pride in their heritage.” She narrates,

There was a really great moment where some students were sitting in a group . . . They had to do a plot diagram together . . . One of the kids, they were writing their little climax moment, and they couldn’t decide on . . . which part was the climax, because they were like, is it the moment they get through the border, where the mom wins, or is it the moment where mom is sitting up against the car telling the little boy about the stories—is that the climax? . . . They’re exploring what that moment means. . . . One of the First Nations girls was in that group and she almost started to tear up. She is so shy and she’s really introverted, and she wasn’t really contributing to the conversation, but once they recognized the importance of that moment, she now has a group of friends. It created a connection for her with those students because she saw that, through this literature, people were appreciating her heritage.
Suzette feels this was an “awesome” moment and exclaims, “That’s one of the moments that you go into teaching for.”

I ask Suzette to say more about what literature can do for students. She points to the social context that holds “pejorative” views of “First Nations culture.” She responds further,

I think the possibility of Aboriginal literature in the classroom is, it creates a space for appreciation, and it creates a space where ignorance gets pushed to the side . . . We are in Canada and there’s so much ignorance about our First Nation peoples, and I think when we explore the literature that comes from, whether it’s First Nations writers or people who, are like Rudy Wiebe who collaborates with Yvonne Johnson. . . . There’s some real power there in the writing about and the writing of. And when we expose our youth to it, that’s when they can start building their frame of reference for it. Without it being what they see in the news or what their mom and dad say around the dinner table. When we can expose them to a way of storytelling that has been around for millennia.

Suzette contends that it “doesn’t make any sense” that First Nations traditional stories (she calls them “mythologies”) are not in “the English curriculum.” Canada is “supposedly this mosaic society,” she says, but “we’re still very much a patriarchal, misogynistic white society that still values the pen held by the white man.” For teachers, she says, “It’s our job to expose them to the spectrum of literature, not just the canon.” While challenging Eurocentrism and ignorance by teaching Aboriginal texts is an emphasis for Suzette, she points out, “It’s troublesome when you’re trying to access it.
That’s the challenge.” She argues, “When it comes to the real meat and potatoes of the curriculum—the novel study and the modern play, and the Shakespearean play—it doesn’t give First Nations, Inuit, Métis writings any weight, at all.”

Suzette speaks about “economics” and how “we live in a very tight budget day,” which affects what schools can afford. She suggests, for instance, that she would love to do a novel study with *The Back of the Turtle* or *Monkey Beach* and describes how those might work with students. “But try and get a class set of that in!” she exclaims. The issue of affording resources is “on the forefront” when it comes to not selecting Indigenous novels. “The other thing,” Suzette adds, “is not everybody is familiar with First Nations literature; it’s just not anything that is mandated. We don’t have to know it. I think it’s something that you teach if you know it.” She refers to a “comparative study” that she designed for a grade 10 Advanced Placement course in which students examined classical epic poetry alongside First Nations traditional stories. She notes that “I could do it because I’m familiar with it; not everybody is familiar with it.”

Building on this question of familiarity, I ask Suzette if she sees other ways in which her school enables the teaching of Indigenous content. She divulges, “Even though we have a very high number of FNMI students in our school, the programming that is geared towards them is dying.” This past year, her school tried to offer Aboriginal Studies courses, but “there’s no one to teach it,” Suzette says. Suzette imagines that the teachers at her school, in considering that teaching position, said to themselves, “I know that those kids are hard to get assignments out of, I know that they’re hard to teach . . . I don’t want that challenge.” She describes what she knows about FNMI students’ success rates at the school: “The completion rate for FNMI students is incredibly low, beyond
provincial standards, to the point where, if we get 30 students at the beginning of the year, 1 of them graduates by the end of grade 12.” As one strategy, Suzette suggests how beneficial it would be to have a dedicated room where students could “connect with their friends in a space where they could freely talk about their culture and not worry about condemnation.” She feels, “We’re not providing a space for these students” and expresses hopes that her school will strengthen programming to engage and support FNMI students.

Suzette explains that Indigenous perspectives are addressed in few other ways in her school. She says, “The conversation happens in the Social Studies department,” but not in other departments. Further, she explains,

The conversations about what struggles and accommodations and interventions that we can have with our FNMI students is happening in Guidance and Administration. So it’s either a behaviour issue that’s being addressed or it’s an academic issue that’s being addressed. There’s no proactive thing going on. There’s a lot of reactive stuff.

Suzette’s school does have a “huge wellness program” that offers some services for FNMI students. However, Suzette notes, “There’s kind of a stigma around it, because it’s a school-driven program.” She suggests, “You almost need to empower the kids to create their own program to draw them in.”

Suzette states that although her school has a very diverse student body there is “open discrimination against anybody who’s different,” including Aboriginal students. Pointing to issues of attendance among First Nations students, she suggests, “There’s not a draw . . . There’s no real thing that’s keeping them in school.” She expresses hope that incoming initiatives in her jurisdiction will begin to change that dynamic. She says, “I
think the first step of anything is building that relationship with the kids, to help them, see what can be done.”

I mention to Suzette that I want to share an inspiring comment from one of the writers I interviewed, and contextualize that comment in some of my thoughts around how “literature has a real power to help people to imagine a better way of being together, and to imagine strong communities.” I suggest that it is necessary for people to learn about colonization, but that “it can’t be all the darkness. . . . There’s so much beautiful cultural and artistic expression out there.” Suzette replies,

Absolutely! And I think that’s what we miss, you know, when we’re educating our students about our history, we hear about all the terrible things that we did, right? And then we hear about all the negative cause and effect cycles . . . and . . . that’s that piece that’s missing, is the resilient side, and . . . the beautiful side, the artistic side that shows the history and the culture and the—and that it’s still present day.

It is vital for students to hear about the continuance of Indigenous people, we agree.

I share with Suzette the piece from Daniel’s interview in which he says (in my words), “It’s not just about [Indigenous literature] being a mirror. It’s about it being a window into a world where we have a place.” Suzette responds,

That just hits the nail on the head . . . because we’re all individuals. We’re all so different; we have different backgrounds, and the idea of a mirror is that it’s a reflection in its entirety, back at us. And we’re never going to connect in its entirety to a fictional character or a historical recreation. But the idea of a
window, where we can look through it and see something we connect to or see . . . that we have a sense of belonging in that world. Yes, that’s it exactly.

Suzette agrees that this notion of seeing “the possibilities” is very important.

This response leads Suzette to connect to current curricular changes in Alberta, to how learning is being rethought:

That’s one thing that I think we’re trying to focus on right now, . . . especially with the whole Inspiring Education, the flexible initiatives that are coming down, with the personalization of learning, and . . . now that we’ve moved from the Carnegie Unit . . . Now it’s about competency and providing opportunities for understanding and opportunities for demonstrating understanding, and it doesn’t have to look cookie cutter anymore, right? And I think that’s where that quote is so interesting because now the kids can, instead of, say, “Okay, this is what I’m supposed to see, and this is what I’m supposed to understand, and this is how I’m supposed to connect.” . . . Now it’s, “This is what I understand, this is what I’m seeing, and this is how I connect to it.” It really makes it truly relevant to them, and that’s where kids truly engage. Because if they don’t think that it matters to them, they don’t give a shit.

Students are more likely to care and engage “if we provide opportunities for understanding” and for “delving deeper into their own perspective or seeing another perspective.”
As we approach the close of our conversation, I ask Suzette what would enable her to do more of the work we have been discussing. She wishes for a teacher’s guide for *Monkey Beach* and a “class set” of books. Then she intones,

I want other teachers to see the possibilities. I want even the most battle-hardened teacher to recognize that different perspectives are okay . . . How do we get there? It’s not through PD days; it’s not through increasing funding. I think that kind of stuff needs to happen with collaboration, that we need to start working together more, to appreciate what other people’s perspectives are, as teachers, because it starts with us. We’re the ones who get to introduce the material, and if it’s introduced in an aloof, and scratch-the-surface kind of manner, the kids aren’t going to appreciate it. So how do we get to those battle-hardened teachers? To see that there’s some value in teaching something different than they have for the last 25 years? How do we do that?—In my utopia, everybody just laughs and jumps and says, “Let’s do it! Let’s work together! Let’s create a resource!”

Suzette and I agree that optimism is necessary to working for change.

She asks me if I personally feel that the situation around Indigenous education is “getting better” and we discuss some of the changes we have seen in our lifetimes. We express hope that things are indeed improving, and Suzette expands upon her hope that the “new initiatives” around curriculum reform can create substantial change:

It’s a really different way of looking at education, that we don’t need to tick the boxes of our program of studies to call it a job done, that we need to look at a kid and say, “Did they understand what I was trying to tell them? Can
they communicate that understanding? Do they have a fresh perspective of what we were talking about?”

Suzette concludes, “It all adds up to citizenship.”

4.15 Francesca Rawson (Pseudonym), Teacher (13 November 2015, Calgary)

4.15.1 Francesca’s Introduction

I have been teaching English, Social Studies and French for eight years and my students have ranged from grade seven to grade 12. Throughout this time, I have been inquiring into the incorporation of Canadian Indigenous literature into my classroom practice. I think it is a worthwhile questioning process as we in Canada are moving towards an ever-evolving awareness of the fluidity of Canadian identities. What it means to be Canadian and how this awareness has come to be are questions that form a base for much of my students’ learning, regardless of grade level; the intentionality of these questions is very important to how kids posit themselves, their backgrounds, and their future selves in modern Canada.

4.15.2 My Conversation with Francesca

As we begin, Francesca shares with me that she is currently consulting with an Indigenous education resource person from her school jurisdiction as she works to address FNMI topics in grade seven humanities. There are a number of considerations, which she says, “I am now starting to explore as a white woman . . . and talking with [the resource person] about . . . First Nations literature, and how do we talk about it.” She states that she has an “uneasy thought process” around these consultations, and she
questions how to frame Indigenous literature: “Is it separate from Canadian identity, or is it absolutely woven into it?” In describing her teaching, Francesca describes her students as “unaware” of Indigenous issues and notes there are only a few First Nations or Métis students at her good-sized school.

She explains one of her motivations for improving how she teaches FNMI content in grade seven this year, where “We talk about Canadian identity and we talk about First Nations people.” She explains,

Last year when I was teaching grade eight . . . the kids were so grateful . . .

“Oh thank goodness we don’t have to do First Nations; that’s all we did last year.” Because it was like over and over and over again; for that one year we learned this. Well, a people is not something or someone that you learn in one year and then [you’re finished].

So this year, Francesca explains, she is working to “approach this program of studies with these grade sevens” in such a way that they will not have that “Oh, not First Nations again” response. Francesca critiques the related responses in broader society: “So many Canadians think, ‘Oh, really? Not another First Nations problem.’”

In taking up the questions of whether and how she teaches Indigenous literatures, Francesca details how she has a table of books in her room that students can read, many of which connect to topics that they are examining as a class. She gives a few examples of Indigenous books she has out and says that students do not tend to pick those ones up. As we discuss possible reasons, such as reading level, Francesca expresses this feeling about teaching Indigenous literatures:
I don’t know. I’d like to actually have it as a fluid, natural fit in my room, instead of me thinking, “How am I going to incorporate?” . . . This is mostly my way of thinking and my familiarity . . . when I took my BA in English, I didn’t have any exposure to those literatures.

Since she did not gain this exposure through her English degree, Francesca suggests that it is only “by accident,” by “bumping into” texts that she has encountered Indigenous literatures thus far, and is left to build her own familiarity with them.

I ask Francesca to say more about what she means by a “fluid, natural fit.” She says, “I’d like it—that it’s something that I naturally go to, instead of fumbling towards.” She explains that she feels awkward as she works to incorporate Indigenous content. Francesca describes this awkwardness as persistent and unwelcome as she shapes her approaches. She says,

I feel awkward talking about the appropriateness of—I don’t want to appropriate; I want to use, right? So when I’m talking with [the Indigenous education resource person] about using certain literatures or she’s coming in and it’s going to be an uneasy dance about, how do we talk about this stuff? . . . in a respectful way but without always thinking in the back of my head, “Gotta be respectful!”

Francesca wants Indigenous content to be something that “naturally flows out when I’m talking about literature” instead of a constant source of “uneasiness.”

I ask Francesca what motivates her to teach Indigenous literatures. She shares a story of watching another teacher including excerpts from Indigenous “short stories and poems,” remarking that they were “really great pieces of—exploration of metaphor and
voice” and thinking to herself, “How come I’ve never thought about using this in my classroom?” She explains, “So I think I’ve always had that in the back of my mind, that I enjoy that literature, that I thought it was fantastic.”

I ask her what would enable her to feel less awkward or uneasy about teaching Indigenous literatures, or what would support that teaching. She suggests these possibilities: “Roving speakers, roving authors that are actually there; phone numbers of people I know” and “a literary circle that is absolutely part of the teaching process.” She acknowledges that it is “exciting” to be planning further activities and classroom visits with the Indigenous education resource person. She comments also, “If I had read more—if I knew more literature—” and so I ask her about what ways she has of accessing or learning about Indigenous texts. She explains that essentially it is by “browsing through bookstores” that she comes across new items.

Francesca shares a success story arising from this kind of browsing. She found and bought a “fantastic graphic novel” about residential school experiences by David Robertson:

One of my kids who has had not a wonderful, cherished, supported past, in his personal life, that boy will do anything to not read, and he is glommed onto that book. He took it home! . . . It’s something that he absolutely loves and has sunk into. So that’s me picking something up, going, “That looks interesting,” taking it in, leaving it in my table and seeing who picks it up.

As she describes her process of locating new texts, Francesca notes that her in-school colleagues are not a source of information or guidance on Indigenous content. She
remarks, “There’s also an uneasiness with having somebody coming in on a PD day” to talk about Indigenous topics or literatures.

I share some points from writers in these conversations about how they feel they are inevitably representing their people or community when they write. Francesca asks what it might mean for students to find that literature on her table and enjoy it, and then “by accident, find out” that the author is Indigenous. She wonders, “Why am I always framing it [as], I’d like to have more FNMI literature? Maybe I’d just like to have a more diverse range of Canadian literature, Can content, in my classroom.” We discuss diversity among students and I suggest that it is valuable to have diverse texts and perspectives for students to connect with, to feel like they have a place. Francesca responds,

There’s a sharing, a linking. Something—a recognition of a little bit of themselves in the pages they’ve just read. . . . Then, that they’re part of that story too. Maybe they could be a larger part of this story in the future.

She suggests, “That’s why literature is so important. It knits people together.”

From here, Francesca moves back to her feelings of awkwardness. Referring to an earlier mention that, when she did have FNMI students in her previous high school classes, they were usually in her Knowledge and Employability (K&E) or -2 classes, Francesca asks this:

See if you were, that’s another thing too, let’s talk about . . . so, you’re Métis. . . . You don’t look like one of the kids I taught in K&E. So if I were talking to one of the boys, who were now grown up into men, and one of them is now an author, and talking to him . . . about their experience, would I feel an awkwardness? Because they’re not white? . . . They’re different. And the
cadence of the speech is different, and it’s a very different experience that I’d have . . . and that is part of the awkwardness—I don’t know. Is it part of the awkwardness?

I share some stories and questions, by way of asking how she thinks about bridging differences with students.

We talk about the importance of expectations that teachers have for FNMI students, Francesca citing the “dynamics of power” and the “stereotypes” that can work against Indigenous learners. Francesca asks me, “Looking at the literature too, do you think there is a tendency to look at FNMI literature as, just because it’s FNMI it’s got to be valued?” To respond, I share some perspectives from writers, and ask her what her own reasons are for teaching more Indigenous literature and for caring about diversity. Francesca makes some connections to global events and Canada’s political responses—such as that around making space for Syrian refugees—and says, “I think it’s becoming . . . more and more fitting to talk about diversity.” She questions the terms “diversity and difference” themselves, but says,

In a world of differing perspectives, it’s really important for us to live that—not appreciate it, not read it, but live it. That’s the world. And a very changing world . . . I think it is really important to have differing ways of looking at the world inside your classroom.

I ask her what students are learning from such approaches to literature and from reading diverse texts. Francesca explains, “They’re learning about themselves”: teenagers “quest to find themselves . . . looking for a sense of belonging.”
As we discuss what processes of finding oneself through literature can be like, I ask Francesca what happens if students read things that are very different from their experience. She answers,

I think it’s good to recognize that that is different, that I don’t understand it. And, to maybe take that apart, to deconstruct, “Why don’t I understand that?”

... And they may not get it in grade seven. Well, you don’t know, it’s amazing. Human beings are amazing. The images that come back years later and affect you profoundly ... and just little elements. Just sparks. ... Who knows what difference that will make? And to be uneasy, at looking at a piece of literature, and to not get it, I think that’s fine. I don’t think we should always be reading stuff that you immediately sync with. So, but who else is going to expose a child to that? So, that, I think that’s our job, to help our kids navigate that process of feeling uneasy when you look at literature that doesn’t quite jive with the way you fit the world.

We exchange some stories about connecting with students and hoping that our teaching is having an impact. Francesca expresses hopes that what they learn brings her students to see people and the world differently—for instance that “it leads to a sense of empathy.”

We come back to my central research question about why Indigenous literatures matter. Francesca sums up her feelings like this:

Well I think they do matter if you’re looking at resurgence of ... healthy Indigenous communities. If you’re going really, really small, the individual, if they can recognize themselves in the stories around them, and those stories become more and more mainstream, and they’re ... recognized positively,
there’s more true likelihood of that person feeling that they are part of that
knitted-together community of Canada. Not just Morley, not just Morley and
then Cochrane, Rocky View [County], not just Morley and Calgary, not just
Morley and Alberta, but Canada. It’s going to take time. . . . But having other
learners recognize—if those stories become more, part of the vocabulary of
literature, of mainstream Canadian folks . . . if these writers become names
that roll off your tongue—I can’t help but think that benefits Canada. Instead
of us . . . feeling separate . . . So, if these names become common parlance,
how can that not benefit the greater good? And it might not happen in a
generation, but long term? What is Canada? What is voice? That’s one of the
big questions, has always been, is what is Canadian literature and why does it
matter?

Drawing out this point, Francesca considers Canadian literature and the distinctions made
between regional literatures.

We discuss how literary texts can influence people. Francesca agrees that they do
have an impact: “The characters can live on in your head as people, people you’ve met
and known,” and the “places you’ve read about, it’s—you have gone there. Physically,
oh, but emotionally, psychologically, you have gone there.” Building on this notion of
reading, Francesca tells me this story:

The thing is about the broader community learning from this too . . . [On]
Canada Day . . . my [family] and I . . . were walking down to Prince’s Island
Park. . . . You’ve got all these different First Nations groups and there’s a
Pow Wow . . . I just felt so grateful for being welcomed into this. . . . A lot of
Aboriginal people are dancing . . . There were about six different drumming circles and these Elders at the front sitting, and then you’ve got the leaders sitting up on the dais, and they were saying, “Please, we encourage you, join us in this dance.” And 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. It blew me away. Looking at the historical process and the historical horridness that’s happened, and yet, there’s this, a willingness, a recognition that the only way to move forward is together. And so, me, learning about that Pow Wow experience by being part of it, even if it was nominally, holding in my hand of my little girl, who’s going to be living in a world that’s going to be changing so fast, and just being embraced by this, “Oh, we can do this.” I think it’s tremendously important to do that. And it’s a great metaphor.

Francesca acknowledges that this experience evokes a strong emotional response for her. As we close our conversation, Francesca tells me, “I get very excited in the classroom when I’m talking about people in books . . . and ideas, responsibility, social responsibility, and individual responsibility.” She emphasizes that “passion has to be there” and that young people “have to recognize that the passion they feel for life and the passion they feel for ideas—it’s normal.”
4.16 Danny Bill (Pseudonym), Teacher (16 November 2015, Calgary)

4.16.1 Danny’s Introduction

I am a First Nations and Metis person. I have been working for the same school board for 11 years, with a career in social work prior to that. My roles have included teaching high school and junior high ELA, Aboriginal Studies, and Social Studies in all streams. Most of the settings I have been in have been unique settings with complex needs students. As an Aboriginal educator, I hope to support my colleagues as they work to integrate Aboriginal content into their teaching across the curriculum.

4.16.2 My Conversation with Danny

Danny is the only teacher of Indigenous ancestry in this study. She begins, “I think the important place to start is where I’m from and my people are from.” She traces her heritage and upbringing before moving on to her teaching experience.

I ask Danny about student learning, specifically about why it matters for learners to engage with Indigenous literatures. She responds,

I think the primary reason I go to, first and foremost, is our stories as First Nations people are directly connected to our land that we live on. Whether it’s done orally or it’s done in written, it’s always directly connected to the land. And those students, no matter where they’re from, live on that land that we’re in, and that is part of what forms our community is our environment—literally, the environment. And I think having those local Indigenous stories specifically in the classroom brings that connection to those kids who are living on a land that may be very foreign to the land they are used to, or it
could be somewhere that their families have lived for generations but they
never quite understood that connection to land, or it could be First Nation or
Métis student sitting in the classroom and finally something makes sense to
them. So it doesn’t matter whether they’re Indigenous or non-Indigenous; we
live on this land, and those stories are of this land.

This connection, she says, is “the primary reason why I think it’s important.”

I share some thoughts on how literature has enabled me to learn about myself as a
Métis person and to think about community in responsible ways, and I ask Danny what
her thoughts are on what literatures can do for students. She suggests that, for
“Indigenous students . . . being able to finally see yourself in a story is significant,” and
mentions that she never read any Indigenous literatures when she was in school. She
gives an example about being able to relate to characters and develop self-understanding:

When I actually get to see myself in a story and when these Indigenous
students get to see themselves in story, when you can relate to a character, it
lets you see yourself as an outsider, and looking in, and really start to
understand who you are and go, “Oh, this person reacts this way in this
situation, and that’s kind of how I would react, or that’s how I would like to
react, or that’s how I don’t want to react,” or whatever it may be. It really lets
these Indigenous students have that same opportunity that other students have
had for many, many generations of education.

Similarly, “for non-Indigenous students,” reading Indigenous literatures “allows them
also to maybe see themselves in there and not see First Nations and other Indigenous
groups as ‘the Other,’”
because they can also relate to those characters, so it lets them see that their identity isn’t completely separate from that of an Indigenous person. And I found, working with a lot of ELL [English Language Learners], especially coming from other countries, they’re connecting in their way too and going, “Oh, I had that experience in my country.” And again it’s that community piece, but it’s myself as an individual in the community.

Danny finds that “characters” in “Indigenous literature” are “very real, very there,” and that this quality “allows kids to relate to those characters.”

Even when Indigenous literatures portray individuals’ experiences with identity, an understanding of identity in relation to community is fostered. Danny explains her thoughts:

I already talked about the connection to the land and that is part of community—but community of people as well. Indigenous literature is based on that. It’s based on relationships with people around you and the animals around you and everything else. And I think even though you’ll have an individual’s story within that, it’s always in relation to—at least every piece of Indigenous literature I’ve read—it’s always in relation to the bigger community. And I think it will allow students to see that they can develop who they are and they can do that through their connections within their community.

Students may have different senses of what that community is, she qualifies—“community” might mean “the school,” “their Nation,” or “their church,” for instance. Whatever that community is, Indigenous literatures can enable students to “see they can
develop as an individual person and understand who they are by seeing themselves in the context of the bigger picture.” Danny suggests, “That’s one of the distinctions I’ve made between Indigenous and non-Indigenous literature.” She acknowledges, “that’s a generalization,” but contends, “Indigenous literature comes from that collectivist point of view, and so it helps students form identity . . . within the bigger picture of things.” As an example, Danny turns to the example of Thomas King’s short story “Borders.” She points out that the mother in the story “has a pretty solid” understanding of her “identity” and that “the narrator is working on his, but he’s working it on it in the bigger picture of ‘Who am I as a Blackfoot?’” This is crucial, Danny says: “It’s his individual journey, but it’s within a community. It’s not a separate piece.”

Speaking further about “Borders,” Danny argues that the story offers rich opportunities for students to connect to land and place because it is set in Southern Alberta. She describes her ideal way of teaching the story: she would like to “go down to that place specifically” with her students—“with an Elder, talking traditional oral stories there, having that experience, talking about the stories of the land, and the plants.” She and students would read the story out loud—Danny points out, “I worry about us getting away from oral tradition.” She suggests that King’s story embeds orality in its written form and students could experience some oral storytelling by reading it aloud. Taking time to camp out and to speak with a Blackfoot Elder, Danny envisions “talking about identity, talking about who you are in relation to where we’re sitting right now in this place.” She thinks it would be important for students to examine questions like these:

So you are from these other communities, but right now you’re in this community, and what does that mean? What does that look like for your own
learning? What does that mean in the big picture? What does that mean as a non-First Nations person sitting here learning about the traditions of this time from an Elder of this place?

Danny sums up, “I don’t know where it would go but I think those conversations need to happen.”

Danny points to the significance of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s report and how it emphasizes the need for “education for everybody.” We discuss how education is necessary to foster non-Indigenous Canadians’ respect for and understandings of Indigenous people. We also discuss how, in our experience, many students encounter very little Indigenous content in their elementary and secondary education. Danny refers to a recent conversation held with a group of FNMI students in Calgary, who shared that they were not “seeing themselves” in their education thus far. For instance, these students mentioned that, while the topic of residential schools was taught, it was “a one-day, here’s the textbook, checkmark.” Further, the students said that some of the information was “not the true story” but was “someone else’s interpretation of our story.” Most of those students had not read any Indigenous literatures at school: in the group, only “one student said that they had had a First Nations, Métis, or Inuit book taught in their class.” Danny argues that, if Indigenous students—who “are going to be way more aware, because it’s themselves, of whether they’re learning this”—are not seeing Indigenous content in their classes, then non-Indigenous students are likely not seeing it, either. “That’s the struggle,” Danny exclaims, is that “these Indigenous stories are not just for the Indigenous youth; they’re for everybody.” Furthermore, “They’re no less important than Shakespeare,” and studying Shakespeare’s plays “takes so much of
our time.” Studying Indigenous literatures encourages people to learn and “it gives the message that Indigenous people are just as valuable.” She says, it shows students that “we’re not any of the stereotypes.”

Danny argues also that Indigenous literatures should be taught on their own merits. She points to the novel *Medicine River* as an example, as it is on Alberta Education’s list of recommended texts for English 30-2. As to why a teacher might choose this text over another on that list, Danny suggests, “It doesn’t have to be, ‘Oh, we’re doing this because it’s Indigenous. We’re doing this because it’s a good piece of literature with a good story.” Considering how Indigenous texts are not always viewed as “valuable,” Danny points to what they offer in terms of showing “a different way of writing . . . what’s often considered the female way of writing, that story-telling, that non-linear type of story.” We discuss the issue of availability of resources—I share with her some of what other teachers have said about accessing texts and she responds with some similar experiences. She builds on her point about *Medicine River*, describing the richness of the story and possible ways of approaching it with students. We talk about how, in arguing for the value of Indigenous texts, it helps, for instance, to have critical scholarship; Danny says that it works to be strategic and bring in “data” that are meaningful to “the Western institution of education,” which does not always recognize “Indigenous ways of saying this is valuable.”

I share with Danny some perspectives from other teachers on the challenges they face in building their capacity with Indigenous literatures. Acknowledging that this work can be “so hard,” Danny expresses, “I wish I could say it’s going to get easier.” However, she fears there will continue to be resistance to the work as there has been “since the TRC
has come out with the report.” Teachers will see this negative response, she says, because “it’s bigger than just literature . . . this is a huge issue around human rights, and any time there’s that move, there’s backlash.” To support their teaching of Indigenous content, Danny thinks it is important for teachers to connect “with other like-minded teachers” and with the Indigenous education resource people in their jurisdictions. She emphasizes, “That teacher care piece is so fundamental for teachers who want to make a difference on the bigger scale, because you get burnout.”

Danny offers several ideas in response to my question about what enables teachers to face the challenges entailed in teaching Indigenous literatures. When it comes to materials and information, Danny suggests that “resources are available” but the “struggle” is “trying to compile all the resources so that people know where to get them from.” Having a “network” of fellow teachers and resource people will allow teachers to “support each other” and to help each other to “make those curriculum connections that other people need to see,” so that the literature is “not that check mark; it’s your piece of literature that you’re using to show all of these outcomes.” The designated Indigenous education resource person in a given school jurisdiction, Danny says, can provide support but also advocacy if needed, such as by talking to school administration on the teacher’s behalf. She refers back to the TRC report:

As our government pushes for the Truth and Reconciliation piece, that document . . . will be something too that we’ll be able to fall back on and say, “Actually our government says this is what we need to be doing.” So as policies change, you can use the government policies.
“Until that point,” she suggests teachers need to “use somebody higher up,” including, again the Indigenous education resource person.

Danny points to the additional difficulty that “English departments can be very intimidating and very canon based”: since most “literature degrees that people come out with focus on the canon,” it can be “very challenging to get somebody who, that’s their education background, to see anything outside of that.” She points to her own degree program as an example. “If you are a new teacher, living in that hierarchy of an English department,” it can be “frightening to try to speak up.” However, a support network of other educators “can help you reframe what you are trying to say in a way that is English-teacher speak.” It also helps to have advice on how to “approach your leadership,” not necessarily in a way that is adversarial or fuelled by the “gut anger reaction” or “protest” that arises “when we see this injustice of the invisible.”

By this point we have come up to the end of our time and I ask Danny for her concluding thoughts. Danny reflects,

I think the big thing is the piece that what is good for Indigenous students is good for all students; what is good for all students is not necessarily meeting the needs of our Indigenous students. . . . And it doesn’t matter which subject area you’re looking at. I think part of the value of Indigenous education is that it isn’t subject-area’d, so even if you’re looking at a story, you’re also looking at science through the land; you’re looking at all those pieces and really acknowledging that bringing in not just our stories, but our way of knowing and our way of being with those stories, is vital to our Indigenous students and a huge benefit to our non-Indigenous students. And that
reconciliation piece happens through these activities. We will never bridge those two worlds if we can’t come together, and stories are a place where everyone can come together. So I think that is why this work around literature is so important, because that’s where we come together. That’s where we can see each other in our own stories and in each other’s stories.

This kind of relationship, we agree in closing, can change what happens next.

4.17 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have shared writers’ and teachers’ perspectives gathered through research interviews exploring Indigenous literatures, communities, and learning. While summarizing these perspectives to create a meaningful presentation for the study as a whole, I have sought to foreground teachers’ and writers’ own words so that each conversation speaks to its own significant concerns. I hope that readers have appreciated the richness of each person’s insights, reading through the words of Richard, Angela, Rachel, Alice, Robin, Jesse, David, Katherena, Warren, Sharron, Daniel, Suzette, Francesca, and Danny. I am tremendously grateful to these people for sharing their time, knowledge, words, and stories with me during this process. In terms of my methodological métissage, I have set out these perspectives in preparation for the interpretation that will follow. I have gathered the threads—I turn next to the weaving.
Chapter 5: Interpretations—Weaving the Threads

In this chapter, I interpret the perspectives from the 14 writers and teachers who shared conversations with me, taking them up in relation to my primary research question—how do Indigenous literatures matter to the resurgence of healthy Indigenous communities? The richness of those conversations brings breadth and depth to this work; it is an honour to explore them in this recursive and relational process of interpretation.

I previously described my theoretical and methodological framework and how I would shape my study through métissage as an Indigenous and hermeneutic research sensibility (Donald, 2012). In working to enact métissage at this stage, using the model of the Métis sash figuratively, I understand my process of interpretation as one of conceptual and textual weaving. Previously, I gathered the threads; now, I turn to the weaving itself. In this imagined weaving, I envision bright strands intertwining, colours overlapping, patterns emerging under my fingers. Weaving has been a generative model for understanding my process: it has enabled me to conceptualize and organize my work. As this is métissage, I find meaning through the relationality of the intertwined threads. Understanding the rich conversations I held with teachers and writers does not mean simplifying them or distilling them down to their basic ingredients; rather, it means recognizing the complexities, respecting the intricate relationality of the interweavings. It means dwelling with them, coming together in relation to the topic, and listening for what they ask of me.

Drawing upon the Métis sash figuratively requires me to be responsible to it in practice. My accountability to the real existence of that symbolic item, and to the communities that it represents, is something that remains for me to demonstrate in my
ongoing work. I articulate this point here because I previously argued that it is irresponsible to take up Indigenous cultural items as metaphors within academic work if they are divorced from real contexts and communities. I am not certain that what I am doing here exempts me from this critique; however, I am taking pains to complete this work with rigour and care, focusing on connections to contexts and communities. For me, this project is a way for me as a Métis scholar to give back.

In this chapter, I take up what I heard as I listened to writers and teachers and work through the understandings that arose, for me, out of those conversations. As I explained in chapter three, I found that my interpretive juxtapositions, mappings, and writings generated four main clusters of understandings. In other words, I am weaving the threads in four sections in order to create one long stretch of fabric, my sash. I have composed them in four sections to organize my emergent understandings, but the interpretations are interconnected. In reality the threads are all continuous and interwoven, related and distant, tangled and loose—but for my purposes here I am naming my four segments and locating the primary patterns I see in each. Figure 5.1 below offers a visual representation that shows the four clusters as interconnected and permeable. Representing these understandings in writing, through métissage, entails weaving in a somewhat sequential fashion. Thus the written chapter itself embodies the material form of the woven sash.
This chapter comprises a sequential but interconnected discussion of these four clusters of understandings, which I am calling *weavings*. In each section, I weave together the threads of participants’ ideas with my own understandings; I also weave in understandings drawn from critical scholarship where they enable me to better appreciate the significance of what participants have shared. Each of the four sections has a title designating an understanding this work has generated in relation to my research topic and question.
The four weavings are sequenced in order to build upon each other. In the first weaving, entitled “Indigenous Literatures Creating Community,” I begin with literature, exploring the processes of community creation that emerge out of Indigenous writers’ creative practices. In the second weaving, entitled “Indigenous Literatures Challenging Context and Challenging Learning,” I consider how colonial contexts may present challenges for teachers when they try to bring this creative work, and the communities it represents, into their classrooms. In the third weaving, entitled “Indigenous Literatures Calling Readers to Relate and to Respond,” I look at the capacity of Indigenous literatures to call readers into relational understandings, which may motivate educators to undertake these challenges. In the fourth weaving, entitled “Indigenous Literatures Enabling Transformation,” I examine the potential for transformation that exists when readers respond to what they read, demonstrating responsibility to those relational understandings. Each of these four sections is drawn together through the conceptual framework I have developed around Indigenous communities and resurgence. Each weaving therefore concludes by articulating how the understandings in that section answer my primary research question on reading for resurgence.

Each of the four weavings below 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, Hasebe-Ludt, Donald, Hurren, Leggo, & Oberg, 2008; Donald, 2012; Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009; Simpkins, 2012). It is weaving, enacted and represented 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 each 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; Simpkins, 2012). While this chapter is, on the whole, composed in my voice and represents a personal process of composing myself in this place that is my study (D. Jardine, 2002, p. 155), this textual métissage standing at the front of each section is a reminder that relationality is at the heart of my understandings. This is true because the process of understanding is inherently a relational one—as understanding entails coming to an understanding with each other about something (Gadamer, 1960/2004)—and because it is only in conversation with these 14 people that I am able to do this work. In this way, it is their voices that invite readers in to what is at play in each weaving.
5.1 Indigenous Literatures Creating Community

5.1.1 First Weaving

“I am a representative of the Métis Nation no matter what. . . . You end up being a representative of who you are all the time, and you want to be as good an example as possible.” (Katherena)

“That’s that piece that’s missing, is the resilient side, and . . . the beautiful side, the artistic side that shows the history and the culture—and that it’s still present day.” (Suzette)

“In my teaching and my writing there’s got to be at least a good measure of uplifting, self-empowering messages and themes and stories . . . The last thing our First Nations students want is to be coming here from the rez and then have a mirror shoved in their face about how awful things are for them.” (Jesse)

“They hate being Native; they hate the stereotypes; they hate being Native [in this program]. . . . And so for me to then say, “Oh, read this one by Sherman Alexie—you’ll love it,” you know, it’s a no-brainer . . . I’m just going to lose them.” (Angela)

“Deepest truth be told, I write because I have to and I write equally because I love to. . . . I hope my writing can help others and at the same time be not too frightening to endure.” (Sharron)

“If we’re going to be anywhere positive in the future we need to start from a good knowledge base—from a place of truth, and acceptance of that truth.” (David)

“Literature is our voiced expression of being in the world, and it enters a world where we are presumed to be already be erased or where we are expected to disappear. And our stories, our fiction, our plays, our poems, our songs, all of these embodied story-ways affirm the rightness of our belonging.” (Daniel)

“When I actually get to see myself in a story and when these Indigenous students get to see themselves in story, when you can relate to a character, it lets you see yourself as an outsider, and looking in, and really start to understand who you are.” (Danny)

“Literature can remind people of the value of their stories and can build pride.” (Warren)

“That’s what I’m so excited about, is being able to tell stories from the North, with Northern artists, from a Northern perspective, with Northern editors and Northern translators. I think that’s what’s going to get our community members reading.” (Richard)

“This resurgence . . . of literature and why that’s happening, and this idea of healing through storytelling, and why we need to aware of that, and to teach that and to be—education should be on the forefront of saying this is important.” (Alice)

5.1.2 Representing Indigenous Communities

One of the first avenues I explored concerning writers and their connections to community was that of representation. Representing one’s community as an Indigenous writer is importantly tied to the process of creation, but this has more than one layer of
meaning to it. First, the writers with whom I spoke repeatedly raise the point that Indigenous writers inevitably represent their communities for reading audiences, when their work is taken up. While several writers voice a careful insistence that they speak only from their own perspectives—for instance, when Jesse talks about writing from his own background and not foisting his beliefs on others—many writers also demonstrate an awareness that they may or will be held up as representative of their community. This representative role may be attributed even if it is not sought—as Warren suggests when he says, “As an Indigenous writer or Indigenous scholar, I think your work always does represent more than your own perspective, whether you want it that way or not.” I think the awareness that writers demonstrate—that they are going to be read as representing their communities—is coupled with a sense of responsibility in that role. Just as Katherena expresses discomfort over the assumption of representation, for instance, she invokes her consequent sense of responsibility: “you want to be as good an example as possible.”

This sense of responsibility to community that arises from the role of representation in the public sphere is just one aspect of writers’ understandings of responsibility, but it is one that relates importantly to readership. It is their recognition that readers see them as representative that leads them to think carefully about how they represent their communities. Daniel marks this insistence most clearly when he says, “no work of art exists in a vacuum,” and urges writers to “think about responsibility.” His point about understanding context—specifically, when he says, “you have to write in the context of settler colonial realities that have already misrepresented Indigenous peoples . . . and if you don’t understand that context, you’re going hurt people”—invokes the
potential for readers to take up a text in ways that are harmful to Indigenous people; his point here also invokes the long history of Indigenous peoples being portrayed and understood in inappropriate ways through Eurocentric writings. This “context of settler colonial realities” that Daniel points to is well established in scholarly writing on Indigenous perspectives: for instance, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) has established that Eurocentric understandings of Indigenous peoples and knowledges are a form of imperialism that have undermined the self-understanding and self-determination of global Indigenous communities. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) also addresses misrepresentations and argues that writers and other artists who take up the Indigenous project of “representing” (pp. 151-152) are countering those colonial processes:

Representation of indigenous peoples by indigenous people is about countering the dominant society’s image of indigenous peoples, their lifestyles and belief systems. It is also about proposing solutions to the real-life dilemmas that indigenous communities confront, and trying to capture the complexities of being indigenous. (L.T. Smith, 2012, p. 152).

Like Daniel, many of the writers I spoke with express a strong sense of responsibility in light of this broader context of readership and representation. Jesse does so when he describes asking himself, as a kind of self-check, “Is my writing coming from the right place? . . . Is it coming from an authentic place?” Knowing that writing may be taken as representing certain communities leads to considerations of how and what to write.

Such questions about responsibility are just part of the complexity of what it means to be bound to one’s community. Rich examples exist across the conversations but there is something particular that Warren says that I would like to take up. When
Warren—in telling me how he thinks about community when he writes—points out that there are “various Métis communities,” for instance, and describes his connection to community as “an ongoing negotiation,” he suggests some of the complexity of defining community and belonging. Métis community is not a singular entity: it is “more really about specific relationships with specific people.” Warren’s insight here foregrounds the complexity of identity but also the extent to which particular relationships shape his understanding. In recognizing that Indigenous writers may represent their communities, it is also important to recognize that connections to community are not always as straightforward as some might assume.

This caution connects to what Indigenous scholars have said about the problem of assuming or demanding representation, cultural knowledge, or certain forms of authenticity (King, 2003; St. Denis, 2007). For instance, King (2003) critiques the demand for authenticity as perpetuating mythical characterizations of Indigenous people that obscure their contemporary realities and diversities:

In the absence of visual confirmation [looking “Indian”], these “touchstones”—race, culture, language, blood—still form a kind of authenticity test, a racial-reality game that contemporary Native people are forced to play. And here are some of the questions. Were you born on a reserve? . . . Do you speak your Native language? . . . Do you participate in your tribe’s ceremonies? . . . Are you a full-blood? . . . Are you a status Indian? (King, 2003, p. 55)

I agree with King that fixed ideas of what it means to be Indigenous—the Indian as an “imaginative construct” (King, 2003, p. 34)—are dangerous in that they suppress the
lived realities and diversities of Indigenous people, obscuring the extent to which “Native culture, as with any culture, is a vibrant, changing thing” (King, 2003, p. 37). This warning about authenticity plays well with Jesse’s question about his writing coming “from an authentic place”—he intentionally uses the term to raise complex questions about responsibility.

How to write responsibly from one’s positioning is one among many concerns that appear across the conversations on writing. I borrow this term, “concerns,” from Rachel, who listed this among the background information she would find useful in teaching a new text: “Where’s this situated in terms of First Nations literature as a field, and who wrote it, and what are their major concerns?” While I did not anticipate this line of inquiry when I was planning my study—for instance, I did not have a question for writers on what topics or issues they write about—it emerged out of writers discussing what significance their work has for them. In considering how literatures connect to community resurgence, it is important to listen to what matters to writers in portraying the complex, lived experiences of Indigenous community members. Exploring and representing one’s concerns, in this sense, in relation with the concerns of one’s community, is integral to the process of storying the community. The community exists within and through the creative expressions of who people are, what they do, what they care about, how they relate to the world, how they see and understand, what they have experienced and endured, and what they dream about and hope for.

Indigenous writers take up a range of concerns in their creative work. Even at the simple level of topic and genre within the small sample of writers in this study, the range in their creative practice is apparent. For a reader seeking to learn about Indigenous
literatures, it is good to follow Rachel’s awareness that Indigenous literature is a diverse field in which individual writers have particular backgrounds and particular concerns. This awareness connects to one of the most fundamental emphases in Indigenous literary criticism, namely that it is inappropriate to generalize across the entirety of Indigenous writing as if it were a homogenous body of work (Acoose, 2001; Fagan, 2002) or, by extension, across Indigenous peoples as if they were a single cultural group. Daniel (Justice, 2006) makes this emphasis in his critical work on Indigenous literatures, insisting upon specificity as necessary for appropriate interpretation:

Native people are never just “Native”: we are Cherokees, Creeks, Cherokee-Creeks, Mohawks, Eastern Miamis-Shawnees, and all distinctions and combinations between and beyond. Collapsing all these affiliations and relationships into a generic claim of between-the-worlds Native hybridity is yet another act of colonialist displacement that has, as its ultimate aim, the symbolic and physical erasure of Indigenous nations from the very memory of this land. (p. 215)

Blending Indigenous groups together is not only inaccurate: it also perpetuates political and epistemological violence against Indigenous peoples by erasing who they are. This range and diversity means it is better not to look for a quick or simple way to understand Indigenous writing as a whole.

Tangled up with the question of what aspects of individual and community experiences writers represent through their writing is the question of whether the writing is uplifting or not. I think it is very significant that writers and teachers both consider what kind of emotional effect a text will have on readers, particularly young readers. Of course recognizing the range and diversity of Indigenous literatures—and of their
readers—means recognizing that they will inspire a range of feelings, but to what extent do writers and teachers seek to shape those experiences? I am thinking here of several comments. Both Robin and Suzette remark that it is beneficial to see celebratory, positive, or creative aspects of Indigenous peoples through writing. Indeed, positive portrayals can counter negative attitudes and racism, spreading more affirming perspectives. The question of readership becomes salient in relation to this point. For instance, Jesse insists that his writing include “uplifting, self-empowering messages and themes and stories” because he considers a First Nations audience and does not want to constantly bring them to face difficult realities: “There’s enough of that already,” in his view. However, uplifting Indigenous texts can also relieve settler readers of the discomfort of reading about colonial violence, which may let them off the hook, in a sense: there is some necessity to continue portraying the difficult realities of colonialism in the face of stubborn forgetting or denial (Dion, 2009; Martin, 2012; Regan, 2010). The dissonance between these ideas about differing audiences is just one of many complexities tied to who is reading Indigenous writing.

The complexities inherent in writing for diverse audiences are amplified by literature’s role in expressing Indigenous presence. Writers and their texts are bound to their communities through questions of representation, but it is not simply a matter of Indigenous communities existing separately from the literature while writers portray them. Rather, communities are themselves created in and through the literature. I see this most clearly when I consider the threads in this section in relation to Daniel’s answer to my question about why Indigenous literatures matter:
Because Indigenous people matter. And Indigenous peoples matter. Literature is our voiced expression of being in the world, and it enters a world where we are presumed to be already be erased or where we are expected to disappear. Our stories, our fiction, our plays, our poems, our songs, all of these embodied story-ways affirm the rightness of our belonging in a world that is so wounded, and so ruptured, but to which we still hold a significant claim.

Literatures are not simply representations of communities; there is a flatness or disconnect implied in that language that does not convey the extent to which literatures—and other embodied story-ways—are a form of presence for Indigenous peoples. Elsewhere in his critical writing Daniel (Justice, 2008) has emphasized the significance of such expressions in the context of colonial erasures. Indigenous people are not only present but also present in defiance of the forces that have sought to eliminate, forget, or mythologize them. Writers and their texts are portraying Indigenous communities for their readerships, but these processes of representation must also be understood as creation. They are an expression of being for those communities.

5.1.3 Building and Envisioning Better Futures

I came to understand through my conversations with writers and teachers that working for a healthy future for communities is an important aspect of creating and learning with Indigenous literatures. I heard this point clearly from David’s insistence on knowledge as a foundation on which better futures might be built. I am thinking of when David says, “I play a small role in building that foundation” and “if we’re going to be anywhere positive in the future we need to start from a good knowledge base—from a
place of truth, and acceptance of that truth.” David’s description of working toward a better future is a forward-looking and pedagogical one, as he sees the possibility for better futures to be built out of the material that creative texts provide. He invokes a sense that teachers and students learning through Indigenous literatures can access knowledge that then moves through them to manifest in the world, precipitating a constructive process. I am interested in this framing of the role literatures play, almost as a delivery system for raw materials—truth and knowledge being the stuff from which better futures are constructed. This framing holds within it a corresponding approach for teachers and students: their collective task in relation to the literature is to read to learn the truths, gather the knowledge, and then demonstrate that learning through their future actions. This suggestion resonates with insights from teachers like Rachel and Alice who discuss bringing their students to challenge stereotypes, for instance. I think that perspectives like these demonstrate an intertwining of beliefs about creation, imagination, learning, and community futures.

Imagining or building the future entails connecting the past and present to the future, not focusing forward only. This recognition of Indigenous communities’ continuity is essential to creating community, as it is a process of ongoing creation, not creation out of absence. When Katherena talks about the stories yet to come—“There are so many people that are just coming into their power to tell stories”—and when Jesse talks about the rich literary traditions that extend, uninterrupted, deep into the past—“Every decade, going back, is filled with stories, writings”—they invoke a sense of continuity, connecting people in community from generation to generation. Since Indigenous community members may be “unaware of just how rich our Indigenous
writing traditions are,” foregrounding the deep roots and upward growth of those literary traditions can help to nurture pride and more dreams for the future.

5.1.4 Indigenous Readers Identifying with Indigenous Communities

My focus on Indigenous communities brings me to consider the significance of Indigenous readers identifying with Indigenous literatures—a topic that came up in many of the conversations. As I discussed with participants, and shared with readers in chapter one, I came into this study aware of my own experiences with reading Indigenous (particularly Métis) literatures as part of my broader personal struggle to understand and respond to my Métis heritage. Teachers and writers in turn shared many ideas on why it matters to identify with what one is reading. These perspectives connect with points I make in the final section of this chapter on changing Indigenous learners’ experiences with learning. For now, I am focusing on how identifying with literature is part of creating community.

To examine this idea, I want to put together three ideas from Danny, Jesse, and Angela. First is Danny’s insistence that, “when you can relate to a character, it lets you see yourself as an outsider, and looking in, and really start to understand who you are.” Being able to see yourself and work on self-understanding or identity is something that literature can facilitate—Danny emphasizes that, in this way, Indigenous literatures offer Indigenous students “that same opportunity that other students have had for many, many generations of education”—in that the Eurocentric canon has for a long time offered students of European ancestry the opportunity to see and learn about themselves in what
they are reading. Danny’s points on developing self-understanding here also connect importantly to her points on developing a sense of self in relation to community.

I want to contrast this idea that Danny discusses with the story of a student’s disconnection that Angela shares, as I feel this is a significant point of “dissonance” (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009), revealing both tension and urgency. When Angela raises her experiences of what happens when “the Aboriginal kids aren’t interested” in reading the Aboriginal literature she tries to read with them, she points to the possibility that this process of building self-understanding and validation in relation to community will not be inevitable for all readers—this possible disconnect is one way in which the teaching of Indigenous literatures will not necessarily be beneficial (immediately, easily) for all readers. A student’s lack of interest may be insignificant: young people may have a wide range of reading interests and I would not suggest that Indigenous youth should only read Indigenous texts. Nor would I suggest that Indigenous youth should be compelled—particularly not by a non-Indigenous education system—to develop positive identifications with their cultures or communities. I think that self-determination means that people have the space to engage in their individual and community processes of identification (or healing, or resurgence) on their own terms—in relation to each other but without outcomes being imposed. Along these lines, it is crucial to recognize that, for Angela’s student—and others like him, in Angela’s experience—to say that they “hate being Native” is a glaring indicator of the dysfunction and damage that currently colonize the identity-building processes of Indigenous youth. It is necessary to ask what schooling has done to contribute to this student’s negative self-perception. How to support and affirm young people as they struggle to grow healthy senses of self-
in-community while colonialism poisons their efforts is a big question at the very heart of this project. It is a complex, but necessary, task for educators to navigate the tension between providing opportunities for Indigenous youth to identify with the literatures they are reading, and refraining from imposing expectations as to whether, when, or how they do so.

Jesse’s perspectives offer some further insight into this difficulty around identifying with literatures. In particular, I am thinking of what Jesse says about how literatures can connect readers intimately with Indigenous culture. He says, “It’s that connection to culture which allows or helps people be a little more self-reflective . . . it enables one to look in that mirror I was talking about without flinching.” By “that mirror,” here, he refers to the one that confronts readers with the difficult aspects of their experiences with colonialism. Jesse describes the process of self-reflection as empowering, as a form of personal growth that can help give young people the strength “to look at their own past, to overcome that discomfort or anxiety.” Connecting with culture and community through literatures in this way, working through processes of self-understanding, can develop people’s resilience. Further, it can bring people to imagine and story themselves into communities. For literatures to help people work through their place in their community is an important process for community resurgence.

It is this kind of empowering process that I think Alice is so adamant about respecting in education when she says, “This resurgence . . . of literature and why that’s happening, and this idea of healing through storytelling . . . education should be on the forefront of saying this is important.” She calls for a greater connection between the resurgent creative work going on in Indigenous communities and the possible
pedagogical work that could take place in secondary classrooms like hers. Maybe understanding the potential for education to help such empowerment to materialize means understanding educators’ responsibility to do the work involved, and education systems’ responsibilities to shift and grow to facilitate that work. Listening to Alice’s passionate insistence here, I think about the contrasts that exist between many of these conversations between writers and teachers. Looking at the issue of what it means for Indigenous readers to identify with what they are reading and develop self-understanding in relation to their communities, I am still wondering to what extent the resurgent possibilities of Indigenous literatures are actually able to manifest in secondary classrooms. While it is not right to prescribe how Indigenous youth develop community identifications or pride, it is essential for schooling in Canada to continue working against its assimilative legacy (Battiste, 2013; Hampton, 1995), which has disconnected too many Indigenous people from their communities. Such shifts are necessary if literatures are going to be able to contribute to Indigenous community resurgence through education.

5.1.5 Creating, Reading, and Celebrating

The notion of Indigenous readers identifying with Indigenous literatures connects with a beautiful surprise the conversations gave me. Going into this study, looking for how literatures matter to community resurgence, I had assumed that whatever significant things were going on were going on within and through the literature, in the connections between what writers put into texts and how readers took those texts up. That assumption burst apart during the very first interview, my conversation with Richard. Richard’s way
of talking about Indigenous literatures evokes an understanding of community being generated around literatures as well as through them—in how they are created and in how they are celebrated. For instance, when Richard talks about telling “stories from the North, with Northern artists, from a Northern perspective, with Northern editors and Northern translators,” he is describing community members coming together around the creation of a text: the vibrancy and collaborative creativity suggested in his descriptions is exactly the kind of community resurgence I was looking for; this is just not where I expected to find it. Likewise, the way Richard talks about other Indigenous writers and celebrates their achievements—as when he says, “In Aboriginal literature we carry each other’s joys”—invokes a sense of strong community among writers as well. Writers are connecting around the literary arts and their common investment in storying themselves and their communities. I was pleased to see this immediate expansion beyond my original research proposal, as it meant my project was alive, complex, and growing. Richard’s conversation contained the first threads that led me to these understandings but many more arose across the other conversations.

Community resurgence happens around the creation of Indigenous literatures; it also happens around its reception. The process of people coming together as audiences for Indigenous writing is evident in how Warren describes having “huge turnouts” at literary events, as well as the “support and pride that people in our communities feel when they see” literary work being shared at such events. Similarly, Jesse and Warren discuss the effect that anthologies of Indigenous writing can have for readers—for instance, Warren talks about how, through anthologies like Manitowapow, Indigenous people can “look at the richness of what’s been accomplished in our communities.”
Importantly, such celebrations of literary achievement are a way of coming together with pride, which is, I believe, an important way in which literatures contribute to healthy Indigenous communities: as Warren says, “There’s such an amazing sense of community well-being that becomes a part of that.” As audiences and readerships grow, community is created around the literature.

Another forum through which growth in Indigenous literatures perpetuates further creation is role modeling. Several writers mention either other writers who went before them, making it seem possible for them to become writers, or wanting to help other young people see that they could be writers, too. To me, such role modeling is also about creating community, as it involves bringing more voices into the continuing storying-forward of that community. For example, Katherena describes her experience of reading *In Search of April Raintree*, a novel by Métis writer Beatrice Culleton Mosionier: “That’s really where I opened my eyes to the idea that I could write and I could write about this place.” Connecting with this book enabled her to imagine herself not only as a writer but as able to portray her own experiences in her own voice. It is significant that a book published by an Indigenous writer can validate other young people’s sense that their voices matter, that their experiences and stories are worth sharing. Role modeling can encourage further growth in Indigenous literary arts, which feeds into the creative possibilities of the community. It also connects people together within their communities. Again, this is resurgence taking place around the creation and celebration of creative writing. It is community creation—in both senses that the phrase suggests.
5.1.6 Reading for Resurgence: First Weaving

When I first started thinking up this study, I thought I would be pursuing one specific line of inquiry: the potential for Indigenous literatures, taught in classrooms, to nurture stronger communities through individuals learning about themselves. That is, I thought that Indigenous literatures contributed to community resurgence because, through reading, people could learn about who they were or who they might be as community members. So through individuals’ processes of identifying with what they read and the impacts those processes had on how they lived, the literature helped to create healthier Indigenous communities. I had experienced this process myself, as I have shared across this project. Now, while this is one important aspect of what I have heard in my conversations with teachers and writers, I think that there is much more to it.

Connecting back to my primary research question—how do Indigenous literatures matter to the resurgence of healthy Indigenous communities?—I think Indigenous literatures matter because, through literatures, Indigenous people are creating resurgent communities. Artistic texts are connected to the people who create them, and communities can flourish in, through, and around literary texts. Through their stories, writers are portraying the complex lived experiences of Indigenous individuals and communities, expressing Indigenous presence. Through Indigenous literatures, Indigenous people remember, story, and envision community pasts, presents, and futures. Communities are generated and connected not only through and within literary texts but also around them—through their creation and reception. Learning is at work in all of these processes. People can come to understand themselves and their communities.
through these kinds of creation, and can learn what is possible for new futures built on long histories.

I continually return to the notion that communities are storied to understand this cluster of threads about creating community. The stories literally make up the communities, not out of thin air but out of all the things that make up who people are and how they connect together. In their stories, people describe everyday experiences, express beliefs, teach their kids what matters, understand the Land around them, laugh at the funny things, point out what is inhumane, remember past events, dream of better ways, share feelings of love and anger and loss and pride. They are agreeing, disagreeing, talking, changing, adapting, preserving, honouring, celebrating, differentiating, joining, and relating. Of course many stories remain untold, and each community exists in other ways, beyond its literatures. However, when people tell their stories, they are voicing and sharing the things that matter to them about their community. Each literary text is a form of creative work that helps to story the community—past, present, and future.

One of the most formative texts for my thinking is Renate Eigenbrod and Jo-Ann Episkenew’s (2002) collection Creating Community: A Roundtable on Canadian Aboriginal Literature. It emerged out of a roundtable, held annually still, at which scholars of Indigenous literatures come together to share and discuss. It is really a community gathering, with hugs, familiar faces, and a strong sense of continuity. I personally have benefited from and contributed to these community spaces, and I think I can see why Renate and Jo-Ann titled the book that way. Taking up Indigenous literatures means engaging with community creation. Understanding the literature also means nurturing a responsive critical community. I want to honour their insight since
both of these women, touchstones in that critical community, have passed on during the
time I have been working on this project. Their legacy of creating community is a
reminder to me of the work to be remembered and the work to be done.
5.2 Indigenous Literatures: Challenging Learning, Learning to Challenge

5.2.1 Second Weaving

“From the perspective of Indigenous literature, for so long it’s been looked on through a European lens and then it’s been considered bad.” (Katherena)

Native writing is pigeonholed. . . . Non-Native people’s expectations of Native writing are generally extremely myopic. In some ways you can’t fault people for that, because they are trained that way. . . . My grandkids are reading the same books I read when I was a kid, and that was 50-something years ago.” (Sharron)

“I definitely try and mix it up at least with the literature that focuses on trauma and victimhood and is of course sharply politicized. . . . I almost feel like there’s an extra level of energy needed to teach Indigenous literature, because you’re having to negotiate all of these feelings and issues . . . so it creates a lot of tension in the classroom.” (Jesse)

“I think the possibility of Aboriginal literature in the classroom is, it creates a space for appreciation, and it creates a space where ignorance gets pushed to the side.” (Suzette)

“I think it’s easy to continue to be ignorant. . . . That’s why I want really want to start teaching more Indigenous literature, because how do you stop newer generations from having that opinion?” (Alice)

“That’s how ignorance gets spread, by dialoguing between each other about things that we don’t know about. So if we know about them, then we learn more positive things, and I think that’s my whole goal in writing the stuff that I do.” (David)

“I feel awkward talking about the appropriateness of—I don’t want to appropriate; I want to use, right? So when I’m talking with [an Indigenous education resource person] about using certain literatures or she’s coming in and it’s going to be an uneasy dance about, how do we talk about this stuff?” (Francesca)

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

“A lot of the staff just got really mad. It’s like, ‘If I have to hear another goddamn thing about Native people’ . . . I think everyone thinks that just because there’s people who work with Aboriginals that they’re all sensitive, but not a lot of people are.” (Angela)

“I knew there would be preparation involved in this. But it’s a different kind of preparation; it’s preparation around land and story and culture and so many things that I think people would be interested in, and I never really felt fearful about that. I always thought that someone would tune me in if I was doing something wrong.” (Robin)

“You’re totally going to screw up. Just like Indigenous teachers screw up. That’s the nature of the beast . . . . So part of it is to own your imperfection. No expects that they’re going get it right on other stuff all the time.” (Daniel)

“It’s bigger than just literature . . . this is a huge issue around human rights, and any time there’s that move, there’s backlash.” (Danny)
5.2.2 Confronting and Challenging Colonial Contexts

In chapter two I wrote that, going into this project, I felt that there was a gap between what I had seen happening in Indigenous literary studies and what I had seen happening in secondary classrooms. One of my aims has been to connect these spaces, to bring them into conversation with each other. I feel both hope and concern: so much is possible with learning through Indigenous literatures; however, is that possibility being realized in classrooms? My experience of the research conversations I shared with writers and teachers was spread over months, sometimes with significant temporal pauses between each one. Readers coming to this work for the first time experience them all in a row. I wonder what that experience of reading chapter four is like. How much connection, how much contrast, did readers see between the teachers’ and writers’ perspectives?

Listening to many of the teachers’ perspectives gave me a sense that there is a tremendous disconnect between what teachers’ day-to-day working realities ask of them and what teaching Indigenous literatures asks of them. A kind of turbulence or difficulty accompanies the introduction of Indigenous texts into some of these classrooms. Of course whether and how this turbulence occurs very much depends on an almost infinite number of variables encompassing classrooms, schools, teachers, students, places, times, contexts, and so on. It is outside the purpose of my research to characterize or critique the teachers or classrooms involved in this study. Rather, I seek to attend to these particular teachers’ experiences of teaching Indigenous literatures. Given my own positioning, I see the need for a stronger connection between teaching contexts and the broad and deep critical contexts that call for Indigenous-centred, decolonizing, and Nation- or culture-
specific approaches to Indigenous literary texts in and out of the classroom (Allen, 2012; Balzer, 2006; Blaeser, 1993; Episkenew, 2002, 2012; Fagan, Justice, Martin, McKeegney, Reder, & Sinclair, 2009). In other words, many of these teachers face a genuine challenge in bridging their classrooms and the literary work of creating community.

Many of the teachers I spoke with expressed concerns that they did not feel prepared to teach Indigenous literatures or said that they could use support in terms of developing their critical background or locating resources and generating teaching ideas. Alice offers one explanation for such feelings of insufficiency when she points out that teaching Indigenous literatures is not the same as teaching the usual texts, because the context shaping those texts is not the same: “There is more to it than just throwing in a short story or talking about a poem. There’s more . . . emotional investment, more background knowledge.” She goes on to suggest that many teachers do not have the “comfort level” needed to teach Indigenous literatures. Rachel echoes this point: “I have just enough criticism to make me cautious and afraid, but not enough to make me confident.” Such perspectives speak to how teaching Indigenous literatures presents genuine challenges for some teachers.

Colonial contexts contribute to the difficulties that some teachers may face in reading and teaching Indigenous literatures. Even for a text-based examination of aesthetic or figurative elements—which have often been thought of as exempt from politicized readings (King, 2003)—Indigenous literatures offer challenges to readers if they seek to understand them through established critical practices. Reading from the centre of the discipline of English literature means reading through a Eurocentric lens. Jesse points out that Indigenous literatures have “a different aesthetic altogether.” Danny,
likewise, points to particular stylistic and narratological characteristics of Indigenous texts when she suggests that such literature “shows a different way of writing . . . what’s often considered the female way of writing, that story-telling, that non-linear type of story.” Culture and context influence communication and artistry, even at the level of rhythm, simile, diction, metaphor, and tone, and even when the writing takes place in the colonial language of English (Allen, 2012; Blaeser, 1999; Maracle, 1994; McLeod, 2014). Cree scholar Tasha Beeds (2014), for instance, looks at “the poetics of ancient sound” (p. 70) in relation to Cree writers who “lay down the pathways between the oral and the written” (p. 61). She says, “These writers have ‘re-fused’ traditional European based literary constructs and boxes with nêhiyawêwin (Cree-ness). In kistêsinâw/wîsahkêcâhk’s style, they re-Cree-ate English with nêhiyaw-itâpisiniwin (Cree way of seeing/world view), shape-shifting English textual bodies” (p. 61). Beeds (2014) here articulates an understanding that Indigenous literatures emerge from particular communities—with particular ontological, epistemological, linguistic, and aesthetic systems. This understanding exposes the incompatibility of Eurocentric approaches to reading.

Several writers point to what happens when readers—including critics, publishers, and those who adjudicate literary prizes—do not recognize that Indigenous literatures must not be evaluated using Eurocentric measures. I am thinking, for instance, of Katherena’s comment that, “From the perspective of Indigenous literature, for so long it’s been looked on through a European lens and then it’s been considered bad.” Sharron makes a similar statement, saying that “Non-Native people’s expectations of Native writing are generally extremely myopic.” Further, she suggests that the evaluative
standards within the literary industry originate in Eurocentric education, in that “They are trained that way.” She adds that “It’s important for many people to understand that Western education is limited . . . It’s dead / live wealthy white men and women (on juries and in the texts read).” In making these points, Sharron suggests that people within the literary industry who do not see merit in Indigenous writing may be limited by Eurocentric education and training, but also that they “really should know” better if they are sitting on prize juries. Using Eurocentric standards or lenses is not an appropriate way to gauge the merit or meaning of Indigenous writing.

Instead, reading Indigenous literatures entails recognizing and countering colonial contexts. While some critical approaches within English literary studies push readers to interpret texts without considering contexts, teaching Indigenous literatures responsibly means engaging with contexts (Episkenew, 2002; Hanson, 2008). The basic premise that Indigenous writing “enters a world where we are presumed to be already be erased or where we are expected to disappear,” as Daniel puts it, is central to this contention. That is, the possibility for Indigenous literatures to disrupt such presumptions or expectations is a key way in which context matters. The same can be argued about challenging misrepresentations, or missing representations, of Indigenous communities. It is vitally important for those teaching Indigenous literatures to understand how colonialism and racism have contributed to a set of conditions in which many settler Canadians have not been able to build accurate or affirming understandings of Indigenous communities. This issue of understanding and representation is of course only part of “the wider framework of self-determination, decolonization and social justice” (L.T. Smith, 2012, p. 4) that concerns scholars across Indigenous studies: issues around treaties, governance, land,
violence, and social and economic disparities, for instance, point to that broader framework. However, in relation to Indigenous literatures, self-representation is a particularly salient issue, because, as I discussed in my second chapter, “telling our own stories” (Valaskakis, 2000, p. 78) is a form of intellectual sovereignty that is a close cousin of political sovereignty (L.T. Smith, 2012; Warrior, 1995; Womack, 1999). Indigenous writers representing and celebrating Indigenous experience and presence, as discussed in the first weaving, above, are feeding a strong and steady supply of self-representation into public consciousness, challenging the pervasive misrecognition that occurs between settler-Canadian and Indigenous populations.

Critics have theorized this kind of misrecognition in a number of ways that are useful to the points I am making about colonial contexts in this section. Dion (2009), for instance, argues that many non-Indigenous people take on “the position of ‘perfect stranger’ to Aboriginal people” (p. 179). When asked about their relationship with Aboriginal people, she suggests, the response goes “something like ‘Oh I know nothing, I have no friends who are Aboriginal, I didn’t grow up near a reserve, I didn’t learn anything in school, I know very little” (Dion, 2009, p. 179). Dion argues that this positioning is “a form of protection against having to recognize their own attachment to and implication in the history of the relationship between Aboriginal people and Canadians” (Dion, 2009, p. 179). Dion (2007, 2009) pairs this articulation of the “perfect stranger” relationship with an analysis of the dominant mode of (mis)understanding of Indigenous peoples as a “romanticised, mythical, victimised, or militant Other” (Dion, 2007, p. 331). Indigenous people are mentally relegated to other places and time frames—pushed out of and obscured from the here and now, tied to static images like
buckskin and feathers (Dion, 2007, 2009; King, 2003). Dion’s formulations are useful here because they help to describe how ignorance about Indigenous peoples is not only about lack—one of accurate information, for instance; rather, there are more active colonial processes at work.

Simon’s (2000) analyses, discussed above, build upon this point, as he, too, contends that ignorance actively “prevents us from hearing” (p. 75) what Indigenous people say, such as their testimonials of dislocation and violence. Likewise, Martin’s (2009) caution that the discourse of reconciliation relies dangerously upon a teleological imperative to move on suggests that not-knowing is not a passive or empty state:

reconciliation . . . involves an eventual forgetting, even as its processes [e.g. the TRC] ask us to remember. Indeed, the “amnesia” that is promised in the discourse of “moving on,” or of “putting the past behind us,” is, I believe, a major part of what made the idea of reconciliation so appealing to Canadians on 11 June 2008 [when Canada issued its statement of apology to former students of Indian Residential Schools]. It seemed to offer the possibility of starting over or of absolution. (p. 57)

Forgetting is an action. The sense of amnesia that Martin invokes here, tied to absolution, is not benign: it is a way of not-knowing that is willingly entered into by a Canadian consciousness that does not want to change itself in its relations with Indigenous peoples.

It is striking to me how critics find such powerful, often embodied, terms through which to describe the mechanisms that prevent (or release) settler-Canadians from recognizing and responding to Indigenous peoples’ voices. Seeing the context around reading
Indigenous literatures in such ways helps to illuminate some of the challenges teachers face in approaching Indigenous literatures.

Daniel’s point that “if you don’t understand that context, you’re going hurt people,” is essential to how he thinks about the power of writing, for himself and other Indigenous authors, but offers important implications for reading and teaching Indigenous literatures as well. In some ways this attention to context is also a response to Francesca’s question about why it matters for Indigenous literatures to be flagged as being Indigenous specifically—when she asks, “Why am I always framing it [as], I’d like to have more FNMI literature? Maybe I’d just like to have a more diverse range of Canadian literature, Can content, in my classroom.” I think there are several layers of meaning and experience tied up in this question, and I see this line of inquiry as connected to several other concerns that Francesca raises. However, a straightforward response might be to take Francesca’s question at face value and answer it with Daniel’s perspective: why does it matter to recognize and emphasize the presence of Indigenous texts specifically in the classroom? Because if you don’t recognize that context of colonialism that shapes how Indigenous presence is understood in Canada, you’re going to hurt people—by perpetuating harm or erasure, for instance, or obscuring the distinct experiences of Indigenous communities throughout that context. I do see how Francesca’s question points to some other issues. For instance, it highlights the potential for possibly tokenistic inclusion of Indigenous texts—i.e., if a text is included merely because it is Indigenous, rather than because the teacher sees its merit for learning. Also, her question points to the possibility that, by drawing Indigenous literatures out as distinct from the rest of Canadian literature, Indigenous people will somehow be torn out
of the fabric of Canada. Such divisiveness feels troubling in relation to Francesca’s perspectives on how literature “knits people together.” This knitting-together is a beautiful example of how complex it is to grapple with colonial contexts. On the one hand, it is inspiring to see how Indigenous literatures might draw people together to connect and build better relationships. On the other, it is easy to feel cautious about any impulse toward unity, given the strong history of assimilationist policies that sought to draw Indigenous people out of their Indigeneity and their ancestral territories and into the mainstream of Anglo- and French-Canadianness (Battiste, 2013; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003).

Challenging presumptions of erasure, in Daniel’s words, or voicelessness, to borrow Jesse’s, brings a particular political charge to Indigenous writing as it challenges these colonial constructs. Katherena’s anecdote about sharing a story at a writing workshop is illustrative here. As she explains, her story was simply about two women discussing relationships, but the conversation at the workshop ended up revolving around how a reader was surprised to realize near the end of the story that the characters were Native, not white. Katherena describes how, through such questions as whether textual cues marked her protagonists’ ancestry or cultural background, her writing became politicized: “I was just writing a story about two people . . . but it was striking to me . . . how that completely non-political story . . . was political.” Examples like this strengthen Katherena’s suggestion that “just to have any sort of cultural pride, cultural experience, in and of itself, is a political act.” Jesse, similarly, states, “most Indigenous literature is inherently politicized to begin with,” and suggests, “When you teach Indigenous literature you’re teaching about all of the pressing social issues that we’re dealing with
today, like residential schools for instance.” Expressions of Indigenous presence are politicized because they challenge presumptions of erasure or absence. Further, portrayals of Indigenous experience are often politically charged because they represent the difficult truths of colonial violence. The necessity of confronting and challenging these contexts when reading Indigenous literatures is a crucial dimension of how they matter to the resurgence of Indigenous communities.

5.2.3 Unsettling Readers, Challenges in the Classroom

Indigenous literatures cannot (responsibly) be read outside the context of Canadian colonialism because that context has influenced what it means to live as an Indigenous person in this place (Episkenew, 2009; L.T. Smith, 2012). Reading Indigenous literatures involves recognizing how they embody the resistance and resurgence of Indigenous communities in defiance of colonial erasures (Justice, 2004, 2008; Simpson, 2011; Womack, 1999). The company of this difficult context can make for some difficult reading experiences. Emotional difficulty can lead to challenges for teachers bringing their classes to discuss Indigenous texts, as Jesse suggests when he says, “I almost feel like there’s an extra level of energy needed to teach Indigenous literature, because you’re having to negotiate all of these feelings and issues . . . so it creates a lot of tension in the classroom.” This tension, as Jesse points out, arises from questions of audience or classroom demographics: for instance if “First Nations students . . . get radically self-conscious” and “the Canadian students” struggle with “white guilt.” Readers, students, will engage with Indigenous texts differently depending on their positioning.
I have spent a little time considering Indigenous readers’ responses to Indigenous
texts; I need to spend some time on non-Indigenous readers as well. How do Indigenous
texts unsettle non-Indigenous readers? Again, there is no homogeneity among the
supposed groups I am positing here: Indigenous vs. non-Indigenous is of course a gross
oversimplification and a false dualism. However, examining the experiences of diverse
readerships with Indigenous writing is beyond the scope of this study: considerations of
such questions exist in other scholarship (I. Johnston, 2013; Korteweg, Gonzalez, &
Guillet, 2010). Generally, when I speak about settler-Canadian readers and non-
Indigenous readers, I am not only considering readers’ experiences, but also invoking the
ways in which white privilege and Eurocentrism may operate to marginalize Indigenous
people and perspectives, perpetuating colonial and racist dynamics (Battiste, 2013;
Regan, 2010; St. Denis, 2007).

Indigenous literatures can be unsettling for non-Indigenous readers because
As Sharron so importantly says, “People learn about Indigenous peoples from Indigenous
literature—through all the arts. People who hold Western values don’t realize, when
reading the “classics,” people are learning about (mostly dead, White, male,
UK/American) White people.” Engaging with self-representation through literature can
counter ignorance. Many participants I spoke with expressed a high degree of hope for
the capacity of Indigenous writing to change what readers know. Suzette, for instance,
says, “I think the possibility of Aboriginal literature in the classroom is, it creates a space
for appreciation, and it creates a space where ignorance gets pushed to the side.” David
also believes that engaging with Indigenous writing can counter ignorance: “That’s how
ignorance gets spread, by dialoguing between each other about things that we don’t know about. So if we know about them, then we learn more positive things”; he says, “That’s my whole goal in writing the stuff that I do.” If ignorance is not a passive state, but rather an active one, caught up in people’s identities and worldviews, then challenging ignorance is not necessarily going to be an easy process for readers.

I think Francesca captures this uneasiness most clearly. To begin with, she reflects on her own feelings of discomfort. For example, she says, “I feel awkward talking about the appropriateness of—I don’t want to appropriate; I want to use,” and she describes working with the Indigenous education resource person as “an uneasy dance.” Francesca is clearly working, with ever-present self-reflexivity, to question her own investments—such as those around Canadian identity—and to confront her own feelings of uneasiness. One source of tension in her conversation is her recognition of how different her First Nations students are from herself. She shows this when she imagines what it might be like to speak with one of her First Nations students instead of with me: “Would I feel an awkwardness? Because they’re not white? . . . They’re different. And the cadence of the speech is different . . . and that is part of the awkwardness—I don’t know. Is it part of the awkwardness?” First of all, I honour Francesca’s having shared this vulnerable self-reflection with me. She recognizes the challenge of connecting with her First Nations students, whose embodied experiences are very different from hers “as a white woman.” In our conversation Francesca reveals her feelings of discomfort, but she also holds herself open to the alterity of her students. She respects that her feelings require some working through—rather than erasing difference out of a refusal to experience them.
I see here the possibility for understanding to arise from the recognition of difference. Listening to Gadamer (1960/2004) on the nature of interpretation makes this point about difference particularly relevant to the task of reading:

a person trying to understand a text is prepared for it to tell him something.

That is why a hermeneutically trained consciousness must be, from the start, sensitive to the text’s alterity. . . . The important thing is to be aware of one’s own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one’s own fore-meanings. (pp. 271-272)

In this passage, Gadamer (1960/2004) suggests that recognizing otherness is necessary if understanding is going to open up—readers bring their own understandings forward to their reading but are ready for the text to present something other to them. Gail Jardine (2000), in her writing on hermeneutic understanding, explains this idea clearly: “When we encounter another person, another voice, a different and unexpected meaning, any Other, we need to let it show its Otherness and not absorb it into what we already know” (p. 127, emphasis in original). Francesca herself emphasizes the value of alterity in understanding when she considers her own students’ learning, later in our conversation. She is describing her hopes that the literature she teaches will have a positive impact on her students when she says,

To be uneasy, at looking at a piece of literature, and to not get it, I think that’s fine. I don’t think we should always be reading stuff that you immediately sync with. So, but who else is going to expose a child to that? So, that, I think that’s our job, to help our kids navigate that process of feeling uneasy when you look at literature that doesn’t quite jive with the way you fit the world.
Learning is not just about feeling comfortable and having your prior understandings of the world reinforced; feelings of discomfort can be a sign that good learning is taking place. Again Jesse describes how, in his teaching, students feel discomfort, but “the response to that is not to avoid it but to face it head on.” Robin, similarly, says, “Discomfort isn’t a bad thing. I think if someone was uncomfortable you could have a conversation about that and figure out where to go from that.” Feeling unsettled by the difficult or different representations in Indigenous literatures can lead to further learning; it does not need to shut learning down.

Analogous to these struggles with uneasiness are teachers’ articulations of fear or anxiety around making mistakes. Rachel provides a clear example here. In sharing her thoughtful hesitations around teaching Indigenous literatures, Rachel articulates feelings of intimidation when she says, for instance, “I feel like for Indigenous literature, there are a lot things to be careful of . . . You don’t want to misstep.” In explaining why she feels intimidated, Rachel points squarely at the context that I have argued is necessary to understanding Indigenous literatures:

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

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

On the one hand, Rachel’s misgivings here echo useful cautions against non-Indigenous teachers jumping too confidently into teaching Indigenous texts. Critics have argued that there is a real potential for the teaching of Indigenous literatures to harm Indigenous people, for instance by perpetuating misunderstandings or stereotypes—as I have already argued, and as Rachel’s struggles with teaching the short story “Blue against White” exemplify (Episkenew, 2002, 2012; Hanson, 2008; Proulx & Srivastava, 2002). Many such critics have responded to this potential for harm by calling for appropriate pedagogical approaches to Indigenous literatures (Episkenew, 2002, 2012; Hanson, 2008; Proulx & Srivastava, 2002). Rachel’s hesitations are deeply considered and offer a useful note of caution to any non-Indigenous teachers who might not be ready with a critical repertoire, and might be quick to engage in superficial, decontextualized ways with Indigenous texts, reading them entirely through Eurocentric aesthetic understandings, for instance. As Angela warns in her conversation, not every teacher is ready to take on ethically engaged work: “Everyone thinks that just because there are people who work with Aboriginals, that they’re all sensitive, but not a lot of people are.” However, there is the necessary counterpoint that non-Indigenous teachers need to find a way to jump in, as Robin attests. Robin’s and Rachel’s perspectives on the possibility of making mistakes are central within an important convergence across the conversations—as is evident from how these perspectives came up repeatedly in dialogue with other participants.
Robin acknowledges that many other teachers feel fearful about doing Indigenous education work and that there is a fair amount of “preparation involved” in learning how to teach Indigenous content. However, Robin explains how she was ready to take on that preparation and outlines the strategies she used to build her capacity; further, she specifically discusses her willingness to learn from her mistakes. She describes this willingness when she says, “I always thought that someone would tune me in if I was doing something wrong . . . and I always felt that if I overstepped a line or if I had some questions, that I could ask someone”—and when she shares the story of an incident where she did make a mistake and was able to move forward in a good way. It is crucial here that Robin connects with Indigenous people around her—knowledge keepers and resource people, for instance, of whom she names many during our interview—to learn from and collaborate with; this is a particular way of being in relation, as I will discuss in a subsequent section. Robin has experience and relationships that support her in tackling any challenges or missteps that arise; additionally, she has built up her own capacity because of her passion for and investments in the work, which she connects to her personal background:

I don’t think I’ve had a problem imagining that there was something I really couldn’t learn or teach for any particular reason. . . . I think because of some of the connections I’ve had to the land, and when I thought about “sign posts” in my life, what I’ve read, some of my experiences and people I’ve talked to and engaged with, I just thought it was good work to do.

Her self-understanding and self-motivation enable her to feel confident enough to keep learning and to overcome any missteps.
Despite the potential for teachers to make mistakes, none of the writers I spoke with suggested that non-Indigenous teachers should not be teaching Indigenous texts. Rather, there was a strong suggestion that teachers need to find their way forward, because there is a great deal of work that needs doing, and that responsibility cannot sit entirely on Indigenous shoulders, as Daniel puts it. In response to Rachel’s and Robin’s perspectives, which I brought into our conversation, Daniel says that making mistakes is an inevitable part of any teaching: to a fearful teacher, he would say,

You’re totally going to screw up. Just like Indigenous teachers screw up.

That’s the nature of the beast. . . . So part of it is to own your imperfection.

No one expects that they’re going get it right on other stuff all the time.

Further, Daniel offers some reassurance when he says that the kinds of mistakes teachers are likely to make are not likely to be extremely harmful, as in “you’re going screw up, but you’re probably not going destroy your students.” So “keeping things in perspective” will help teachers to let go of their fear about making mistakes—fear which, he cautions, can be disabling: “fear of it being perfect can work to lull teachers into a sense that the fear is the work.” Daniel, Jesse, Sharron—several of the writers speak out against fear and guilt, admonishing settler-Canadians who get stuck in those feelings and then fail to work toward some kind of response or responsibility to whatever knowledge prompted those feelings, such as difficult events from colonial histories. I will discuss this kind of work in the following weaving.
5.2.4 Reading for Resurgence: Second Weaving

Indigenous literatures are creative expressions of Indigenous presence, reflecting and storying diverse communities and connecting artists and audiences through and around the art. Because the Indigenous literary arts in Canada enter into the context of colonial relations between the settler nation-state and the Indigenous peoples of this land—including assimilative policies that have sought to erase Indigenous presence—an unsettling dynamic is always at work. Connecting back to my research question—how do Indigenous literatures matter to the resurgence of healthy Indigenous communities?—I think Indigenous literatures matter because Indigenous literatures are challenging the workings of colonialism that restrict the autonomy and well-being of Indigenous communities. Indigenous literary expression engages with the context of Canadian colonialism, challenging barriers to Indigenous resurgence. Reading Indigenous literatures can also be challenging, creating challenging teaching and learning situations for educators. Teaching Indigenous literatures is no neutral task, as it brings educators to grapple with the ideological and material manifestations of Eurocentrism and racism, as well as with their own and their students’ positioning in Indigenous / non-Indigenous relationships. Reading Indigenous literatures, learning in relation with Indigenous peoples, requires educators and students to confront these politicized contexts.

Teaching Indigenous literatures in Canadian classrooms can be challenging, unsettling teachers and learners, prompting difficult emotional responses, and sparking discomfort and tension in the learning environment; these challenges arise from the necessary connection between text and context. Readers—teachers and learners—are made to confront their own positioning, as well as their relations with each other and with
the author and her or his community, when they engage meaningfully with the text and its context. As Danny argues, “It’s bigger than just literature . . . this is a huge issue around human rights.” She makes this point while acknowledging that teaching Indigenous literatures entails hard work and that teachers doing this work need to support themselves and each other: “I wish I could say it’s going to get easier, but I think we’re going to have—I think since the TRC has come out with the report, there’s been a lot of backlash.” The real-life settings in which Indigenous literatures are situated—this context in Canada that is undergoing so much change at present—continue to shape the particular challenges that teachers will need to face as they take up the difficult and inspiring work of teaching Indigenous literatures.
5.3 Indigenous Literatures Calling Readers to Relate and Respond

5.3.1 Third Weaving

“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, whether—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)

“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)
5.3.2 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). Again, 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. So learning will always involve relationality, but how is that true for Indigenous literatures in particular?

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. I think that Sharron’s point that “people learn about Indigenous peoples from Indigenous literature” is an essential part of this understanding. It bumps my thinking into some big questions around literature. What is literature for?
What does it do or make happen? What do experiences with literature do for readers? What kinds of connections can literature create? These are very old questions that deserve to be examined anew in this context, at this time. 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. 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.

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. Several writers and teachers suggest that 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 get to readers and draw them in, these perspectives suggest, which enables more or 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, “Stories are always the way in. They are the accessible way . . . stories are the way that people relate to that experience.” Likewise, Rachel suggests, 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.

Again, the intimate and experiential nature of reading literary texts can draw readers into meaningful learning.

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 this topic. 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, and that’s what I think is lacking, and that’s where people hold onto, where settlers would hold onto those prejudices, because they don’t have empathy, because they’ve never been taught to be empathetic towards Indigenous people, and they don’t understand.

Katherena describes empathy as a kind of emotional connection, one that has the power to draw people into a sense of personal implication.

Weaving in Dion’s (2000, 2007, 2009) critical perspectives on empathy is generative at this point. As discussed, Dion analyzes 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 on one’s understandings. Dion (2009) suggests 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) explores particular examples of students and teachers working with her Braiding Histories stories, which she composed specifically to challenge such colonial discourses. However, she shows how readers persisted in falling back upon dominant discourses even when reading and learning from those narratives. Dion (2009) includes empathy as a cautionary point in these examinations: she critiques the tendency of teachers (in her study) to focus on empathizing with the narratives rather than considering the implications they convey, such as how settler-Canadian readers are
called to examine their own positioning in relation to present and historical forms of 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 implication and motivation for taking 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,” which has to come from empathy. She suggests that getting teachers “on side, with how they can connect,” is best done by figuring out “what really caused them that moment of empathy.” As she suggests some 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—whether its because we’re all human, whether it’s because we live in this place called Canada, whether—whatever connection we have.” 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—that is what Katherena’s discussions suggest.

I think that Dion’s (2009) cautionary note about a shallower form of empathy is a good one: she warns 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” (2009, 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 Katherena’s, empathy can be a useful way of framing the way that literature can call readers into personally significant understandings, understandings that motivate readers 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. While knowledge is a strong foundation for better futures, as David argues, providing information alone is not going to create adequate change. This contention resonates strongly with Simon’s (2000) formulations on transactional remembrances, in which he argues that knowledge is not enough to call people to interrogate their understandings and change how they act: “simply acquiring 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, Simon (2000) argues, 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” (p. 63, emphasis in original). In such assertions, Simon (2000) examines the kind of learning that may enable “a change in the way non-Aboriginals view their shared history with First Nation peoples” (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 speak about my research at workshops, for instance, the most common question I am 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 they simply needed 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 thing I could do. 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, emphasizing the connections piece rather than the resources piece. 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 (Sarris, 1993; L.T. Smith, 2012), which point to the recognition that putting learning into action is not merely a matter of seeing how information can be mobilized, instrumentalized, or deployed as rapidly and widely as possible, but is, rather, a matter of building relational understandings (Gadamer, 1960/2004; Jardine, Bastock, George, & Martin, 2002; Luke, 2009; Wilson, 2008). Working in relation also involves working against the opposing processes that I have discussed (Dion, 2009; Martin, 2009; Simon, 2000).

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 here are in some ways evocative of many shared points voiced 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 choose from. And so 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. It is this latter piece that I
find most interesting, because it connects to the point I am making about relational understandings, and because I think it enables me to offer some pragmatic suggestions to 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, when 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 . . . Resource Lines . . . 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 see—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. 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, but . . . there are six language arts,” she points out how 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 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 (ELA) education 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), and if schools have elected to purchase them—and then, again, if teachers are able to build a relationship with that material, to connect and find the motivation to take on the preparation and work required to teach those texts 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 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. . . . 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.
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, Bastock, George, & Martin, 2002, p.55). Further, generating understanding in relation to the subject matter means being called into relation with the people attached to it, such as particular Indigenous communities.

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 clearly 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 the [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.

5.3.3 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 relations with Indigenous communities that require action. I have articulated from the beginning of this dissertation my own understandings of Indigenous principles of relationality and kinship—including the ethical relationality underlying the framework of métissage—and how 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, so in making decisions I think about my responsibility to others. Understanding the connection means also understanding the requirement for reciprocal, ethical engagement. Such understandings are fundamental within the scholarship I am building upon (Ermine, 2007; Kovach, 2009; L.T. 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 kind of 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. Anishinaabe scholar Kimberly Blaeser (1999), for instance, describes 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. (Blaeser, 1999, 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 in some way. Again, Tom King’s (2003) repeated 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 invokes 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 literary, i.e. written, artistic expression; 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.” However, I believe that 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 her story about being welcomed into a dance at a Pow Wow, 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 connects those feelings to a consideration of future action: “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—and the event 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 on how learning through literatures can call readers to respond. When Jesse describes the tensions in his classroom, he 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 for movement toward reconciliation or 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 with 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’s insight about being in relationship—when he suggests that being Métis “comes back to relationship and how you act rather than just who you are”—is very helpful. This way of thinking offers a vital lesson for non-Indigenous readers seeking to engage with Indigenous texts. It may be liberating—to borrow Jesse’s word—to understand one’s positioning in relation to Indigenous literature as something that can be strengthened, such that how you inhabit that relationship determines the character of that connection. Non-Indigenous readers are not automatically precluded from understanding Indigenous literatures: this is something they can work on (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 they need or can provide in terms of support for teaching Indigenous literatures, teachers point to the possibility for collaborations among non-Indigenous
teachers. Angela and Robin call for opportunities for dialogue and mentorship among non-Indigenous teachers. Suzette disputes the idea that funding is the issue and points instead to collective work between teachers: “I think that kind of stuff needs to happen with collaboration, that we need to start working together more, to appreciate what other people’s perspectives are, as teachers, because it starts with us.” Building upon the self-positioning of allied scholars (Eigenbrod, 2005; McKegney, 2007; Martin, 2012; Regan, 2010), I see how teachers’ choices to engage with Indigenous literatures entail a recognition of response-ability. This work calls them to see how they are responsible to the Indigenous communities storied into the texts they and their students are reading.

5.3.4 Reading for Resurgence: Third Weaving

What is it about literatures that can inspire people to take on the challenges of learning with them? How do literatures communicate across the dynamics of ignorance that provide such active opposition to understanding? Returning again to my research question—how do Indigenous literatures matter to the resurgence of healthy Indigenous communities?—I think 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.

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. For example, 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.” This growth in recognition is linked to the appreciation of the artistry of Indigenous literatures. It is important to hear writers’ and teachers’ emphases 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 in to 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.
5.4 Indigenous Literatures Enabling Transformation

5.4.1 Fourth Weaving

“That’s where stories and literature can really help us. It can take us into that space where it’s about a relationship or we’re starting to get a sense of the real impact on real people’s lives.” (Warren)

“You don’t go into it necessarily expecting that you’re doing teaching, but you have to go into it knowing that you’re impacting somebody’s life.” (Daniel)

“You want to give it to someone and say, ‘Read this. You’ll love it. It changed my life.’ And then they don’t.” (Angela)

“The images that come back years later and affect you profoundly... Who knows what difference that will make?” (Francesca)

“Now it’s about competency and providing opportunities for understanding and opportunities for demonstrating understanding, and it doesn’t have to look cookie cutter anymore... It really makes it truly relevant to them, and that’s where kids truly engage.” (Suzette)

“Really acknowledging that bringing in not just our stories, but our way of knowing and our way of being with those stories, is vital to our Indigenous students and a huge benefit to our non-Indigenous students. And that reconciliation piece happens through these activities.” (Danny)

“A classroom is a place where you have to live together, so it matters a lot to get it right... to do it sensitively and thoughtfully.” (Rachel)

“My worry is this. Jeannette Armstrong said in ’91 she could count on her fingers the number of people in the Okanagan Nation who read her work... I was always haunted by that. I don’t think that we prioritize Aboriginal literature as much as we should in our own homes.” (Richard)

“The important thing for me is to have a child go into a classroom and see themselves represented in something they’re reading.” (Sharron)

“Their community is the online community and social networking, and so their particular community where they live, the land they live on, or how they live, or work community, that doesn’t really exist.” (Robin)

“As adults, we’re responsible for our youth and we’re responsible for providing that information to our youth. But our youth are responsible for tomorrow.” (David)

5.4.2 Indigenous Literatures Affecting People’s Lives

From the outset I have aligned this study with prior scholarship that examines what literatures do, not only what they mean (Bidwell, 2012; Episkenew, 2012; Justice, 2012): through our conversations, the 14 teachers and writers and I have gathered understandings around the impact that literatures can have on people’s lives. I think
Daniel is right to suggest that literatures are always educational “for somebody,” in that “even the most hastily written, hack novel will connect to somebody in some way.” He says, “You don’t go into it necessarily expecting that you’re doing teaching, but you have to go into it knowing that you’re impacting somebody’s life.” From this response I understand Daniel’s point about recognizing context when writing, as discussed above, but I also hear that talking about teaching and learning is a fair way to think through the impacts that texts can have on people. Reading can help people build understandings, can change how they think. Literatures draw readers into relational understandings with communities and social contexts that call for a response: this process is one of learning, and literary texts “are teachings,” in Daniel’s words, that affect people’s lives.

This potential for literature to create change in people’s lives comes up in how teachers think about their work, as well. As a teacher making choices about which texts to use with students, Angela considers the personal impact a text might have:

You know when you’ve read this really good book and you want to give it to someone and say, “Read this. You’ll love it. It changed my life.” And then they don’t. And you’re like [sighs].

What Angela is emphasizing in this particular passage is her bigger point that not all Indigenous students will connect with Indigenous literatures—particularly when Indigenous youth grow up grappling with the intergenerational effects of colonial violence. Within that bigger point, however, she articulates the belief that literature can open up a life-changing experience. Trying to set up that possibility of transformation is one of her tasks as a teacher. It does not always work out, which is just “part of being a teacher,” and she knows she “can’t force” students to read a certain book; she will simply
try another text. Angela also sees that some students may resist her choices “because I’m not Aboriginal, but then once we develop trust . . . I can bring more forward.” Through such efforts with her students, Angela expresses hopes that literatures may enable transformative learning.

Francesca makes similar suggestions, also pointing out that the impact a text might have is often unknowable in advance and may materialize much later in a student’s life. She says,

They may not get it in grade seven. Well, you don’t know . . . Human beings are amazing. The images that come back years later and affect you profoundly . . . and just little elements. Just sparks . . . . Who knows what difference that will make?

Francesca connects this point about being affected by a text to the potential for students to see the world differently or to feel empathy for others. While she cannot know in advance what the impact will be, she wants to have a rich selection of texts available to her students so that the potential for meaningful learning is there. I believe that, in comments and stories like these, teachers suggest fundamental beliefs that literatures impact people’s lives—which means that teaching literatures entails inviting young people into a shared process of building understandings that will shape who they are and how they live, now and in the future.

The belief that literature can change how people live seems simple, but I find it highly generative to interweave the particular beliefs that teachers and Indigenous writers have on this idea. From these conversations I understand that, from Indigenous perspectives, it is vital to maintain the connection between a story and the way it impacts
people—that stories are meant to influence the real world, for learning, for culture and community identity, for governance, and so on (Episkenew, 2009; Maracle, 2014; Simpson, 2014). From these conversations I also understand that teachers bring literatures to their students for learning, with the underlying belief that the experiences that arise from that learning will impact their lives (Sumara, 2002). Weaving these ideas together, I see an important point of affinity (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009, p. 9): I see an openness to transformation. In the next three sections, I argue that this space might hold opportunities for change that will benefit Indigenous learners and communities. Through these arguments, I demonstrate three main ways in which learning through Indigenous literatures could be reading for resurgence.

5.4.3 Transforming Pedagogical Approaches

If Indigenous literatures can enable transformation, what opportunities might open up for Indigenous approaches to teaching? The conversations held for this study traveled through secondary classrooms across multiple subject areas—primarily English, Aboriginal Studies, Social Studies, and Humanities—and through other educational contexts considered by writers—including post-secondary English and Indigenous Studies classrooms. However, many of these conversations were anchored in disciplinary understandings about literature studies in English specifically, and my thought processes continually return to teaching and learning in secondary English Language Arts. As my conversations with teachers illustrate, teaching literatures in English here and now involves engaging with disciplinary conventions shaped through centuries of scholarship and pedagogy on the canon of English literature, which for North American classrooms
largely means British and American literature, along with a mandated proportion of work by Canadians. Engaging with may mean deconstructing, decolonizing, critiquing or transmitting, applying, building upon, or any other kind of action that is done in relation with the disciplinary expectations of English literary studies—but whatever it is, it is done acknowledging the establishment that this body of knowledge and its ways of knowing constitute. This establishment may be fluid, dialogical, and shifting in the sense that any such establishments are discursive, but it has particular heft and clout when it impacts which knowledge is held up as worth knowing or which texts are worth reading. By comparison, I think no one can contest the fact that Indigenous literatures and pedagogies have not been central within Canadian schooling. Efforts to change the presence of Indigenous texts in Canadian education are going to run up against that establishment. The conversations held within this study invoke these disciplinary expectations but also envision transformation in teaching.

The teachers I spoke with offer a number of concrete, specific examples of how they are working for transformation in their pedagogies. Such examples might contribute to, or offer starting places for, broader transformations in teaching. For instance, Angela describes how learning within classes can be connected to bigger-picture cultural experiences and supports for students, such as relationships with Elders and opportunities to participate in ceremony. Danny shares her detailed vision for teaching the short story “Borders” in a way that brings students to learn about themselves and others in relational ways, to consider their relationship with the Land through place-based teachings, to learn from local Elders, and to experience traditional modes of storytelling. Robin describes bringing her students to engage with personal and family stories to explore
understandings of identity, relationality, and community. These are just a few examples that suggest shifts toward Indigenous pedagogies that are more responsive to Indigenous literatures and communities. Building upon directions like these, teachers can take up the call to shift from conventional Euro-Western ways of approaching literary studies toward ways that respect Indigenous communities’ ways of knowing and being.

It is useful to note how teachers like Suzette, Alice, and Robin show how such shifts go hand in hand with shifts and programming options that are already taking place in Alberta’s education system, such as the shift toward inquiry-based learning. Such shifts mean that students should have more flexibility to explore what is “truly relevant to them,” as Suzette puts it. This kind of meaningful connection between students and what they are learning fits well with the relationality attendant to Indigenous literatures. By this assertion I mean that when teaching is open enough that students can find what addresses them, in a hermeneutic sense, learning entails not just the processing of information but also the forging of personally relevant, relational understandings. Students read things that call them in particular ways, leading them to respond, to make particular decisions or to think particular things going forward into their lives. I think teachers are right to suggest that, as other shifts take place across the province, connections might be made in service of Indigenous education.

5.4.4 Transforming Experiences of Schooling for Indigenous Learners

Why does it matter to make more space for Indigenous literatures and pedagogies in Canadian schooling? Much Indigenous education scholarship shows that conventional Western, Eurocentric models of education are not meeting the needs of Indigenous
students (Battiste, 2013; Ermine, 1995; Little Bear, 2000). I prefer not to articulate this problem through the deficit-based framing of the language of student achievement: I heed the Canadian Council on Learning’s (2007) caution that viewing this landscape “through a deficit lens tends to encourage the development of policy and programs that respond to a deficit instead of supporting the positive successes that lead to improved learning outcomes” (p. 8). However, I also recognize that it is often strategic to be able to point to the significant achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in order to motivate change (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007; Howe, 2013). As Danny points out in our conversation, data can be convincing within “the Western institution of education.” Teachers and writers in this study strongly suggest that experiences of education for Indigenous students need to change. Danny is clear on this point when she says, “What is good for Indigenous students is good for all students; what is good for all students is not necessarily meeting the needs of our Indigenous students.” When she adds, “Bringing in not just our stories, but our way of knowing and our way of being with those stories, is vital to our Indigenous students,” she points to the role that Indigenous literatures and pedagogies can play in creating change.

Just as my conversations with writers brought me to realize that communities are created around (not only through) Indigenous literatures, educators in this study show how community can be created around (not only through) Indigenous literatures through experiences of teaching and learning. Welcoming communities in classrooms and schools can be spaces where Indigenous students can belong and thrive. While I was busily asking them about how literatures might impact communities—thinking of connections between Indigenous peoples outside of schools—teachers in this study insistently brought
me to see how community matters in schools as well. Part of this understanding comes from the connections teachers make to the big picture of Indigenous students’ experiences in their schools in and beyond their classrooms—as when Suzette brings up details like whether support groups and safe spaces are available to students and describes how Indigenous students’ behaviour or attendance are more of a focus than culturally responsive curricula and pedagogy. Similarly, Angela says, “any school is a community,” but hers is more “tight-knit” than many, she feels, and what she does in her classroom likely influences how connected people feel. Listening to her describe how students are able to meet and speak with Elders, smudge together, and gather around the pan while students show off their kookums’ recipes for fry bread, I hear a depiction of community being fostered for students. Community can be created around the teaching of Indigenous content when Indigenous ways of knowing and being shape the schooling experience. This transformation will extend beyond classrooms and schools to influence broader society. For instance, as Sharron suggests, Indigenous students can use their educations to “give back” to their home communities.

Considering whether Indigenous students have healthy experiences of schooling in relation with how Indigenous literatures are taught brings me to see why it matters so much for students to, in Sharron’s words, “see themselves represented in something they’re reading.” Daniel’s comments resonate deeply with me on this point. As we discuss whether having Indigenous literatures in English classes is a process of reflecting students’ experiences, Daniel brings up the window:

Should literature be just a mirror or should it be a window? . . . Even for those of us who want to see something of ourselves, I don’t think we’re looking for
a mirror. I think we’re looking for a window into a world that includes us. I think we’re looking for stories, and images and possibilities and dreams and visions of reality, wherein we are part of the narrative. We are part of the story.

What Daniel evokes for me here is an understanding that reading Indigenous literatures is not just a matter of showing students themselves—in a flat, static sense—but about allowing them to see how they are storied into the world around them. Indigenous literatures are storying communities forward, which means that each young person needs to be able to find a place in those narratives in order to thrive. The more literature young people read that validates who they are, the more they can develop a healthy sense of their place in the world. Obviously literature is not the only place for youth to get this validation, but I think school should be a place that supports this process, rather than jeopardizing it.

As an additional point that keeps my recursive understandings circling around, Indigenous learners connecting with Indigenous literatures are also better positioned to feel empowered to tell their stories—that means more youth creating literatures and creating community in turn. It is also important to support Indigenous families in having literatures in their homes, as Richard suggests when he mentions Jeannette Armstrong’s comment that she could “count on her fingers the number of people in the Okanagan Nation who read her work.” He says, “I don’t think that we prioritize Aboriginal literature as much as we should in our own homes.” Richard and other writers model inspiring ways of making this priority possible through family practices, role modeling, literacy initiatives, and the creation of books for all ages. Such work may enable
Indigenous youth to read and learn through Indigenous literatures beyond the walls of the school as well.

5.4.5 Transforming Relationships

I am very invested in the question of what happens to the relationship between Indigenous people and non-Indigenous people if Indigenous literatures are encouraged to exert their transformative influence on Canadian classrooms. What happens, for instance, if students are taken out on the land near Coutts, Alberta, to study Tom King’s (1993) story about a Blackfoot mother and son, as Danny describes, and they take up these questions?

So you are from these other communities, but right now you’re in this community, and what does that mean? What does that look like for your own learning? What does that mean in the big picture? What does that mean as a non-First Nations person sitting here learning about the traditions of this time from an Elder of this place?

What happens when Indigenous and non-Indigenous students are invited to understand themselves in relational ways—through their relationships with other people, with particular places, with particular traditions?

The kinds of learning I am advocating and which these teachers and writers are facilitating—through building relational understandings with Indigenous literatures—can lead people to shift how they understand themselves in relation with others. I argued above that reading literatures fosters relational understandings—a further outcome of such understandings is a transformation in who and how people are, and thus how people
are in relation with each other. Relational understandings among and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities can be a foundation for better ways of being and acting together in this place we now call Canada.

Listening to writers and teachers, I am inspired by the kinds of transformation they envision in this regard. For example, Robin talks about literature as a starting point to expand students’ understandings of community, beyond their friends and social media for instance, into “their particular community where they live, the land they live on, or how they live,” and beyond. Through their self-storying and family learning she brings them to grow their roles as carriers of knowledge and cultural continuity. David talks about how young people are amazing in acting upon what they have learned and says, “as adults, we’re responsible for our youth and we’re responsible for providing that information to our youth. But our youth are responsible for tomorrow.” While the pace of change may be slow and teachers, as Daniel says, may not “not see it change in their lifetime, to the degree they want to,” such precious instances and visions of transformation must be nourished. For students and teachers to understand who they are in relational ways, to respond to the relationships with Indigenous people that Indigenous texts call for, and to story that relationality into who they are and how they act with others, can have a tremendous impact on how we all are together in this place. Such forms of change show why Indigenous literatures matter.

5.4.6 Reading for Resurgence: Fourth Weaving

The well-being and self-determination of Indigenous peoples, alongside the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, truly matter here and now.
The kinds of change that I have been outlining are tremendously important. I hope that the momentum of this present moment, coming out of Canada’s TRC process, is able to enable meaningful change, with significant impacts for learners, for Indigenous communities, and for Canadians. I came into this work with a strong investment in the potential for literatures to inspire substantial change, and I have only deepened my appreciation of what literatures can do. To connect back, once more, to my research question—how do Indigenous literatures matter to the resurgence of healthy Indigenous communities?—I think Indigenous literatures matter because Indigenous literatures are changing things. People change when they read Indigenous literatures, learning about themselves and others, including all others across the physical and spiritual world. Being called into relationships and responsibilities can change how people live their lives. Existing teaching practices can change because Indigenous literatures are not the same as mainstream or Eurocentric literatures in the English canon; they call for different ways of being, knowing, and learning.

Reading Indigenous literatures in Canadian classrooms is an opportunity to come together and learn what it means to change. Like Danny says,

Stories are a place where everyone can come together. So I think that is why this work around literature is so important, because that’s where we come together. That’s where we can see each other in our own stories and in each other’s stories.

In the context of this study, I find this passage evocative, suggesting possible connections between learners and educators, Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, writers and readers. Such connections have the potential to foster transformations that can benefit
Indigenous communities’ resurgence. I maintain my conviction that this coming together can be inspired in Canada’s classrooms.

5.5 Chapter Summary

Indigenous literatures, read in Canadian classrooms, invite Indigenous ways of knowing and being to transform what it means to learn in those settings, and to transform relationships between people in and out of the classroom. Indigenous literatures carry with them understandings of how people are interconnected with and responsible to their communities, and they create communities in and around the storying of people’s experiences. Indigenous literatures challenge the dynamics that threaten Indigenous peoples’ well-being by identifying and opposing colonial violence in its many forms. They can also be challenging, in that they may immerse readers in difficult learning experiences and present teachers with difficult work in and for their classrooms. Indigenous literatures can call readers into relational understandings—Indigenous readers and non-Indigenous readers—fostering connections that encourage readers to see how those relationships implicate them, requiring them to respond. Indigenous literatures make significant change possible—in classrooms, this means thinking carefully about what impacts literatures might have on pedagogies and learners. This tangible learning in classrooms impacts how people in diverse communities relate to each other in this broad place called Canada and is thus tremendously important.

Indigenous literatures do matter, profoundly, to Indigenous communities. From writers and teachers, I have learned a great deal about what is at stake, and at play, in that mattering. Their interwoven perspectives reveal the complexities of learning in relation
with Indigenous literatures and the impacts that such learning can have on communities. There is much to get excited about in these weavings, but there are many cautionary insights as well. I feel that a great deal of work remains to be done in making space for Indigenous literatures in Alberta schools. I also feel that these 14 conversations offer a number of good directions for that work to take. The four hermeneutic tangles I have explored here in my four sections of weaving represent only some of the insights generated in those conversations. As I move on from this work, I am grateful to be able carry that learning with me and to find good ways to reciprocate and contribute.
Chapter 6: Conclusions—Contemplating the Weaving

6.1 Reading for Resurgence

It is time to step back and contemplate what this process of weaving has shown me. I began this study with the notion of resurgence as an organizing and motivating concept, and I circle back to this notion now as this project concludes. I started this study with an overall understanding of resurgence. I described it as the growth of Indigenous communities from their roots upward; as the revitalization of Indigenous ways of being and knowing; and as the expression and celebration of Indigenous humanity in defiance of colonial oppression. I understood that resurgence could take place through everyday ways of being Indigenous, and that it was in many ways about the health and well-being of communities. I also understood that processes of artistic creation, as in the writing of Indigenous literatures, were integral to inspiring and enacting such regeneration and expression, in the sense that creative expression is inseparable from ways of living. I knew that stories and literatures were important to the growth of healthy, self-determining, vibrant communities, and that learning was a vital part of that importance. I wanted to find out more about why all of this was so—that is, how learning through literatures might foster community resurgence. I set out to attend to particular instances of how this phenomenon manifests in the everyday work of teachers and writers. I set out to investigate what the particular experiences and perspectives of writers and teachers might reveal about why learning through Indigenous literatures might matter to community resurgence.

Beginning this work, I also understood that resurgence as a framework or principle focuses on Indigenous communities, or, rather, invokes the momentum of
individuals and peoples standing up in and for their own communities in situated and specific ways. Existing discourse on resurgence, as I detailed in my second chapter, insists, crucially, on particular Indigenous communities as sites of revitalization. That is, it is not a generic, pan-Indigenous concept, but one that takes shape in particular ways in particular places.

As I conclude this study, I see how working through this concept of resurgence—which I have found both compelling and challenging—has brought me to important understandings about relationships. This study is about teaching and learning, and it is about creating and reading literary writing, and it is about the people who engage in these activities, and the contexts in which they do them. These things entail relationships. I chose to speak with writers and with teachers because I knew that they had relationships with literary texts—relationships forged out of all the dimensions of human experience, out of thought and feeling, body and spirit. I understand, now, that the processes of creating and teaching literary texts are more deeply and broadly relational than I could have anticipated. One way of describing what I have learned, for example, is that literatures create community relationships, challenge oppressive relations, call readers into relational understandings, and change how people relate to each other. So if so much of what I have found is about relationships, how does it relate back to the resurgence of Indigenous communities?

On the one hand it is simply, and powerfully, that these community processes work through relationships. This idea takes particular significance when it comes to literatures and learning. That is, resurgence may be at play within each connection made between and among writers, texts, readers, and contexts—including also teachers and
learners and the webs of community spreading around each individual in those positions. The relationships that open up, for example, when a teacher is able to read a particular book with learners, and when an author is able to publish a particular story for audiences, are avenues through which processes of community revitalization can be activated.

On the other hand, what I have learned about relationships strengthens one of the core emphases within resurgence discourse. Resurgence is insistently rooted in Indigenous communities, but when I explored what this notion means through the particular experiences of teachers and writers working in communities, or in schools, or in Canada, these worldly contexts repeatedly pulled my attention also to non-Indigenous contexts. I could see this pull as a positive insistence on relationship and engagement, or as a dangerous re-centering on non-Indigenous perspectives—as a reassertion of a Canadian mainstream at the centre of the critical frame. It is necessary to see both of these possibilities within education research and practice and I am setting both of them forward here, divergent as they are.

There is much to see by looking at how the resurgence of Indigenous communities interrelates with the context and relationships in which they are situated. Now is an important time for Indigenous research and education in that there is a blaring call to build better relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada. In the teaching contexts I am examining, particularly, where the majority of teachers and students are non-Indigenous, it certainly seems necessary to focus on building better Indigenous-settler relationships. Conversely, for the well-being of Indigenous communities, it definitely seems necessary to focus primarily on Indigenous communities, to centre the critical frame in Indigenous territory. Not doing so might
mean losing some of the depth and specificity of understandings. I mean this in the sense that Simpson (2014) evokes when she says that she has “grown tired of explaining” (p. 113) to non-Nishnaabeg audiences:

I felt the need to create a space for myself to vision and to live, where my primary pursuit was doing or making stories grounded in contemporary Nishnaabeg ontologies and animating contemporary Nishnaabeg poetic and narrative consciousness rather than writing about those things. In making that decision, I realize that ultimately I have chosen to write for a Nishnaabeg audience. (Simpson, 2014, p. 113)

Simpson’s (2014) perspective here highlights the conflicting demands on Indigenous writers—to write from and for their communities, and to write so that non-Indigenous readers can understand. It is vital to recognize that focusing on the latter might jeopardize the former.

Perhaps education might focus on relationships between Indigenous and settler peoples, as in reconciliation, because that is what is asked of teaching and learning in Canada. However, it is absolutely vital to see the resurgence at work in Indigenous literary arts, to respect the need for what Métis artist David Garneau (2012) calls “irreconcilable spaces of Aboriginality” (p.33), which exist “apart from a Settler audience” (Garneau, 2012, p. 33). Indigenous communities’ processes of self-understanding and the Canadian nation-state’s understanding of reconciliation may be incommensurable just as Indigenous histories may be at odds with the prevailing national myth that Canada is a nation of peacemakers (Tuck & Yang, 2012; Regan, 2010). At the very least, respectful engagement between distinct groups requires genuine recognition of
difference (Ermine, 2007; McKegney, 2014). Framing what learning through Indigenous literatures means for Indigenous communities means respecting the need for Indigenous writers, readers, and communities to focus on their particular concerns, without necessarily asking that those be made intelligible for non-Indigenous audiences.

What I have learned through my work here, then, is that, if building better relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities is one of the desired goals of teaching Indigenous literatures, it is necessary to formulate what it means to build better relationships with resurgent Indigenous communities. Indigenous peoples’ flourishing is a necessary component in reciprocal relationships. Reciprocal relationships between settler and Indigenous people in Canada require non-Indigenous people to develop positionings that respect and engage with Indigenous resurgence. Ethical engagement between distinct parties requires each to be “supported and informed by their own autonomy” (Ermine, 2007, p. 200). Indigenous community resurgence is about fostering community well-being first. That well-being is a requirement for fostering relationships between Indigenous communities and others. This is an important lesson as reconciliation movements take place across Canada.

Exploring why Indigenous literatures matter to Indigenous community resurgence, in relation to learning and teaching, has also brought me to believe that resurgence is surprisingly possible. I have learned that resurgence works because of learning, in that learning is necessary to all of the processes of revitalization and celebration I have described: those processes rely upon community understandings. Listening to the particular perspectives and experiences that writers and teachers have shared with me, I have learned that such understandings can be opened up through the
specific and everyday work of creating and teaching Indigenous literatures. Literatures, written and taught, make resurgence possible because learning happens along each of the innumerable strands that make up the webs of relationships between and among texts, communities, contexts, and individuals—readers, writers, teachers, and students, all of whom are learners.

The artistry of literary writing and the pedagogical ancestry of the story within oral cultures both beckon and bind individuals into relationships and learning. So resurgence in this sense is surprisingly possible because it can be as simple as a young person picking up a book and finding some aspect of herself storied into the world, encouraging her to shift or strengthen, however much, her sense of who she is in relation to her community. Likewise, a young person might read a text that shows her a perspective she has never considered before, something that is genuinely different and cannot be reconciled with her existing understandings: whether or not this experience is unsettling, this young person might then be a little readier to remain open to others and to hear what they have to say.

Anything that is powerful can create positive or negative effects, healing or harm. I echo this insistence again because while I have tremendous optimism about teaching Indigenous literatures in public schools—I think it is mostly inevitable that more widespread engagement with Indigenous writing will help to foster resurgence in Indigenous communities and more reciprocal relationships between Indigenous and settler peoples—I recognize the potential for such endeavours to go awry. In this dissertation I have repeated several cautions about how the creation and teaching of Indigenous literatures can indeed inflict harm or hurt. Consequently, I am not only calling
for engagement with Indigenous literatures in education; I am calling for particular ways of engaging with Indigenous literatures in education. I think it is likely of minimal benefit for Indigenous texts to be included in the mainstream classroom, in the sense that a text is brought into a prior and privileged epistemological-pedagogical framework, such that the classroom and the mainstream do not shift. Some learning and affirmation might still happen in that case, but the potential is smaller. I think it just as likely that inclusion in this sense—meaning without ethical or reciprocal engagement, without a willingness to shift how learning happens and impacts learners rather than just what is being learned and the desired outcomes of learning—will not do anything important for Indigenous communities. Superficial inclusion is a picture drawn on an Etch-a-Sketch—one shake and the Canadian consciousness resumes its amnesia, (Martin, 2009), its common-sense racism (Bannerji, 1991), or its self-perception as a peaceful and multicultural country (Regan, 2010).

If the potential for Indigenous literatures to impact the resurgence of healthy Indigenous communities is going to materialize in Alberta’s classrooms, teachers must be supported in teaching Indigenous texts in respectful ways. However, teachers in this study point to a wide range of obstacles facing those who choose to teach Indigenous literatures. I think it is important to recognize how their experiences open up certain aspects of existing practice to critique. One of these is the almost palpable rigidity surrounding the selection of texts within high school ELA. Related to this is the apparent rigidity in expectations around how English as a disciplined subject is to be taught. Another is the isolation of teachers as they work to develop their capacity in this area. The prevalence of the Indigenous education resource people mentioned across the
conversations is encouraging, but there is a strong sense that teachers undertake this work as individuals, disconnected from potential collaborators or resources. The conversations suggest that many teachers do not feel supported by their professional contexts in teaching Indigenous literatures. In the absence of institutional support—or requirements that Indigenous content be taught—teachers are left to determine whether and how to teach Indigenous literatures based on their own positioning, experience, and motivation.

In Alberta there is a very strong likelihood that teachers are non-Indigenous, and that they do not have much prior experience with or education on Indigenous literatures. Teachers in this study suggest that teaching Indigenous material is an extra, elective task that individual teachers may choose to take on. This situation greatly undermines the potential for ELA teaching to serve Indigenous communities. Further, the conversations in this study suggest that there is a risk that Indigenous perspectives will continue to be subsumed by mainstream discourses of settler nationalism. The teaching of Language Arts is still very entwined with the narrative of the Canadian nation, as suggested by the Program of Studies’ focus on “citizenship” and “common values,” which are to be explored “by studying Canadian literature” (Alberta Education, 2003). If Canadian schooling is going to respect, rather than undermine, the intellectual sovereignty and the resurgence of Indigenous nations, then it is vital to ask how provincial Language Arts education might shift to make more space for Indigenous perspectives. According to writers and teachers in this study, more meaningful change requires more meaningful engagement.

The good news, in my opinion, is that the way forward lies in the nature of these things: good teaching, good listening, good reading, good relationships. I have shaped my
research as interpretive, hermeneutic, and Indigenous research because I have learned and
developed strong beliefs about what it means to come to understand something. These
ways of thinking about learning have also shaped what I see emerging out of my
interpretations. I see, for example, how teachers and students can come together around a
text by an Indigenous author—a text that is set in a particular place and emerges from the
concerns and experiences and imaginings of a particular person in a particular
community. If readers remain open to hearing what the text tells them, and to
investigating what they do not understand or what is truly other in what they hear, they
will engage in meaningful learning. If how learning happens is allowed to emerge in
relation to what is being learned—just as one does not seek to interpret something by
entering it with a previously established way of proceeding, but rather builds
understanding in relation to what one encounters—then they will engage in responsive
learning. As they remain open to what is in the text and allow it to relate to them, to
address them, they will build relationships with that text or its perspectives in which they
are personally involved and implicated. These relationships entail responsibility, and
response-ability. Once the learning is picked up, it cannot really be put down again: some
kind of response will ensue, in that sense again of “you’ve heard it now” (King, 2003).
As I have reiterated throughout this dissertation, the growth and artistry of Indigenous
literary arts have much to contribute to such change: new and exciting creative texts are
coming out all the time, and older ones are getting more public attention. I think that, just
as Indigenous literatures have generated a strong critical field in Indigenous literary
studies, Indigenous literatures can contribute to strong practice in Language Arts
education, if readers attend well to the understandings and responsibilities they offer.
6.2 Moving Forward in Response to my Learning

My work in this study has not been about developing concrete understandings about literatures and learning that would enable educators to enact particular strategies in service of Indigenous education, or that would enable writers to target their work in particular ways in order to facilitate learning in and around their communities. The interpretive and Indigenous nature of this study resists the conventional requirement to articulate concrete and actionable recommendations emerging from the study’s conclusions. The understandings I have generated also resist reduction to overly instrumental next steps. So when it comes to framing what I hope will emerge from this study, I return to my conversations with the 14 teachers and writers who spoke with me and think about what I can say back to them, in reciprocity and respect, based on what I have witnessed during the course of my learning here. I will turn a question I asked many of them back on myself: what would you say to other teachers, other writers, who are struggling along in this work? I hope that these responses will be generative for a broader audience invested in Indigenous literatures and learning, but it is to these two groups that I have the most responsibility.

To Indigenous writers, first of all I offer my gratitude and respect. The work you do shows what community means and imagines better worlds into existence. I hope that you will continue to do what you do in creating the literatures that you care about. I hope that you will find and be given the support and respect you need to be able to engage in your creative processes. I hope that you will be inspired by the tremendous growth in Indigenous literary arts and the powerful possibilities for literatures to impact on Indigenous communities. I also hope that you will continue the work that you do in the
service of learning. All the connections you make with readerships—school visits, book signings, interviews on the radio, websites, creative use of digital media, talks and workshops for teachers, workshops and other experiences for young writers, responses to inquiries from learners and educators, and so on—can have important impacts. I know that these kinds of engagement are not necessarily inherent to the creative work of writing, and it is not fair to demand that of you. However, I also see that you are already doing these things, and I think that they are welcoming readers into the learning that so urgently needs to be done in the service of Indigenous communities. I hope that you find something in this study that helps you.

To teachers taking up Indigenous literatures in classrooms, first I offer my gratitude and respect. The work you do shows what community means and enables young people to learn how to build a better future for themselves and their relations. These futures must be built on courageous confrontations of the present and on remembrances of the past, which require the learning that you set up for your students. I hope that you will continue to teach Indigenous literatures, to increase the respect for Indigenous voices in the taught curriculum. Racism and colonialism, along with institutional and disciplinary structures, may present significant challenges for teachers doing this work: recognizing and tackling those obstacles may at times be very difficult. I hope that you will continue to demand and advocate for the material supports that help you—like resources, guides, books, and stable employment—as well as for the professional development, leadership, guidance, collaboration, and recognition that increase your capacity. I hope that you will continue to connect with scholars and scholarship on Indigenous literatures and education, and that you will be supported in making those
connections. I also hope that you will continue to seek out relationships with other people that foster your learning, such as community members, collaborators, and knowledge keepers. I hope that you will engage in the self-care and self-reflexivity that enable learning and growth. To non-Indigenous teachers, I express a particular hope that you will continue to see possibilities for engagement that transcend fear and guilt, looking, instead, for a relational self-positioning that enables you to engage and relate ethically. I honour how you are working to listen to the Indigenous voices you are hearing. I respect how you feel responsible for ensuring that you and your students read Indigenous literatures in order to learn, and I am encouraged that you want to read Indigenous literatures because of their own merits. I hope that you find something in this study that helps you.

Moving forward, away from this dissertation, I have more questions than when I began, and many more ideas about work that remains to be done. These will shape my own ongoing scholarship and teaching, but I also hope that others will take them up in ways that are relevant to their work and communities.

How much are Indigenous literatures actually being taught in Calgary, in Alberta, and in Canada? I gathered some anecdotal information from a very small population in Calgary—certainly this information about how many Indigenous texts are being taught cannot be generalized. However, I feel strongly that Indigenous texts do not get taught enough. Having some clear, quantitative information on this question would likely be helpful.

How might literature teaching in schools resist the erasure that takes place when pan-Indigenous frameworks are deployed, instead of Nation-specific ones? Respecting
the specificity and diversity of Indigenous communities means recognizing that the literatures are different between communities, and diverse even within communities. One of this study’s major limitations is that it does not meaningfully engage with Nation-specific literature; it talks about Indigenous literatures generally (while repeating an insistence on specificity). I set aside the option of working specifically on Métis literatures and learning, for instance, in order to focus on the principle of community resurgence in the realm of literatures and learning. What possibilities exist for educators to take up local Indigenous literatures in ways that are place-based and that connect meaningfully with local communities and artists?

If this work is in the service of Indigenous youth, why did I not ask them for their perspectives? Future scholarship on Indigenous literatures and learning in schools needs to engage with Indigenous youth. I had strong hesitations about ethical engagement between academic research and young Indigenous learners when formulating this study, particularly given my own professional positioning, and I determined to speak only with adults. What possibilities exist for generative, reciprocal research with young Indigenous people?

If this study suggests that many teachers do not feel prepared or supported in teaching Indigenous content, what concerns exist for the broad-scale work of “Education for Reconciliation” called for by Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015c)? The work of implementing the TRC’s 94 Calls to Action entails a huge amount of teaching and learning across many sectors, not only education. How is this work to be conceptualized, and who is responsible for leading and doing it? How might the potential risks of having many underprepared or unwilling people engaging in this work be
mitigated? How can those who are willing and ready (if not prepared) be supported? I personally see an important place for literatures in this work.

What do I have to say to non-Indigenous people who do not want to engage with Indigenous literatures, particularly to teachers who are not making space for Indigenous literatures in their classrooms? I hope that this study reflects my empathy and respect for the complex and demanding work that teachers do. Teachers are already doing an impossible number of things and are very often not sufficiently respected or supported. Innumerable structures and systems undermine individual teachers’ efforts to teach more Indigenous material. It is vital that I not demand something more of caring professionals who are, importantly, human beings whose workloads need to have limits. Furthermore, I know and hope that teachers are already working diligently in service of their students, and many of those who are not teaching Indigenous literatures are doing other work in the service of social justice. I respect that teachers need to contribute what they can, and that, as one wise Principal I worked with put it, if something is going to be added to teachers’ plates, something else has to be taken off. However, I also believe that, as people with intertwined histories, living in the same territories, whose futures depend very much upon each other, we—meaning all people in this place called Canada—are responsible to each other. Settler Canadians occupy a position in which they can sometimes deny their relationship with Indigenous people, but this denial allows injustice to continue. I have asked what possibilities exist for Indigenous literatures to inspire better relationships, but now I wonder what might be required in terms of support, governance, policy, or leadership so that making space for Indigenous literatures need not be a matter of individual teacher choice. People are going to feel burdened in doing this
work, and it is important to consider how the burden might be distributed with some attention to equity and efficacy.

Perhaps more optimistically, how might scholars and educators build upon promising models and practice for teaching Indigenous literatures? For instance, how might mentorship and professional networks be fostered for teachers doing this work? How might reciprocal collaborations be strengthened between and among teachers, writers, and scholars? I have tried to suggest the value of bringing writers and teachers into dialogue, building understanding across contexts, positionings, and disciplines: what more might be done? Also, what supports might be put in place to foster the efforts of Indigenous writers to engage audiences and encourage learning, particularly among young Indigenous people? So much inspiring work is already being done and I hope that people will learn from and help each other.

6.3 Final Thoughts

No single study can exhaust the possibilities tangled up in the webs of relations between Indigenous literatures, communities, and learning. I have sought to open up some understandings of these intertwined possibilities. I hope that these understandings will be taken up in the service of Indigenous communities, particularly Indigenous youth. By weaving together perspectives from writers and teachers, as well as from related scholarship, I have tried to show the depth and complexity of knowledge that already exists. That is, so much is already known about why Indigenous literatures matter to communities, and while learning through or teaching Indigenous literatures is no simple process, strong directions on how to engage have been set out by people who care deeply
about what literatures can do. Continuing along those paths, or perhaps standing up to take a few first steps, is both possible and urgently necessary. I hope that my work in this study inspires and motivates others to move forward in their own ways. For myself, I have only strengthened my conviction that Indigenous literatures have the power to nourish communities as they continue to imagine and to story their resurgence.
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Appendices A: Interview Questions

My conversations with writers and teachers will be preceded by introductions and shared participation in any cultural protocols chosen by each participant. I will initiate each conversation with my primary question, listed below. I will allow conversations to flow naturally, welcoming stories and insights that each person wants to share in relation to the topic. Participant perspectives will be welcomed and respected, as I see them as co-creators of meaning and understanding. As we discuss, I may use any number of questions—which will be in the spirit of those in the following list—to guide conversations or seek elaboration. I will ensure that each category—that is, the groups into which I have clustered the sample questions below—is addressed during each conversation.

Primary Question:

• Why do Indigenous literatures matter?

Background Information, Introductions

• Could you please introduce yourself, tell me a bit about yourself?

for Writers

• Growing up, what kind of education did you have? What kinds of experiences did you have through your education/schooling?
• What, or who, do you think was most formative for you?
• Growing up, did you read Indigenous literatures? When did you start reading Indigenous literatures?
• What kinds of things did you read? Which authors/texts do you remember reading? Which made the biggest impressions on you, and why?
• When did you start writing? Why did you start writing?
• Do you also teach Indigenous literatures?

for Teachers

• Where do you teach?
• What subject(s) do you teach, and at what levels?
• How long have you been teaching?

Significance of Writing (for Writers)

• Do Indigenous literatures connect to the resurgence of healthy Indigenous communities, cultures, and perspectives?
• How might connections between Indigenous literatures and resurgence enrich the educational experiences of Indigenous learners?
• Why do you write now? What hopes do you have for what your writing might do? What do you hope your writing will achieve?
• What does “community” mean to you?
• How do you think about Indigenous (FNMI/Aboriginal) community?
• Which communities do you belong to (or identify with/as)?
• Has literature influenced how you think about communities? Have communities influenced how you think about writing?
• How is your writing important to your communities?
• Can you talk about one of your works and its importance? Why is it important, and to what/whom?

**Opting to Teach Indigenous Literatures, or Not (for Teachers)**
• Do you teach Indigenous literatures in your classes?
• Why do you teach (or not teach) Indigenous literatures?
• Have you been asked to teach Indigenous literatures? (e.g. by school leadership/administration/curriculum/community?)
• Do provided materials (e.g. books, readers) include Indigenous texts?
• What challenges / obstacles might prevent you from teaching Indigenous texts?
• How do you support or inform your teaching of Indigenous literatures? (E.g. do you go to literary criticism, theory, teachers’ guides, colleagues, community members, other resources / materials?)

**Significance of Teaching Indigenous Literatures (for Teachers)**
• How do you think about yourself as a teacher of Indigenous literatures? Do you reflect on your place in this work? Does your social location matter?
• Do you think it is important to teach Indigenous literatures? Why?
• How might teaching Indigenous texts impact your students and their home communities?
• What does “community” mean to you?
• Could you describe an experience you have had of teaching Indigenous literatures that you think was significant?
• Given the current relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada, what do you think is an important issue for education? What needs to happen in classrooms?

**Perspectives from this Study**
• Another writer/teacher I spoke with said that . . . How would you respond to that idea? [note: participants will be kept anonymous and ideas will be respectfully paraphrased]
• During my work in this study, I have learned that . . . / I have recently encountered the notion that . . . / One of the things that seems important to me on this topic is . . . How would you respond to that idea? [researcher may share growing insights from scholarly literature or from analyses in study]

**Closure**
• Do you have anything to ask or add?
Appendices B: Sample Transcript 1, Conversation with Suzette Williams

This teacher chose the pseudonym “Suzette Williams.” We met on November 12, 2015 at a local coffee shop in Calgary.

AH: Okay so I like to begin officially by thanking you because, um, this project, really, like, it would not exist without everyone sharing their perspectives…

SW: Of course, yeah…

AH: …with me, and I’m really grateful to have, um, you know, to have the writers who are participating, who are Indigenous writers from across the country…

SW: Excellent.

AH: …and, um, and teachers who are all Calgary teachers in various boards and school jurisdictions, um…

SW: Different demographics…

AH: …and they, yeah, different demographics, different levels of experience, different teaching areas, even but it’s, they’re all teachers who could be, including Indigenous literature or not, or, you know, who are or are not, depending on their various reasons, experiences and so on but people who could incorporate Indigenous literature in their content, um, and again it’s super meaningful to me…

SW: Mm-hmm.

AH: …to have everybody’s participation, so I’m really grateful, thank you. [Laughs]

SW: You’re welcome, my pleasure.

AH: Cool, um, so I guess, to get us, um, I’d like to give you a little, kind of a warm up question, if that’s okay?

SW: Mm-hmm.

AH: Um, but, um, what, why don’t you just give, um, if you don’t mind, just a little introduction, to like what kinds of subject areas you teach, what kind of, a, tell us a bit about your teaching, tell me a bit about your teaching work, that you do…

SW: Okay, so…

AH: …and about yourself, if you want.

SW: …I am kind of, I wear a lot of different hats in my teaching facility. I teach English in grade 10 and 11, currently, I’ll be teaching a 30 level next semester and I also teach
cosmetology, so I get to have a really fun option course to balance out my day. Um, in teaching grade 10 and grade 11, uh, English, I get to choose what novels and short stories and the literature that we, ah, analyze, I get to have a lot of freedom over what I expose the kids to, so I’m really grateful for that. Is there anything else that you want to know?

AH: Um…

SW: What have I been teaching…

AH: Yeah, maybe a bit about that, like, what, what, why, why did you come to teaching, what do you…

SW: Okay.

AH: Yeah a bit about that.

SW: I’ve been, I’ve been a teacher for 5 years, 6 years, 6 years, oh my god, 6 years I’ve been a teacher.

AH: [Laughs]

SW: Um, how I came to teach was I taught ESL when we lived in China for 2 years and I just kind of fell in love with learning and watching kids discover and those “aha” moments and the challenges and overcoming them, I just…

AH: Yeah.

SW: …It kind of sparked a passion, so we came home and I spent a year at home with my son and I decided it was time to go back to school, I didn’t really know what I wanted to do, I thought I was going to be an elementary teacher because my experience teaching ESL was grade 1 to 4…

AH: Right.

SW: …and I loved them…

AH: Yeah.

SW: It was an amazing experience. But then as I started taking more literature courses, it just sparked this huge passion in me and I just, I began to explore this whole world that I didn’t even knew existed: critical theory and just the different genres and oh it was just so amazing, the expression that is found in literature and how it just reflects the cultural contexts and, and the negative spaces and it just, I, I realized once I gotten 3 years into a degree that it was actually going to be a four year degree and I was going to be a high school teacher.

AH: [Laughs]
SW: And I was going to teach English and I was going to, you know, shape young minds with Shakespeare and…

AH: Yeah.

SW: ...And, um, and then when I finished my degree there weren’t any English positions available so thank goodness I had my hairdressing license in my back pocket because that got me a job teaching Cosmo…

AH: Yeah.

SW: Which was awesome. I got my foot in the door, it got me into a school, where I very quickly became known as a, um, efficient and organized and enthusiastic young teacher, well young is relative. [Laughs] I’m not as young as some of the other ones.

AH: [Laughs] Young at heart.

SW: Young at heart, exactly. Um, so I think it was my fourth year, I was in the middle of my fourth year, when I was then called to move into the English department.

AH: Right.

SW: There was a need…

AH: Yeah.

SW: So we found my replacement in Cosmo, after some strain, because Cosmo teachers are not easy to find.

AH: Mm-hmm.

SW: And I began my journey in the English department and thankfully now, after teaching in the English department for a couple years, I have a balance between English and Cosmo. Because as much as I really love English, it becomes very overwhelming very quickly and teaching Cosmo kind of really balances out my day.

AH: And when you say overwhelming, you mean workload? Like is that what you mean?...

SW: ...Workload is really heavy but sometimes even just the way the kids react or don’t react to the literature, like, I have such a strong passion about it that I almost take it personally when they don’t like it.

AH: Mm-hmm.

SW: And that’s something that I struggle with as a teacher, is, is because I craft lessons and activities and design all these, uh, learning moments for these kids to engage with the
text and make those connections and when my ideal utopic classroom doesn’t come to fruition then, then I have to go home and re-evaluate and reflect on what could happen differently, and – yeah it’s a challenge...

AH: Yeah.

SW: ...sometimes.

AH: Yeah, yeah, I can very much identify with what you are saying for sure from my own teaching experience...

SW: Yeah.

AH: Um, okay, well let’s, um, I want to jump into the Indigenous content, like, would you, um, say you incorporate some Indigenous content in your teaching in English?

SW: Absolutely, yep, um, it’s actually how I start my year, is, our first unit is that, I like to formulate it, is I start with short stories.

AH: Yeah.

SW: Because I think it’s a really good way to expose the kids to the framework of the narrative and it gives them the vocabulary that later on in the year we can build on, um, and I begin with uh “Borders,” Thomas King’s “Borders.”

AH: Okay, yeah.

SW: Because it just, the focus for grade 10 is identity, and that story, at its heart, is about identity and, and it teaches, um, about when to compromise, when not to compromise, you know, and the way that Thomas King tells a story, like, how he weaves in the heritage and the mythologies and the symbolisms, um…

AH: And the oral storytelling style, right?…

SW: The oral telling, yes, exactly, the oral storytelling, um, it just, it’s a great way to start off because it’s got so many explicit examples of storytelling, um. Unfortunately that’s it, that’s all I got. When we start getting to novel studies, although I do have a lot of choice, I’m experimenting with a couple different kind of novel studies, I’ve done To Kill A Mockingbird.

AH: Yeah.

SW: I’ve, uh, we’re doing Chrysalids this year.

AH: Yeah.

SW: Um, Girl With a Pearl Earring.
AH: Okay.

SW: Um, another one that I’ve taught is, um, *Great Gatsby* and 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. Um, when you go into the book room, Aboriginal literature just isn’t there...

AH: Mm-hmm.

SW: ...to choose from. And so 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.

AH: Right.

SW: Now when we, because I teach grade 10 and we do a lot of interdisciplinary stuff, there’s some really natural connections with Social Studies um about the First Nations, and…

AH: Mm-hmm.

SW: ...the historical globalization part of it…

AH: Yeah.

SW: ...and we can make connections through that, um, and then when we do research we use the Buffalo education booklet, booklets and…

AH: Mm-hmm.

SW: ...do some activities around that.

AH: Okay.

SW: But really honestly between “Borders” from Thomas King, and I bring in some little moments from his Massey lectures...

AH: Okay.

SW: ...you know...

AH: Yeah, yeah...

SW: ...the “now you know”…

AH: …*The Truth about Stories*, that’s right.
SW: ...*The Truth about Stories*, exactly. I bring in some moments from that, every once in a while, to kind of, like, just drive home a point, here and there, but really honestly that’s about the extent of my, my – depth into…

AH: Yeah…

SW: ...Aboriginal literature…

AH: ...That’s great and I mean, like, it’s nice to actually explore in one, like, something in depth, right?

SW: Mm-hmm.

AH: So can we talk a bit about how that’s gone? Like teaching “Borders” and those bits of Thomas King that you’ve brought in, like…

SW: Yeah.

AH: ...just, um, I mean there’s kind of two ques, I’ll give you two questions and you can pick what you want to answer…

SW: Okay.

AH: ...So one question is like, you know, pick a lesson that’s gone, like, either, okay this is actually three questions…

SW: Okay. [Laughs]

AH: ...and, like, these three questions are going to also branch out, um, no, [laughs]. So like, okay, pick a lesson that’s gone really well…

SW: Mm-hmm.

AH: ...that you were like, excited, like magical things are happening here, and…

SW: Okay, yeah.

AH: ...talk about why that was the way it was. Or pick a lesson that was, like, disappointing or frustrating or that didn’t go...

SW: Okay.

AH: ...and talk about that, um…

SW: Or?
AH: Or what would you say, like, and this is the kind of like, if you want to go theoretical question, like, if that um teach-, and I’m thinking, I’m making it up as I go along here, totally, but, um, if that teaching story kind of represents, any like, philosophical thoughts you have about it or critical thoughts you have about what that entails as a teaching project, like…

SW: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

AH: ...how would you describe that experience? It’s kind of all the same question, like what does it actually mean…

SW: Yeah, I was just going to say, I’m going to answer both A and B.

AH: Yeah.

SW: Okay [Laughs].

AH: And thank you for bearing with me as I...

SW: [Laughs]

AH: ...and I have to, like, I’m always laughing when I’m recording these things because I picture myself...

SW: [Laughs]

AH: ...um, typing this out and I’m just like Aubrey Jean, just ask the question!

SW: [Laughs]

AH: Just pick the question off the list.

SW: Question B is not on the list. [Laughs]

AH: You’d think I’m getting paid by the hour when I’m talking longer. Okay sorry…

SW: Okay, so…

AH: Just strike that from the record. [Laughs]

SW: A lesson that worked really well, okay so, my short story lesson. Because now I’ve done it a few times, each time it’s gotten better.

AH: Okay, yep.

SW: So the first time that I taught “Borders,” I skimmed the surface, right, like, I didn’t, I didn’t know how receptive the kids were going to be, I did have a couple First Nations
kids in my class and I didn’t want to step on their toes, so I was really timid, and I wanted, I wanted them to be offering information rather than me telling them what to hear.

AH: Or putting them on the spot.

SW: Or putting them on the spot, I’d never want to put them on the spot…

AH: Yeah.

SW: …I wanted them to be able to volunteer information and input. Um, so my first time teaching “Borders” I didn’t do a very good job of it. Like I say, I scratched the surface. We talked about symbolism, um we talked about story-telling, we talked about, um, identity and perseverance and you know, some things that you have to fight for…

AH: Yeah.

SW: …and then we moved on very quickly to the next short story. I didn’t do any real assignment on it, we just read it, did some verbal analysis, answered some questions, done. Right? Move on.

AH: And you build it into the, like, thematic connection, you’re building over the course of the unit and things like that...

SW: Yes, exactly.

AH: …like you were saying.

SW: Yeah, my first year, I probably wasn’t doing that, I was on, I was in a survival mode.

AH: [Laughs] Well I have a similar story actually about teaching “Borders” in my first year but…

SW: Yeah.

AH: …it’s your turn, so go ahead.

SW: So yeah, I was in total survival mode so probably planned on making those meta connections, it may have happened...

AH: [Laughs] You probably said the word “identity” to be fair…

SW: Well, yeah…

AH: …when you were talking about the story.
SW: Exactly, exactly. But then, now, so like this year in teaching “Borders,” again I had a couple First Nations kids in the classroom, and this time I was more keenly aware of when to kind of nudge them to offer information and input and where they could show, show their pride in their heritage because it was a moment of realization in the story and they could add,…

AH: Right.

SW: …add to it…

AH: Yeah.

SW: …Or, um, or that I knew more of First Nations heritage, after teaching it a few times and talking with other people and exploring the ideas and…

AH: Yeah.

SW: …Um, that I had better understanding of what the story really meant, um. So through my own teaching experience the lessons get better. Um, this last time when I taught it, there was a really great moment where, um, some students were sitting in a group and I had them doing, just a plot diagram, they had to do a plot diagram together so that could question what was going on and if somebody didn’t know, thy could ask and support each other in the learning, um, and one of the kids, they were writing their little climax moment and they couldn’t decide on which climax…

AH: Okay, yeah.

SW: …which part was the climax, because they were like, is it the moment they get through the border, where the mom wins, or is it the moment where mom is sitting up against the car telling the little boy about the stories, is that the climax?

AH: Oh really? That’s amazing, I’m actually, like, I have to say, I’m writing a paper about that moment, right now, so I’m loving this…

SW: Right?

AH: …so, so keep going.

SW: Oh, and it was, like, so, like, I, I’m standing back and I’m just letting this conversation be organic and let it go, right.

AH: Yeah.

SW: But I’m listening and I’m like, you know, this is where, this is where learning happens and it doesn’t matter if there is a right or wrong answer. They’re exploring what that moment means…
AH: Yeah.

SW: ...right? And so what if mom got through the border to go see sister, that moment when they were talking and sharing, you know, the meaning of the stars and the constellations…

AH: Yeah.

SW: ...and the stories and the heritage…

AH: Coyote stories, yeah…

SW: ...is that the moment that is the most important in the story? Well if you think it is, yeah, for sure. Absolutely, right? Like, and that’s the one thing that I love about English:…

AH: Yeah.

SW: ...it doesn’t matter if you’re right or wrong; if you can justify it, you’re right.

AH: Yeah.

SW: Right, and, in that moment I was like, “yes,” and one of the First Nations girls was in that group and she almost started to like tear up. She is so shy…

AH: Yeah.

SW: ...and she’s really introverted, and she wasn’t really contributing to the conversation but once they recognized the importance of that moment, she now has a group of friends,…

AH: Aww.

SW: ...like, it created a connection for her with those students because she saw that, through this literature, people were appreciating her heritage.

AH: Yeah.

SW: Right?

AH: Oh.

SW: ...And it was just such a great moment…

AH: Yeah.
SW: ...in my classroom, that I didn’t even really need to be a part of. I just got to watch it. It was awesome.

AH: Oh, that’s so great. Because I have to say, like, in the thin-, I’ll just share with you quickly in like this little piece I’m writing, I’m, like, telling the story of my first year teaching, and it was like my first year teaching, first semester and totally, like, jumped into teaching “Borders” and I wanted it to be all of these things, that it wasn’t.

SW: Yeah.

AH: And in this piece that I’m writing, I’m kind of telling story, and the thing I’m wishing for is that happened, right, basically like…

SW: Yeah.

AH: ...I’m, like, in my own thinking about the story and the stuff I’ve done since then, um, I’ve come to think a lot about the importance of that moment in the story and, um, I wish I’d gotten there with my students, so now I’m, like, all I have to do is layer your experience in [laughs]…

SW: There you go!

AH: ...so it’s great that we’re having this conversation…

SW: ...Yes, absolutely because it happened.

AH: That’s where I wanted to get, you know.

SW: Yeah, well and that just, like, you mean, that’s such a moment, like that’s one of the moments that you go into teaching for...

AH: Yeah.

SW: ...because they’re not only using some of the skill sets that you’ve taught them about critical thinking and questioning and discovering, but there’s that appreciation moment, you know, the true, like, that one young girl, she felt respected, right, in that moment.

AH: Yeah.

SW: And that’s…

AH: I can see it happening.

SW: Yeah, it was awesome.

AH: That’s amazing.
SW: Yeah.

AH: Okay, which leads me to the next really good question. Which is, um, like, and I’m going to draw you right into the big picture of this project here but…

SW: Okay.

AH: Um, what do you think is possible, like, based on the experiences you’ve had, and like, what do you think literature can do for students, like does it matter...

SW: Mm-mmm.

AH: ...to teach Indigenous lit, like…

SW: Yes.

AH: ...bringing in Native lit in your classroom?

SW: Yes.

AH: So what’s possible? What can happen?

SW: Well I think one thing that is happening in our society right now is there’s a big uh pejorative discussion around First Nations culture and that there’s a lot of really negative connotations around it and it doesn’t, it’s not necessary, right, like, um, you don’t need to live in the, in the moment of abuse and we don’t need to live in the moment of Eurocentrism, you know, we can still celebrate First Nations heritage without, um, we can acknowledge that it happened because it did but we don’t need that to be the focus, that’s, I think that’s the subtext, um, I think the possibility of Aboriginal literature in the classroom is, it creates a space for appreciation, and it creates a space where ignorance gets pushed to the side…

AH: Right.

SW: ...and people still, start to realize that there’s an actual rich culture and, like, a diverse rich culture there, it’s not just First Nations right, there is a diversity of First Nations and that they can start to appreciate those different perspectives. We are in Canada and there’s so much ignorance about our First Nation peoples and I think when we explore the literature, that comes from, um, whether it’s First Nations writers or people who, are like Rudy Wiebe who collaborates with, like Yvonne Johnson…

AH: Yep, yeah.

SW: ...Um…

AH: Yeah.
SW: Right? Like there’s some real power there in the writing about and the writing of. And when we expose our youth to it, that’s when they can start building their frame of reference for it, right? Without it being what they see in the news or what their mom and dad say around the dinner table, when we can expose them to a way of story-telling that has been around for millennia. When we can expose them to a mythology that’s different from Greek and Roman that they’re used to, that they’ve been educated in junior high and elementary because Greek and Roman mythology is part of the curriculum...

AH: Yep.

SW: ...and it isn’t a necessary part of the English curriculum to teach First Nations mythologies. Why not? It doesn’t make any sense, you know, as a Canadian culture we’re supposedly this mosaic society, but the mosaic society isn’t really recognizing the value of all the different colours that we’re made up of. It’s, we’re still very much a patriarchal, misogynistic white society.

AH: Yeah.

SW: That still values the, the pen held by the white man, right? Um, and I think it’s, as teachers, it’s our job to expose them to the spectrum of literature, not just the canon, right? Um – but it’s troublesome when you’re trying to access it, that’s the challenge, right, is the access. You know, like, I can find poetry and I can find stories and I can include it in my lectures but when it comes to, like, the real meat and potatoes of the curriculum, like, the novel study and the modern play, and the Shakespearean play, like, it doesn’t give First Nations, Inuit, Métis writings any weight, at all.

AH: Where would you say the pressures come from? Like in terms of, like you said, curriculum, ...

SW: Yeah.

AH: ...program of studies...

SW: Yep.

AH: ...um…

SW: Economics, right? Like, I mean, we live in a very tight budget day, and if there’s something that you want – [sucks air in through teeth] it’s not always available because we just can’t afford it.

AH: Yeah.

SW: Like I say, like getting a class set of novels. – Um, The back of the Turtle, would be a great novel study for grade 11s, right? [Laughs]
AH: Yeah, I just read that one, I hadn’t thought about it yet in terms of what...

SW: I think they would love it, right?

AH: That would be really interesting…

SW: I kind of have a thing…

AH: Well, that’s, that’s the thing there’s so much that would be great, like there’s so many great…

SW: Or even like…

AH: …novels out there…

SW: …*Monkey Beach*, like, Eden Robinson’s *Monkey Beach*…

AH: Yeah.

SW: Right. Like you mean…

AH: I’m writing a teacher’s guide for that right now.

SW: Oh my god, what a great story that would be to teach these young grade 10s, when they’re coming into their own, they could connect with it. But try and get a class set of that in. Like, I’ve bought that book, like, three times and lent it out to kids. [Laughs]

AH: And that’s…

SW: That’s usually what I just did, okay...

AH: I was being really careful not to, like, push you to that...

SW: Yeah.

AH: …to let you go to that on your, like, every teacher I’ve talked to so far has named that, like, funding, funding, funding. Like, show me the resources, like, you teach what’s there, and...

SW: Yeah.

AH: …schools tend to have, um – you know, they, they get books that are generic, that anyone can teach, ‘cause there’s new teachers coming in and out all the time...

SW: Yeah.

AH: …number one, number two, there’s stuff that’s tried, tested and true, like…
SW: Yeah, that canon.

AH: ...everyone knows what it is…

SW: Yeah.

AH: ...there’s lots of materials, somebody can walk into that and start teaching it tomorrow…

SW: Yeah.

AH: ...’cause it’s ready to go, um, and then the investment piece of, you know, as well as, like, the preparation in terms of, like, having the background knowledge and knowing what to…

SW: Well yeah.

AH: ...and so everyone, everyone has said that so far and I’m getting that that’s a...

SW: It’s a big issue.

AH: ...I expected to hear it but I’m always worried that I’m making people say that somehow…

SW: Yeah.

AH: ...because I think it, but, so…

SW: No, it’s on the forefront.

AH: I’m glad that you kind went there on your own.

SW: Absolutely, it’s in the forefront.

AH: Yeah.

SW: Because, I would love to teach *Monkey Beach*, oh my god, what an amazing novel that is…

AH: It is an amazing novel, I agree.

SW: Yeah, um, but, yeah. I would be the only one, I’m the only one who’s familiar with that text in my department so, and, and that’s the other thing, is not everybody is familiar with First Nations literature, it’s just not anything that is, um – mandated, right, like we don’t have to know it.

AH: Mmm.
SW: I think it’s something that you teach if you know it, like when I was designing my AP program last year for my grade 10s, um, I made sure that the First Nations literature was a part of it because I did kind of, like, a chronological study with The Iliad and we moved our way up to the present…

AH: Okay, yeah.

SW: And, um, and that First Nation storytelling, it’s so reflective of the epic poetry, right? Of the Greek and the Romans and it’s, um, so it was a really good comparative study but I could do it because I’m familiar with it, not everybody is familiar with it.

AH: Right. So I guess, um, and, and again, I want you to know how much other teachers are echoing what you’re saying, and those kind of frustrations around money and access and preparation, training and…

SW: Yeah.

AH: All of those things, um, I wonder, like, ‘cause you, you are at a school that has a bit of a higher Aboriginal population…

SW: Yeah.

AH: Like relative to, to, like it’s, it’s a city school...

SW: Yeah.

AH: ...but, um, what is your school doing that you would say enables the introduction, of, like, or is there, or what would you like to see, in terms of what would enable you…

SW: You know, it’s kind of scary…

AH: ...or your department to introduce more Indigenous lit, like?

SW: Even though we have a very high number of FNMI students in our school, the programming that is geared towards them is dying.

AH: It’s dying, oh.

SW: We used to have an Aboriginal Studies program that was, it was a stand-alone class levelled so they could take it up to the 30 level.

AH: Yeah.

SW: It’s not taught anymore.

AH: Right.
SW: There’s no one to teach it. The teacher who was teaching it has moved on to a system position, and rightly so; she deserves it, she worked hard for it. Um, but it left a void in our school, where the teachers who were left behind were like, “I don’t want to teach that, I don’t want to teach that. I know that those kids are hard to get assignments out of, I know that they’re hard to teach, I know they’re hard to access, it’s hard to get them to demonstrate their understanding. I don’t want that challenge.”

AH: Okay...

SW: Um –

AH: ...and there’s a lot in that attitude too, right? Like there’s a lot you could say about...

SW: Yes. So, unfortunately, it just wasn’t offered.

AH: Right.

SW: So the program has died. Now this year, um, our school did come into some funding, like I was saying earlier, and um, and now a position has been created, a temporary position has been created, uh, called a Success Coach. And this is geared specifically to connect with our FNMI students in grade 9 to help them transition to grade 10 successfully. Because we’re finding that the completion rate for FNMI students is incredibly low. Like beyond provincial standards.

AH: Oh.

SW: Um, to the point where, like, if we get 30 students at the beginning of the year, 1 of them graduates by the end of grade 12. – So, um, so this teacher is going to be working on transitioning them, and guiding them through the grade 10 to 12 process...

AH: Right.

SW: ...to help them connect with a teacher, build a relationship with a teacher. Now unfortunately the position is temporary. It’s only until the end of this school year. So right now the position doesn’t have a lot of sustainability and future focus. It’s kind of like a temporary Band-Aid, like what’s going on this year. But I can tell you what’s going on this year is that the Aboriginal Studies program isn’t there. The room that used to be provided them, for them at lunch to have a space to connect with their, their friends in a space where they could freely talk about their culture and not worry about condemnation, is gone. [Laughs]

AH: Right.

SW: So, we’re not providing a space for these students, and that is what the main concern is. That’s what’s happening.
AH: And do teachers talk about, like, incorporating kind of, you know, different FNMI perspectives or um texts or exercises or culture in, like...

SW: In Social Studies...

AH: ...across the curriculum, like is there...

SW: ...oh...

AH: ...like is that discussion –?

SW: In Social Studies, yes, absolutely.

AH: And I’m putting you on the spot, ‘cause that’s not a question I’ve asked everyone, so...

SW: Yeah.

AH: ...it’s not really a fair question, but would you say that conversation happens?

SW: The conversation happens in the Social Studies department...

AH: ‘Kay.

SW: ...absolutely, without question. Um, does it happen in the English department? Absolutely not. Zero. Um, does it happen in any of the other classes? No. Uh, the conversations about what struggles and accommodations and, and interventions that we can have with our FNMI students is happening in Guidance and administration. So it’s either a behaviour issue that’s being addressed or it’s an academic issue that’s being addressed. There’s no proactive thing going on; there’s a lot of reactive stuff.

AH: Right. So there’s more, and is there, um, I have to ask this as a question, is there, like, um, you know, when, like you talk about administrative things, like behaviour issues, is there like um does your, you know, you’re a big high school so I imagine you have a Guidance kind of area...

SW: Yep.

AH: Are there support people in there...

SW: Specifically...

AH: ...as well?

SW: ...for FNMI?

AH: ...or who end up kind of like adres-, like are there, like community folks...
SW: It kind of gets...

AH: ...who come in and run programs, or any of...

SW: Um, Big Brothers, Big Sisters, uh we have a huge wellness program. And yeah, so the wellness program in our school is incredibly diverse. Is there something that’s specifically FNMI...

AH: I know sometimes it’s hard to know...

SW: ...yes? I can’t...

AH: ...’cause it’s all happening behind the scenes...

SW: ...yeah, I can’t remember exactly what the program is. I know that there is – there is a group...

AH: Yeah.

SW: ...However, a lot of the kids are kinda, you know, they don’t want to be seen going to it, or, it’s kind of like homework club. Nobody wants to be seen going to a homework club.

AH: Right.

SW: Right? Um, so there’s kind of a stigma around it, that because it’s a school-driven program...

AH: Right.

SW: ...it’s not very well used.

AH: Right.

SW: You know, you almost need to empower the kids to create their own program, to draw them in.

AH: Right...

SW: Right?

AH: ...and then how do you support them to do that without it being almost a burden...

SW: Mandated.

AH: ...or mandated, yeah.

SW: Yeah, exactly.
AH: Yeah.

SW: It becomes a bit of a burden. But at the same time, for the right teacher at the right moment, then it, it’s so worthwhile. Like I know that there’s also um a program; I think it’s called Connections. It’s outside of our school, but it’s, uh, kind of like a leadership program – are you familiar with Connections?

AH: No, I’m not actually.

SW: Oh, I, it’s, uh, I’m trying to jog my brain about the, the details. But somebody contacted me last year to see if I wanted to be a connection and to be honest, I just have way too much on my plate already...

AH: Yeah.

SW: ...with my new position, and all the other stuff that I was involved in, getting...

AH: Yeah.

SW: ...grade 10 started again this year, um...

AH: Yeah, ‘cause you were saying, you have like leadership roles too, right, in your school?

SW: That’s right, yeah. And we’ve started some new initiatives that I’ve been spearheading, and yeah, so, um, it wasn’t the right moment for me to be the contact for that. Um, if they’d have asked me the year before...

AH: Right, yeah.

SW: ...I’d have been all over it. Um, but it was more like um, it was a program to develop leadership skills that they could bring back to the school and implement in the school, to...

AH: Yeah.

SW: ...create, uh, school spirit...

AH: Yeah.

SW: ...um, but it was directly focused towards the FNMI community...

AH: Yeah...

SW: ...But yeah, I mean...

AH: ...So those kinds of...
SW: ...it needs to start from the students, right? Like we need to empower our students. Give them a space to create a program that they want and design it how they want it to look...

AH: Yeah, and...

SW: ...so that it draws in the kids...

AH: ...have the dialogue. Yeah, but then how do you kind of enable a dialogue, because it, you know, how many kids feel, like it takes a lot to get a kid, actually, in high school, just to express an honest opinion about...

SW: Oh, yeah.

AH: ...things around social, like anything that’s around social stuff, or, you know, like school, or what...

SW: Well, like look how...

AH: ...’cause it’s not a free conversation...

SW: ...long it took for our GSA to be...

AH: ...well yeah, yeah...

SW: ...independent and strong. Like they’re an awesome club now, but it took a lot of work to get them there, right?

AH: Yeah. Yeah.

SW: Yeah.

AH: And it sounds to me like from what you’re saying, like would you it’s, is, is it fair to say that there’s like open discrimination against Indigenous students in the school?

SW: Mm-hmm. Absolutely.

AH: Like do you see that?

SW: Yeah, absolutely. Well, there’s open discrimination against anybody who’s different. Right?

AH: Yeah.

SW: So, um...

AH: And it’s, yours is a diverse school, with a lot of...
SW: We’re a very diverse school. We have a very, um – like, and there’s everything. Like there’s the, the Aboriginal kids, there’s the Vietnamese, Chinese...

AH: Probably one of the most...

SW: ...Cambodian...

AH: ...culturally diverse...

SW: ...Ethiopians...

AH: ...schools in the city, right?

SW: ...Somalis, like, well yeah, ‘cause we have a lot of immigrant kids at our school, we have um, a great ESL program at our school that draws a lot of the immigrant population, so that creates, uh, diversity in itself. But, we’re also close to the, I believe it’s the inner-city reservation area, so there’s a lot of kids, um, First Nations kids who live close to our school as well, so that’s why they’re at our school. Do they attend very often? There’s not a draw there, so no. There’s no real thing that’s keeping them in school. There’s not – there’s nothing giving them the motivation to stay there.

AH: Hmm.

SW: Yeah, which hopefully...

AH: So...

SW: ...this new position can...

AH: Yeah...

SW: ...can...

AH: ...will help to...

SW: ...can help to correct...

AH: ...I mean, as you say, these things take time, you know, to watch it happen, and try to understand what’s...

SW: And build relationships, and, ‘cause that’s the, I think the first step of anything is building that relationship with the kids, to help them, see what can be done. What can be done...

AH: Yeah.

SW: ...and then do it.
AH: And see that they’re respected and that people want them there.

SW: Mmm. Mm-hmm! Exactly.

AH: Um, okay, I want to share a little inspirational line, one of the writers, other writers...

SW: Okay.

AH: ...shared with me, because it connects to that, what do you think is possible question, ‘cause I agree with you that all of these, like it’s a big picture, like all of those, sort of pieces, like, you know, incorporating perspectives into the curriculum, like decolonizing the curriculum, whatever you want to call it...

SW: Yeah.

AH: ...um...

SW: I love that, decolonizing...

AH: Decolonizing the curriculum!

SW: Yeah...

AH: Decolonizing education!

SW: ...yeah...

AH: You know, I read a lot of Marie Battiste in my line of work! [Laughs]

SW: Mm-hmm.

AH: Um, but um, you know so that, I think it is a big picture, like all of those things you’re you’re talking about, um, and um, you know, and I feel like the piece I’m trying to work on is, like, supporting teachers in doing the literature stuff. Like, I’m like, okay, if this, this is something I want to work on, but...

SW: Yeah, awesome.

AH: ...So one of the writers shared with me, um, and again, I think it’s really important for teachers and writers to be in dialogue, ‘cause there’s all these wonderful ideas out there in the literary scholarship around how important literature is for rebuilding communities in the wake of all the kinds of colonial...

SW: Right.

AH: ...violence that have taken place over the, like the, the last residential only closed in the year before I graduated high school. Right? Like it’s, this is new stuff. But...
SW: I’m from Kamloops.

AH: Yeah.

SW: I think the year before I left, they, um, redid the residential school that was there and made it into a First Nations museum.

AH: Okay, yeah.

SW: Yeah, so, it, it was a really powerful...

AH: Yeah, I...

SW: ...powerful moment when they did that...

AH: ...absolutely.

SW: ...yeah.

AH: Well and that’s just it, this stuff is all still right around us, right, so...

SW: Oh it’s right in front of our faces.

AH: You know, I was, like yesterday was Remembrance Day, and I was explaining to my 7-year-old that um, how much my grandfather being in World War II still affects us, and, you know, I come from a Métis family, like there’s lots of intergenerational legacy stuff that we’re all, um – just that’s, we, you know, where we start from, right?

SW: Yeah.

AH: Like, and there’s things that are part of my story that I’m going to be always still building into my story, but...

SW: Mm-hmm.

AH: Um, you know, the, how recent so much of these things are, I think not everyone is aware, right? But um, so I, you know, I think literature has a real power to help people to imagine a better way...

SW: Yeah.

AH: ...a better way of being together, and to imagine strong communities and to, um, portray how, as you were saying, like, it’s not all about, like that story, you know the, the truth about what happened in colonization, and residential schools, and the Indian Act, like all of that stuff, like people have to know that stuff.

SW: Yeah. That’s necessary knowledge.
AH: And they also have to hear, like it can’t be all the darkness. They also, there’s so much beautiful cultural and artistic expression out there.

SW: Absolutely!

AH: It has to be that too. Um...

SW: And I think that’s what we miss, you know, when we’re educating our students about our history, we hear about all the terrible things that we did, right?

AH: Yeah.

SW: And then we hear about all the, um, negative cause and effect cycles, um...

AH: If we did at all. [Laughs]

SW: Well yeah, exactly, right? And then yeah, that’s that piece that’s missing, is the...

AH: Affirmation.

SW: ...the resilient side, and the, like you say, the beautiful side, the...

AH: Yeah.

SW: ...the artistic side that shows the history and the culture and the – and that it’s still present day.

AH: And the present, exactly, the continuance.

SW: Yeah.

AH: You know, I um, I had a conversation in, like I taught a course this semester on um, like it’s basically, like, Indigenous perspectives for pre-service teachers...

SW: Okay.

AH: ...like there’s more to it than that, but it’s the FNMI course for all the teacher, teacher education students...

SW: Okay.

AH: ...um, and I had um...

SW: Which wasn’t around when I did my education...

AH: No...

SW: ...degree.
AH. ...no, it’s new, yeah.

SW: Yeah.

AH: And it’s mandatory...

SW: Awesome.

AH: ...by the way. Everyone takes it.

SW: Love it! [Laughs]

AH: Yeah, so they all come out with something. I mean, it’s 9 weeks, right, like it’s pretty...

SW: Short and sweet?

AH: ...like it’s scratching the surface, but there’s a lot there. But I had a conversation with a student who wrote an essay, and she just, all she could see was the, was the darkness. Like, for a want of a better, like, problematic, ‘cause there’s been so much racialization of badness over the...

SW: Yeah.

AH: ...in the Eurocentric – canon, but...

SW: Yeah.

AH: ...um, anyway, so all she could see was, like and she wrote this paper, um, about how, basically using a metaphor of, like um, you know, Indigenous people being like shattered by the legacy of colonization. And I’m like where’s the agency? Right?

SW: Yeah!

AH: And it’s, the thing is like she was making a really important realization of how much damage had been done.

SW: Yeah.

AH: Yes, but recognize, we’re not broken...

SW: We’re still here.

AH: ...We’re here, yeah...

SW: Oh, yeah.

AH: ...and we’re dancing, and singing, and writing, and teaching, and...
SW: Yeah!

AH: You know, look at me, like I’m three generations out of who knows what, and, not to dismiss my ancestors in that way, but out of difficult stuff.

SW: Yeah.

AH: Um...

SW: The cycle of poverty...

AH: ...you know...

SW: ...doesn’t have to be perpetuated, right?

AH: Yeah.

SW: Yeah.

AH: I’m a university professor, for crying out loud. Like it’s hard to believe, right? But um, so things are changing, and things are also still the same. Like cultures are enduring. So I guess, okay, the line I want to share with you, and just get your response to this, and then we have to wrap it up and go, pretty soon is, um, so this teacher, or this writer, was talking about, you know, ‘cause I was like, “okay, you know, a lot of the writers were talking a lot about representation... Like...

SW: Yeah.

AH: ...it’s important for young people to see themselves represented in the writing”...

SW: Yes, absolutely.

AH: ...and I was like, I want to just push that a little, ‘cause I totally believe in that...

SW: Me too.

AH: ...but let’s push it a little further, because it’s not just about seeing yourself there. Like, I’m like, “can you just talk a little more about that with me” and he said, um, like let’s, and he, told me a story that, you know I, I won’t share the whole story here ‘cause it’s not mine to tell, but um, he’s like, “you know what, it’s not just about it being a mirror. It’s about it being a window into a world where we have a place. Literature”...

SW: Yes, love it!

AH: Isn’t it, isn’t it good?

SW: Yes!
AH: “Literature is not just about looking for a mirror; it’s about looking for a window, you know, new understanding, you’re seeing different things, like I see myself in this world where I’m part of the story.”

SW: Yes. Yes.

AH: It’s like, “oh my gosh, thank you for saying,” so I wanted to share that with you and just get your response. Like what do you, what does that, hearing that...

SW: Oh, yeah, well...

AH: ...do to you? What does that...

SW: ...that’s exactly it. That just hits the nail on the head, right? That we don’t necessarily, because we’re all individuals. We’re all so different, we have different backgrounds, and, and, and yeah the idea of a mirror is that it’s, it’s a reflection in its entirety, back at us, right? And we’re never going to connect in its entirety to a fictional character or a historical recreation. But the idea of a window, where we can look through it and see something we connect to...

AH: Yeah.

SW: ...or see something that, um, that we have a sense of belonging in that world. Yes, that’s it exactly.

AH: It’s good, right? And to see something new, right? Like the teacher can kind of guide you in finding a new understanding, like in...

SW: Yeah.

AH: ...a book. I mean who was it, was it Alice Walker? I have this on, like, my bookmark from the Toronto Women’s Bookstore, but it says something like, you know, if a book doesn’t make you better, then what on earth is it for?

SW: Right.

AH: Something like that. And that...

SW: Other than just a good cry. [Laughs]

AH: ...again, yeah, no, it is! And there’s entertainment for sure, but, um, that piece of like seeing how things could be...

SW: Yeah, the possibilities.

AH: ...yeah, and that you’re part of...
SW: Well and that’s...

AH: ...it, right, when you’re reading?

SW: ...that’s one thing that I think we’re trying to focus on right now, is, um, especially with the whole Inspiring Education, the flexible initiatives that are coming down, with the personalization of learning, and, and all those buzzwords that are buzzing around us as we’re trying to task design, um, that, now that we’ve moved from the Carnegie Unit and we don’t have to go by, okay, “they’ve adhered to the program of studies, and they’ve done 25 hours of this, so, check. Complete.” Now it’s about competency and providing opportunities for understanding and opportunities for demonstrating understanding, and it doesn’t have to look cookie cutter anymore, right?

AH: Right, yeah.

SW: And I think that’s where, like that quote is so interesting because now the kids can, instead of, say, okay, this is what I’m supposed to see, and this is what I’m supposed to understand, and this is how I’m supposed to connect, then using a perspective like that...

AH: Yeah.

SW: ...Now it’s, this is what I understand, this is what I’m seeing, and this is how I connect to it. Right? Like it really makes it truly relevant to them, and that’s where kids truly engage. Because if they don’t think that it matters to them, they don’t give a shit. [Laughs]

AH: Yeah.

SW: Right? At all. [Laughs] And, but if they can, they can, if we provide opportunities for understanding, whether it’s their own perspectives, and delving deeper into their own perspective...

AH: Yeah.

SW: ...or seeing another perspective, it’s those opportunities. Yes.

AH: Awesome. Okay um, last question...

SW: Okay.

AH: Like given all that beautiful stuff...

SW: Yeah.

AH: ...like, what is, you know, if you had a wish list, what do you need, what would enable you to bridge, like, the actual material difficulties of getting this happening...
SW: Yeah.

AH: ...like what would you say would make that possible for you as a teacher, in your practice? What would you want, what would you ask for, what would you...

SW: Oh, wow. I want that learning guide that you’re working on for *Monkey Beach*.

AH: [Laughs] I’d better get writing!

SW: You’d better get on it! [Laughs] I want, I want a class set, and I want a learning guide, and I want to teach it. And I want kids to learn from it, and I want kids to connect to it. Um – I would, I want other teachers to see the possibilities. I want even the most battle-hardened teacher to, um, recognize that different perspectives...

AH: Yeah.

SW: ...are okay, and they’re acceptable, because it’s just a different possibility. [Laughs] How do we get there? It’s not through PD days, it’s not through um increasing funding, right? I think that kind of stuff needs to happen with collaboration, you know, that we need to start working together more, to appreciate what other people’s perspectives are, as teachers. Like, because it starts with us. We’re the ones who get to introduce the material, and if it’s introduced in an aloof, and um, kind of a scratch-the-surface kind of manner, the kids aren’t going to appreciate it, right? So you know, like how do we get to those, like I say, battle-hardened teachers, right? To see that there’s some value in teaching something different than they have for the last 25 years? How do we do that? – In my utopia, everybody just laughs and jumps and says, “Let’s do it!”

AH: [Laughs] “Let’s try it!”

SW: “Let’s work together! Let’s create a resource!”

AH: Yeah.

SW: Yeah. Yeah.

AH: That’s a good question. – Well, and I guess, you know, I, I have to have the optimism that things are sort of changing, like there’s, there’s, I mean, and a lot of issues in Indigenous education have really been the same issues for like the last however many decades, right...

SW: Oh I’m sure.

AH: ...it’s like the same conversations, but...

SW: Do you think it’s getting better?
AH: I, I think, and, and I mean I’m relatively young, I’m a new scholar, but I’m like, I see, I see things happening all around us. The TRC has ended and people are talking about what residential schools meant, I feel like there’s so much literature now, and people are reading it, like, CBC has so much programming, like, I hear conversations, and things just seem possible, like I hear things in ways that are different from when I was a kid, for sure...

SW: Yeah, absolutely.

AH: ...growing up in this city, and I’ve spent most of my life in this city...

SW: Mm-hmm.

AH: ...I think it’s changing. I think there’s still a lot of racism and ignorance, but...

SW: Well even our vocabulary is changed, right? Yeah, like even when I went to high school, FNMI was an acronym that hadn’t been invented yet, right? It was “the Indian kids.”

AH: Yeah.

SW: Right? Or the Métis kids.

AH: Yeah.

SW: And, and the, there was almost a segregation that occurred, right? Like a natural segregation, it wasn’t anything that was enforced or created but it happened.

AH: Well or it’s so invisible, right, like, I know, for sure, I was, I definitely felt like I was the only Métis kid in my school, in elementary, but, um, I don’t know, I think there’s a lot more visibility. And as you say, like, teachers talk about hoping their kids feel comfortable enough to kind of express who they are...

SW: That’s right.

AH: ...in the classroom. Just try to create a safe space that’s welcoming and diverse that’s, in yourself, like to model that kind of thing, and hope kids will kind of blossom in your classroom, but it’s um, I don’t know, I think it’s changing. It’s getting better.

SW: I think it is, especially with a lot of these new initiatives that are coming...

AH: Yeah.

SW: ...down the line, like a lot of people are really resisting it ‘cause they think it’s a flavour of the month but really what it is, is it’s a really different way of looking at education, that we don’t need to tick the boxes of our program of studies to call it a job done, that we need to look at a kid and say, can they, did they understand what I was
trying to tell them? Can they communicate that understanding? Do they have a fresh perspective of what we were talking about?

AH: And how are they blooming as a whole human being? [Laughs]

SW: Exactly. It all adds to citizenship. Yeah it all adds up to citizenship. For sure.

AH: And our place, our place in the world, right. I really believe, like Neal Macleod said, um, he’s a Cree writer and scholar. He said, um, I’m going to misquote him, but, “Stories help us to find our place in the world.”

SW: Yeah, absolutely.

AH: And I believe that that is — possible, and it’s a power that stories have that can be set free in the classroom. And I think, you know, there are days when that happens.

[Someone enters and we end the interview.]
Appendices C: Sample Transcript 2, Conversation with David Alexander Robertson

David and I met on July 9, 2015, at his office in Winnipeg.

AH: All right, it’s working. Uhh, this should be good, it’s pretty sensitive so.

DR: Okay.

AH: Um, just officially just to start it up – thank you – …

DR: You’re

AH: …for participating in my project. I really appreciate your generosity and your time, and your, uh, you have a lot to share and I’m, uh, I’m really grateful for having you on board and this, uh, you know this dissertation, I couldn’t do it without all of these participants. And I think you’ll have some really great things to say, so thank you!

DR: You’re welcome!

AH: [laughs]

DR: [laughs]

AH: Thanks, that’s nice, a nice way to begin. [laughs]

DR: [laughs]

AH: Um, do you mind telling, just kind of like introducing yourself officially and um, just you can say a bit about yourself or about your work and – …

DR: Okay.

AH: …just, just a bit. Like why, what you kind of want me to know, I guess.

DR: Okay. Well, my name is David Robertson. I am a writer. I’ve done a bunch of graphic novels on First Nations history and contemporary issues, and uh, culture. And, uh one novel, on the same, kind of – Although, I guess I try and throw, throw whatever I can in whatever I write. Um, ‘cause I think whatever I work on I try and have some educational value in it. Um, so, those are kind of the books that I’ve worked on. I try and do a lot of, um – when I can, ‘cause I have a full-time job – but a lot of school visits. Uh, and I guess guest lectures, at education institutions in Manitoba and outside of Manitoba on my writing and what it’s about. And uh, I guess in my, in my work too, for several years I’ve worked in the communities and now directly with the schools, trying to provide additional resources, um, for students and teachers – to learn more about Indigenous history and culture and languages, so that’s kind of, you know, broadly what I, what I do.
AH: That’s great, thanks.

DR: You’re welcome.

AH: Yeah. Um, and I guess, I like to ask first, um, this is kind of those questions every writer gets asked, but I think it’s neat in this context of thinking around learning and teaching and what kind of important work education can do. But, what, what would you say brought you to writing? Like how did you end up thinking that writing was important?

DR: Well, yeah I mean I guess there’s two things there. The one is, uh, when did I, when did I start or want, when did I start wanting to write, and then when did I start wanting to write about Indigenous – topics.

AH: Yeah.

DR: So, um for me writing was just always, um – natural. I started when I was in grade three…

AH: Mm-
hmm.

DR: …which was maybe early, um – My teacher gave us, I think there was an assignment, a writing assignment of some kind in grade three. And uh – I think it was for poetry. And uh, I didn’t want to do the poetry, because I felt a little embarrassed about it, because I thought poetry was for girls, and I didn’t want to do that. So, I ended up actually like hiding – in the closet in the back of my classroom…

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: . . . in [inaudible – name of school?] and uh, I wrote in the dark...

AH: Wow. [laughs]

DR: …and uh, [laughs] Yeah. With these like, you know those foolscap and the, those big red pencils, and – I ended up writing like a bunch of poems that day, though. And uh, I found that it came – pretty easily…

AH: Hmm.

DR: …and uh, I really enjoyed doing it, so. My teacher when I handed the poetry in to her. She uh – made it into this like – binder, with this, like, little book she made out of it. And uh – from there I went home and I told my mom “I want to be a writer, Mom, I want to be”…

AH: Hmm.
DR: …I think I said, “I want to write a world-famous book,” I told her. That was in grade three so, I’ve been writing since grade three. Um, I still think I’m a bit of a late bloomer ‘cause I don’t think I wrote anything good until – I don’t know, like five years ago. [Laughs] But uh…

AH: Mm-hmm. [Laughs]

DR: …um, but uh, so I love poetry. And then, I got into like prose writing in – maybe in junior high, a little bit. And then – and then got back into poetry in high school…

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: …and I was kind of this like, goof ball in high school. And uh, I remember in grade 10 I handed in a poem. We had this assignment to do a poem again – and I hadn’t written a poem since elementary school. And so I worked on this poem like super hard for a week and – handed it in to my teacher. And when she was handing the assignments back she didn’t give mine back…

AH: Hmm.

DR: …and so, um, she asked to see me after class – I went to see her and she had my poem there and she said, “I don’t think you wrote this. I think you copied it.”

AH: Oohhh.

DR: So I was, like, devastated…

AH: Yeah.

DR: …because I’d worked so hard on it. She accused me of plagiarizing it. And um, so I went home to tell my mom, because that’s what boys do. [Laughs]

AH: Yeah. Yeah.

DR: And uh, my mom, like, flipped and, I mean she flipped in her way, ‘cause she’s like a very – proper lady. But…

AH: Yeah.

DR: …uh, she was upset that her son was upset. So she went and brought the teacher like all my drafts, ‘cause, you know, when you’re a writer I think you just…

AH: Yeah.

DR: …have like a million drafts of everything. So, and then she finally believed me and she’s like “oh, you’re the Babe Ruth of poetry” and it was, like, ridiculous. But then she’s
like, “I want to put you in all these advanced writing courses” and everything, and I said no, ‘cause I was so put off by it…

AH: Yeah.

DR: …so I stopped writing for a long time…

AH: Awwwh.

DR: …and I got back into it in university, and uh – and then, finally so I wrote a couple of really crappy books, that I self-published, which I wish I hadn’t done. I won’t even mention what they’re called, ‘cause I don’t want anybody to look…

AH: [laughs]

DR: …look for them. But um, eventually then I, uh – started to think about doing graphic novels. And I did that because I grew up really disconnected from culture –

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: Uh, my dad is, uh, Cree. He’s from Norway House – um, and, but I was never connected to that when I was growing up. So I didn’t know anything about – my family on that side, really, or really my culture or that side of who I was. Uh, and that had a, I think a really profound effect on me, as it does I think with youth still today. And so, I grew up feeling like – like I wasn’t, I guess, like, whole –

AH: Yeah.

DR: And um, and I had a really negative view, as a kid, um, of Indigenous peoples. Like I, I bought into all those stereotypes and there was nothing for me to learn in school about, like, truth. So, I felt that, as an adult, I felt that, if I had had that, then I would have been in a better place, uh, spiritually, mentally, and from an identity standpoint. And so, um, I really, I started to think about what I could do to put it into schools, ‘cause I, I was missing that. ‘Cause I, I had, by then, by that time I had become more connected to the culture. I worked to learn more about it…

AH: Yeah.

DR: …and finally got to the point where I was kind of proud to be you know, part Cree, and um, call myself an Indigenous person, and, so I wanted that for other youth, ‘cause I saw, working in communities, that there was a lot of that – same sort of feeling. And um – so I started to do graphic novels, because really I just thought originally that graphic novels were just cool. And I thought like if you could put them in a context of Indigenous culture, history…

AH: Yup.
DR: …language, that kids would like, learn a lot. Because they’d be so, pumped to read from the graphic novels right? So…

AH: Yup.

DR: …um that’s why I started doing them. So that’s why I really got into doing the writing that I’m doing now – on those topics, and uh, so I’ve been going at it now for, I guess, seven years. And uh, I’ve done a bunch of graphic novels and I’ve been really pleased to see that they’ve done very well in the education system across Canada. Uh, and – and they’ve done well outside of schools, too, which is great, because the conversation needs to happen in schools and outside of schools –

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: Right? So…

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: …um, kids need to be learning about these things in class. And they need to be going home and having a dialogue with their parents –

AH: Yeah.

DR: or their siblings, or their friends, right? So that’s where – I mean that’s how – uhhh, ignorance gets spread, right? By dialoguing between each other about things that we don’t know about, right? So if we know about them, then we learn more positive things, and I think that’s…

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: …my whole, goal in writing the stuff that I do –

AH: Yeah, so you have a personal, connection and…

DR: Yeah.

AH: …investment, I really, I identify with that as well. That’s a lot of what brought me to the work that I do, too. Just growing up with, I remember learning a couple things about Inuit people…

DR: Yeah.

AH: …in school and just, you know, hardly anything else. And – that’s…

DR: Yeah.
AH: …uh, it’s meant a lot to me to kind of do work to – and I think literature’s a great way to do that work…

DR: Yeah.

AH: …I mean it has a capacity to, to draw people in.

DR: It’s fantastic. And it’s way better, to me – like 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…

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: …and then you’re, that’s half the battle. And then, they’re learning, so what you find is, you know, if you give them a graphic novel, like on residential schools – what you’ll find is the students are way more apt to want to read from the textbook after they’ve learned from the graphic novel, ‘cause they get excited about it, right?

AH: Right.

DR: Then they get curious about the history, and then they want to read more about it – it’s just innate in kids. Like, they’re, so um, that’s what I find, it’s a good, it’s a good entry way…

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: …like the graph – I would never say to a teacher, just use this graphic novel only…

AH: Right, yeah.

DR: …you know, for me it’s like, I scratch the surface with them. I think it’s an important surface, but there’s so much more – and, I guess it’s the teachers’ job to dig, dig, dig deeper into that…

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: …and uh, and provide students with more information.

AH: Mm-hmm. It sounds like you’ve thought a lot about, um, like about the medium, like why you’ve chosen to work with graphic novels. Do you want to, say a bit more about that? Like why you think they’re…

DR: Yeah, I mean, look, I guess I, originally it was, was, there wasn’t much of a technical emphasis for me. Like I didn’t really know about why they were so great. I just thought, you know when I was growing up, I only read comic books, graphic novels, and so I thought they would be pretty cool to bring into a classroom. Kids would get excited
about them. What I’ve learned now, after doing them for – well I guess, seven years, is that there’s a lot of technical reasons why they’re so great…

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: …um, and a lot of it has to do with the genre and the – the existence of storytelling through images and, and words. So – um, the way that images and words connect in the graphic novel format…

AH: mm-hmm.

DR: …and the comic book format, helps students to, uh – retain more knowledge. Uh, and, that’s important, and – how it does that, is it provides a deeper context to the storytelling. So it gives them visual cues that they can’t get just from words. And so, I think when you’re talking about – youth in general, that’s important. But especially when you’re talking about, uh, less sophisticated readers, readers that are harder to reach like boys – struggling readers…

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: …who are also typically, more often, boys. Or even um, uh, students with learning disabilities. Or, who are, uh, with English as a second language…

AH: Yep.

DR: …they’re great, for all, all that group. But they’re also great for more sophisticated readers because, um, even though they connect well with struggling readers or less sophisticated readers they have, often, like, more complex plots, um, or story structures that connect with, um, readers who are, uh, more sophisticated than others. So, they, they they’re really a universal tool –

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: So that’s why, you know, I’ve seen them being used in a grade four classroom and I’ve gone to a university to lecture on the same book – so…

AH: Yep.

DR: …I don’t think you can do that with any other form of literature. So, all that is, I think, generally why, you know, they work so well, uh, in the education context. There’s also this like, um – this theory, I guess, on how it connects with a more ancient form of communication. So, you know, before we – had words, we connected through pictures, right? So, and images, and, and we put those images together, and those images in sequence told stories. And that’s all the graphic novel is, right? So, it’s a really, one of the most ancient forms of communication. In, in, in, the Indigenous culture we, we call that blood memory.
AH: Mmh.

DR: I think we all have that. So I think that’s another reason why they connect so well with our youth. And, and really, I guess you can juxtapose that against – today’s youth and how visually stimulated we are…

AH: Mmmhm.

DR: …right? So I think it works in both those ways, was very interesting. But so that’s, I think that’s why, to me, why they work so well and why I continue to do, to use that format –

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: Yeah.

AH: Yeah. And, like, they are, we were talking, you and I, before we turned the recorder on, about the, the visuals, and I’m just thinking about, you know, how your covers and the, the images um, and the sequencing is so strong in, in the works of yours that I’ve read…

DR: Yeah.

AH: …um, I want to just give you a chance to say, like, is there one of your works that you’d like to talk about in terms of what it offers, maybe to education, or to, to those stories and those things that you think that are important for youth – to know, and about, you know, the story as well as the visual elements and what they, what they offer, or how you’ve seen it work, or –

DR: Yeah. I mean, yeah, I’ve been to a lot of classrooms, and so I’ve seen, it’s interesting, like, and great, that I don’t think I’ve ever received a negative comment from a student…

AH: Hmm.

DR: I’ve been, I’ve talked to thousands of them, on…

AH: That’s pretty good.

DR: …these graphic novels. Which is incredible –

AH: Yeah [laughs]. Yeah, it is.

DR: Um they learn a lot. They’re…

AH: That’s better than my record [laughs].
DR: …I mean, they’re sophisticated in both the knowledge that they’ve, they’ve gleaned from the graphic novel…

AH: Uh huh.

DR: …uh, so their attention is there. All great signs. Um, yeah I mean I think a lot about the visual nature of them. I spend a lot of time – probably, maybe more time than the actual script, in terms of the words you see on the page, on the graphic novels. Um, I’ve spent probably more time thinking about how the images connect.

AH: Hmmm.

DR: Um, so that’s uh – that’s a big challenge in writing them. And I work a lot with the illustrator in, in, uh, making sure that they sequence in really interesting ways, but in ways that, um, you get the best knowledge transfer possible…

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: …um, so in terms of the books that I’ve done, that I think – I mean I’m proud of most of them – I think the ones that are important, most important to me, are the ones on residential schools and missing and murdered Indigenous women. Those are two topics that are, um – really important to me.

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: And I think it’s also two topics that, as Canadians, we don’t know enough about.

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: Or don’t appreciate the impacts of, and so, um, you know, Ends/Begins and, and The Pact and my 7 Generations series…

AH: Yep.

DR: …Sugar Falls, and Betty, the new Betty that just came out on Helen Betty Osbourne…

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: …um they all tell stories about either the residential school system or the epidemic of missing and murdered Indigenous women…

AH: Yep.

DR: …and they do it in ways that are very powerful, because of the images. And because of that, people retain that knowledge, um, more effectively than they would in any other
way. And um, for example, in uh, in uh, *Ends/Begins* there’s this sequence where a young boy is brought to a bathing house in one of the residential schools…

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: …and is um, brought there where the priest is going to rape him, and – you could read about that, in a textbook, and you might read it and think, oh that’s, you know, oh that’s crappy…

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: …or whatever, like that’s horrible, but I don’t think it would stick to you, or stick with you, as much as it would by actually seeing it happen.

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: Right? And that’s, that’s difficult. Like, you know, I have conversations with teachers on, you know, what’s the level of appropriateness in bringing this into my classroom – if I’m a junior high teacher, or if I’m even, you know, an elementary school teacher.

AH: Yeah.

DR: So that’s a, that’s a conversation teachers need to have, um, or a decision teachers need to make. But always within the context of what’s important for the students to learn, as Canadians, uh, and what they’re exposed to outside of the schools. So the argument I usually make is to have teachers think about, if you’re in junior high, and your students are at home watching – *The Walking Dead* . . .

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: …for example…

AH: Yeah.

DR: …Gratuitous violence – really grotesque violence –I mean great show; I love it. But if they’re okay seeing that, then why can’t you show them a scene where that sort of abuse that happened to our Indigenous kids in history, um, can be exposed to – these students in ways that are sensitive, but powerful. Right?

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: So I feel there is an importance to that, that we can’t overlook.

AH: Mm-hmm. Well, I know, like I have two kids, and they’re, right now they’re 6 and 8, almost 7 and 8. And um, you know, I’ve mostly taught older kids, but, you know, being with my little ones and their friends and stuff, I’m always surprised by, like not
surprised, um, but impressed, I guess, by their ability to imagine and to empathize and to be really strong with the things …

DR: Mm-hmm.

AH: …that they learn and take on and, I think that, um, you know, sometimes we don’t give kids enough credit for what they can understand…

DR: Oh yeah.

AH: . . . and what they can process and…

DR: Mm-hmm.

AH: …um you know I – I’m more afraid of them learning things too late than too soon, because…

DR: Yep.

AH: …you know if I don’t get there first and kind of prepare them for some of the difficult stuff that is coming, right…

DR: Yep.

AH: …in their lives like, or that their friends might experience or – You know, it’s, it’s – and even having the capacity to, um, to be understanding and to be respectful around the difficult things that other people experience…

DR: Yep.

AH: …or have experienced historically or…

DR: Yep.

AH: …are experiencing, or will exper-, you know, all of those things. I think that’s really, it’s a big question that we kind of have to look…

DR: Yep.

AH: …at head on, we can’t just put our heads in the sand [laughs] and…

DR: No, I mean, my uh, I have 5 kids [laughs].

AH: Yeah!

DR: So I have a daughter that is in grade six and a boy that is in grade four…

AH: Yep.
DR: …now they’ve both heard, in their school, uh, like racist comments about…

AH: Mmmm.

DR: …Indigenous people, right?

AH: Yeah.

DR: So, obviously, if these kids who are saying these things are exposed to that sort of knowledge at that age, then why can’t we expose them to truth at that age?

AH: Well, yeah.

DR: Right, like, it just makes sense…

AH: Yeah.

DR: …to be able to – If my daughter wasn’t armed with that knowledge, to talk to a kid about something racist that they’ve – said…

AH: Yeah.

DR: …or to tell the teacher about, it then what’s, what’s going to happen, right?

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: Like it just starts with something small and it gets bigger.

AH: Yeah.

DR: So, that’s, that’s the way I look at it.

AH: Yep, yeah, absolutely. Yeah, and I think that par-, I mean it’s – well, I find that parenting and teaching inform each other in really important ways…

DR: Mm-hmm.

AH: …and I’m sure that the educational work that you do and the writing that you do, you must think a lot about that.

DR: I do, I think about, like, I, that’s why I’m so happy to see these books do well, in, in bookstores too…

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: …because that means people outside of schools are reading them –

AH: Yeah.
DR: And if people outside of schools are reading them, and they’re sharing it, then they’re sharing knowledge, and, hopefully, if the kids are bringing that to their kids [parents] and sharing that with them and so you…

AH: Yep.

DR: …kind of have these collisions, this collision of knowledge, which is only, can only be a good thing in the end.

AH: Yeah, and, well, and, as you say it goes, around, in, um, families and in, um – in communities too…

DR: Yeah.

AH: …and that’s, uh, one of the things I’d like to ask you is about, um, how you think about community, or if you think about community when you write, like what kind of community you think about, or, um, like do you think about issues of, like, representation or issues of responsibility to communities – when you, or are you more thinking about kind of what you’re, what you’re shar-sharing or showing with people?

DR: I always think about community, um, but I think of it, I guess, in a broader perspective of – we’re all in the same community. We all need to look at it that way…

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: …that our successes are tied to each other and our failures are. And so, one of the things I always talk about – to students, I get them to kind of look around the room, and I say, “how many cultures do you think we have in this classroom?” And there’s, there’s always 10, 15, 20, like whatever, right?

AH: Yeah.

DR: And I said, and I say “what do we know about each other? What do we –” and I’ll point to one kid and I’ll say, “Where are you from? What are you” you know, “what are you interested in?” and then I’ll say to everyone else in the class “who knew that?” Right, and um, and then you know, I just tell them that that’s what we need to be doing…

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: …we need to be making the effort to know each other…

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: …because if we don’t, then we’re making judgments about each other. Without knowledge. And then I relate that back to that historical context of Indigenous peoples – and have them think about that a lot. But always the conversation is, how do we function as a community, and are we making the effort to understand each other?
AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: ‘Cause it’s a simple act, um – generating knowledge for each other, uh, and, but it’s also – difficult in a way too, because we just don’t do it, right?

AH: Yeah.

DR: Um, so that’s the conversation I have with students. So I think about community from a larger perspective first…

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: …but I do, obviously, in working with a lot of the First Nations communities, think about what’s going on in those communities, too, and how my work will affect them, because I know, kids, you know, as much as non-Indigenous kids don’t know about Indigenous culture, Indigenous kids don’t know about their…

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: …own culture. [Laughs] Right?

AH: Yeah.

DR: So, um, you know, my books, I always write them for Indigenous kids…

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: …so they understand a bit more about where they’ve come from, what they’ve been through as a people…

AH: Yep.

DR: …and how it’s affected them. Same for non-Indigenous kids – what’s happened in this country to Indigenous peoples? What has been the affect on them? And then, how does it affect us –

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: . . . as Canadians, right?

AH: Yeah.

DR: And, so, that’s really important for me. From a community perspective in terms of First Nations communities, that’s my focus there. Like, you know, I’ve been to communities where I’ve worked with them for over a year, and there’s been 7 or 8 suicides –
AH: Hmmm.

DR: So like why is that happening?

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: And what can we do to prevent it?

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: I’ll start a dialogue about it. And so, those, those are always my focuses in terms of community.

AH: Yeah. Yeah so, like talking about prevention and the importance of knowing those, um, stories and why things are the way they are. Um. Like how do you, or do you think about um – like what it takes to build into something better in the future? Like how do you think about the future or about community resilience...

DR: Yeah.

AH: …or –?

DR: I just think knowledge. I think, like it always starts from a place of knowledge and truth. And I think that’s actually the only place it can start. So, from my perspective, I play a small role – in building that foundation. But if we’re going to be anywhere positive in the future we need to start from a good knowledge base – from a place of truth, and acceptance of that truth. And when we do that – I think that there’s only good places that we can go – and that’s the beginning and the end for me.

AH: Mm-hmm – well there’s a lot of work to do there…

DR: Yeah…

AH: …There’s a lot of…

DR: Oh, there’s a ton of work!

AH: …potential there too.

DR: Right, and that’s why I said, like you know, I have a small role in that. I do the best that I can with the work that I’m doing, but what people have to recognize is that they all have a role. That’s the same thing I tell kids, like you all have a role. Especially kids…

AH: Mm-hmm.
DR: …right? Because kids, you know one thing I’ve always said, like, as adults, we’re responsible for our youth and we’re responsible for providing that information to our youth, right? But our youth are responsible for tomorrow…

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: …so, I mean there’s two levels of responsibility there, right? Uh, and so that’s the conversation I try to have with these kids…

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: …is, about their responsibilities, my responsibilities, and – and to take it seriously.

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: Right? So –

AH: Plus kids are amazing! They can…

DR: Oh they’re incredible.

AH: . . . the way that they can think about things outside the, you know, just ask questions no one else would think to ask, and…

DR: Yeah.

AH: …you know, all those little threads of context and history and habit that kind of keep adults moving in certain ways. Kids just, snip right through those and…

DR: Oh totally.

AH: …you know, sometimes we have to kind of say, “well, those threads are there for a reason” and sometimes you can say like “what?!” like…

DR: Yeah.

AH: …“you looked at that from that angle and it’s amazing what you…

DR: Yeah.

AH: …just came up with,” like…

DR: Yeah.

AH: …they have so much energy and…

DR: Yeah, but…
AH: …a sense of justice too, right?

DR: ...And they act, they act fully on the knowledge that’s been provided to them. Right? Like…

AH: Yeah.

DR: …whether it’s from – And that’s the thing too, is like, one thing I ask kids is, like, “where do you get knowledge from?” and they say “oh, like, my friends, my teammates, my family, my teachers.” So – that’s a big group, right?

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: To be getting knowledge from. So, and they only act on the knowledge they have, so we need to be giving them the right knowledge –

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: and kids – are awesome. You’re right, like, I mean, we grew up, we unlearn the things that we knew as a kid, because, as a kid, I mean we look at someone and we don’t judge them – really…

AH: Hmmm.

DR: …like, we look at someone and they might have like darker skin or – I remember when I was in nursery school, I still remember nursery school, pre-school…

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: …and uh, I had this, like, black kid in my class, and I would like play with his hair. It was so neat…

AH: Yeah.

DR: …but I didn’t like think like oh he’s, you know – like, different from me…

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: ...like, oh, well, but I was always, like, “awesome,” you know, like…

AH: Yeah.

DR: …like you accept those differences without thinking about them.

AH: Mm-hmm.
DR: That’s what we need to do right? Like, it’s very simple. Like, it’s true, like, the things we learned in kindergarten – [laughs] they’re basic things that we should be still…

AH: [Laughs] Yeah.

DR: …you know, still understanding today…

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: …that like, we’re just people, right? So we – need to accept that we’re kind of the same, right?

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: But that we have different stories. We need to know those stories.

AH: And have that openness still of willingness to engage and learn and…

DR: Yeah.

AH: …and if you don’t know, ask. [Laughs]

DR: Yeah exactly.

AH: Which kids are good at, right?

DR: Yeah, for sure.

AH: Yeah.

DR: Yeah.

AH: That’s true.

DR: Yeah.

AH: Yeah, yeah, that’s important, I think. Um – I always ask everybody this big question even though people have kind of usually answered it in a lot of ways by the time I ask it but…

DR: Kay.

AH: …I want to make sure – I give you a chance, just to say anything else about, um, why you write. Why you think literature, um, or if you think literatures matter? Are, is it, um, important for, well, I don’t want to give you – I’m always tempted to give people a list of reasons, but…

DR: Hmm.
AH: …basically, why do you think Indigenous literatures matter? Or do you?

DR: Oh I think it, yeah I think it’s, like, vitally important. Because I think that’s one of the really main conduits of, um, information for our youth, and our adults, right? Like, um, it’s how we are going to learn about our histories, and how our histories affect us. Um, I think there, um, is a, is a movement now within Indigenous communities, too, and Indigenous artists, to start sharing stories through our literatures. You know, we’re, we were an oral, an oral tradition within our cultures. We’re recognizing now that we need to shift how we pass down stories and I think literature is one of the ways that we’re doing that…

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: …And the great thing is, is that literature is reaching out beyond our communities into our non-Indigenous communities as well. So I think it’s important in that way. And, um, I think now there’s a growing, uh, movement of reclamation too…

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: …where people, Indigenous writers, are working to reclaim our histories from – how they’ve been told in the past by non-Indigenous peoples.

AH: Yeah.

DR: Right? So, and that kind of perspective, I think, is very important, right? Because a non-Indigenous person is telling stories, even like a century ago, or even decades ago, from a perspective of, from a non-Indigenous perspective. So um, from, in telling stories from that basis of understanding um, it’s, we’re losing something, right?

AH: Yeah.

DR: So, if we can have more Indigenous peoples, talented Indigenous peoples in, in literature making the effort to tell our histories from our perspectives, I mean, that’s where I think a lot of great change is going to happen –

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: So, I’m one of those. There’s a growing group.

AH: Yeah.

DR: And, uh, I hope it continues to grow. And one of the things that we need to be doing as artists is inspiring youth to do that, right? ‘Cause they’ll grow up and they’ll be the ones doing it. So – I think we have a responsibility in that way, too. Not just telling the stories but inspiring youth to tell the stories.
AH: Mm-hmm. Agreed. And well, and that’s a big step for – thinking about the future and, um, you know the continuation of, of stories…

DR: Mm-hmm.

AH: …and, and those things, but also of um, just people, right, like…

DR: Yeah.

AH: …having good ways to go on and be, um, Indigenous in their own, you know in contemporary times…

DR: Yeah.

AH: …and whatever that means, right?

DR: Yep, for sure. Yeah. Yeah.

AH: Yeah. Um, well, we’re coming, it’s 11:00 already, time flies when you’re having these conversations.

DR: [Laughs]

AH: I don’t want to take up too much of your time, but is there anything else, uh, that you want to make sure I know? Like you’ve kind of read what I’m trying to do and what I’m thinking about, is there anything you want to make sure that I put in there? Or…

DR: Uhhhh.

AH: …like where I could go wrong? Like just things, in terms of this project, like what do you think is, like is there anything else you want to make sure you say?

DR: I don’t know, I mean, for me, it’s just kind of, I guess, what I, we talked about before recording, and, you know, just making sure that we have, or are generating, the right resources, whether it’s literature or performance art or music…

AH: Yeah.

DR: …um, to share knowledge…

AH: Hmm.

DR: …in really engaging ways, and that people know how to utilize that knowledge, right? And so, um, I think a big piece of it is in the education system – and my dad and my mom are both educators and that’s kind of where, probably where, what influenced me to get into it…
AH: Oh, okay, yeah.

DR: …is um, is to ensure – and my dad’s a big advocate of this – but, to ensure that we’re making the effort in teacher training programs, whether it’s in education or otherwise, incorporating that training on how to facilitate that knowledge transfer from the right perspectives, and the right ways…

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: …to youth. Whether it’s at a university level or a junior high, high school level, elementary school level…

AH: Yeah.

DR: …um, and I think that’s important. So you can develop the resources, great, but you also need to have teachers who are able to utilize those resources…

AH: Mm-hmm.

DR: …uh in the most efficient, in efficient ways. Right, so…

AH: And respectful ways, yeah.

DR: …yeah. Yeah. So um, always from a place of understanding. Now we need more Indigenous teachers, but the reality is, we need more non-Indigenous teachers who can – do it the right way. Right? So, um, that’s probably the one thing I would add.

AH: Yeah, well and you, the work that you do, you develop, you know you create art that can be used in inspiring and, and responsible ways in classrooms, but, like you were saying before we turned on the recorder, so I want to make sure I get it in here, but…

DR: Mm-hmm.

AH: ...that, you know, you do school visits and you work with, you know, in a number of educational ways to kind of support…

DR: Right.

AH: …that work, right?

DR: Yeah.

AH: So I know that you believe it’s important.

DR: Yeah, definitely, yeah.

AH: Yeah, well, and it’s good, it’s good work. [Laughs]
DR: Thank you. [Laughs]

AH: Yeah, no. Like, I’m always inspired by what literature can do, like that’s definitely something that just is one of my reasons for enjoying life…

DR: Mm-hmm.

AH: …is enjoying the literary arts and what they…

DR: Yeah.

AH: …can bring us. But I think that, um, actually kind of, um, you know working with young people, around that inspiration, but also the knowledge that can come with it, is really, um, it’s, it’s a craft too, right…

DR: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

AH: …and it’s something that is, uh, is really worth putting time into, so I enjoy …

DR: Yeah.

AH: …talking to people who share some of that.

DR: Yeah, cool.

AH: So thanks for that.

DR: You’re welcome.

AH: Yeah, well, I will uh, just close off, I guess, thank you again for sharing your time and your perspectives with me, and I look forward to reading, going away and reading more of your books, so thanks for the work [laughs], for your art, as well.

DR: [Laughs] You’re welcome.

AH: And, uh, yeah, thanks for doing the interview.

DR: No problem.