

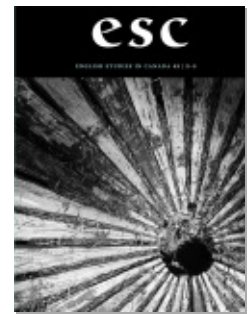


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ESC: English Studies in Canada, Volume 43, Issue 2-3, June/September
2017, pp. 69-90 (Article)



Published by Association of Canadian College and University Teachers
of English

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/esc.2017.0022>

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Reading for Reconciliation? Indigenous Literatures in a Post-TRC Canada

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IN DECEMBER 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) released its final report, and since then people in Indigenous and non-Indigenous contexts (literary and otherwise) have been working to understand that report's implications. As a Métis scholar whose work bridges the fields of Indigenous literatures and Indigenous education, I have been making connections between the report's recommendations and my ongoing scholarship on Indigenous literatures and learning. These connections raise generative questions about the educational aspects of reading literary texts and about the framing of social and political change between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada. In this paper, I focus on connections between Indigenous literatures and learning in order to better understand the reimagining embodied by the TRC's transformative *Calls to Action*. I draw on perspectives from my current research on Indigenous literatures and resurgence—including conversations with teachers and with Indigenous writers—to ask what it means to read for reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada. What might it mean, instead, to read for resurgence? By interrogating the framework of reconciliation, I argue that, while the literary arts may be inspiring and reflecting Indigenous communities' resurgence, a great

ESC 43.2–3 (June/September 2017): 69–90

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deal of learning is required by the rest of Canada to develop responsive relationships with this work.

In order to make this argument, I bring together examinations that occur across the distinct sections of this article. The catalyst for my considerations here—my starting point—is an example of public discourse around reconciliation, education, and Indigenous literatures—namely a conversation that occurred in the winter of 2015–2016 on Canada's public broadcast radio, the CBC. Specifically, I develop my argument in relation to a suggestion for Canadian learning made by Canada's Minister for Indigenous and Northern Affairs in a CBC interview and then look at Indigenous writers' responses to that suggestion in a subsequent CBC interview—responses that challenge the discourse surrounding reconciliation. Second, I build upon those responses to analyze the relationship, implied in the minister's suggestion, between non-Indigenous readers' engagements with Indigenous literatures and the learning precipitated by those engagements. Third, I read the TRC's *Calls to Action* in order to highlight the educational dimensions embedded in that document's vision for reconciliation and to consider their implications for literary scholars. Fourth, I examine perspectives from my own research with writers and teachers in light of these understandings of reconciliation. Finally, I explore the possibility of reading for resurgence through a reading of Cree author Tracey Lindberg's novel *Birdie*. In concluding these arguments about literatures and learning, I seek to contribute to stronger understandings of what it means for non-Indigenous people to read Indigenous literatures at this particular moment in Canadian public consciousness. Reconciliation, in my argument, is not only fraught: it has the potential, if not carefully theorized, to be mobilized by official discourses in order to reinscribe Indigenous expression within the norms of the settler state.

Reading for reconciliation and Indigenous book club month

Shortly after the TRC's *Calls to Action* were released in 2015, the Honourable Carolyn Bennett, Minister for Indigenous and Northern Affairs, was interviewed on the CBC radio program *The Current*. She was there to elaborate on the new Liberal government's commitment to renewing relationships with Indigenous peoples. The federal election, with its dramatic shift in leadership, took place shortly before the TRC's conclusion. In addressing the Liberal Party's plans for renewing relationships, Bennett celebrates the feeling that things are changing for the better, while also pointing out the continuing prevalence of racism and hatred aimed at Indigenous people. She suggests in the interview that many Canadians are

indeed ready to step up and contribute to change but reiterates the responsibility of non-Indigenous people to educate themselves about Indigenous issues and connect with Indigenous communities. This learning is necessary, she emphasizes, to the work of reconciliation, in order “to eliminate the ignorance that we all had because it wasn’t taught to us in school.”¹ As a scholar of Indigenous literatures, I was particularly interested when the Honourable Ms Bennett, as part of this call, suggests that June could become “Indigenous book club month.”² The possibilities and challenges bound up in her proposal warrant further examination and provoked my considerations in this article.

My own life trajectories, as an urban Métis woman and an avid reader, have led me to spend a great deal of time reading Indigenous literatures. This reading fed into my professional efforts as a scholar and educator in literary studies and educational fields. However, my reading of Métis poetry, fiction, and memoirs, as well as other Indigenous literatures, was also a way for me to build understanding of my experiences and those of my kin. On the one hand, then, the suggestion that non-Indigenous people can also educate themselves by reading Indigenous literatures seems like an excellent one. I do believe, to respond to the minister’s suggestion, that Indigenous literatures can be one powerful way to learn more about Indigenous people. Alongside many scholars working in the burgeoning field of Indigenous literary studies, I believe that Indigenous literatures have a lot to contribute to the work that Canada needs to do to relearn, reimagine, and re-story its relationship with Indigenous communities. On the other hand, however, I must interrogate the assumption that I make in comparing my own experience—namely that I learn about Indigenous people when I read Indigenous literatures—with that of others, particularly readers outside of Indigenous circles. It is important to point to the community-oriented concerns at play in the creation, sharing, and celebration of Indigenous literatures. I point to this tangle not to be divisive but to open up possibilities for nuancing considerations of readerships, learning, and reconciliation.

1 This “we” is, of course, important to catch: Bennett is explicitly addressing the learning of non-Indigenous people in this section of the interview.

2 Allied scholar Pauline Wakeham offers a richly contextualized reading of Bennett’s book club proposal and its evolution into the #IndigenousReads campaign. I agree strongly with her contention that the terms of engagement through which readers understand Indigenous literatures in Canada must be examined; I also greatly appreciate her argument that the #IndigenousReads campaign is an example of the settler state relying upon Indigenous intellectual labour.

I was not the only one interested in Bennett's suggested Indigenous book club month. CBC's *The Current* ran a segment ten days later in which three Indigenous writers—namely Salish and Métis writer Lee Maracle, Cree writer Tracey Lindberg, and Ojibway writer Drew Hayden Taylor—respond to the notion that Canadians should read more Indigenous literature. These three are keen proponents of their fellow artists' work and have important things to say about why encouraging Canadians to read Indigenous writing is a worthwhile project. However, they are also careful to insist upon the broader contextual questions underlying such reading. The conversation on *The Current* shifts rapidly, stepping away from what it is about Indigenous literature that can inspire change to focus on what the nature of that change might be. This insistence upon the terms of engagement, upon the nature of the goal itself, is an important one that necessarily infuses conversations around what Indigenous artists are doing. What is it that Indigenous literatures are contributing to? Is it resistance, decolonization, Indigenization, reclamation, regeneration, resurgence, reconciliation, or some combination of these? When people are talking about creating change in Indigenous communities and in relations with settler Canadians, the nature of that change must enter into the conversation.

This insistence comes up in the discussion with the authors on *The Current*. The interviewer, Cree journalist Connie Walker, phrases the pertinent question as follows: "I want to ask about the role that literature ... can possibly play in helping to bring about a reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Tracey, what effect do you think that it can have?" In responding, Lindberg not only answers but also addresses the question's assumption that *reconciliation* is what Indigenous writers are hoping for:

I came to this as a person who tried to listen to people tell stories through the law, and telling law stories proved quite impossible to have a conversation about reconciliation.... I'm not even certain that I'm ready to talk, broach the term reconciliation so much as renewing relationships, building relationships.... I think that poetry and literature and fiction and Indigenous stories in the first person allows us the possibility to touch not just people's heads, which I think law can do, but touch their hearts.... I also think that there's something so intimate about having that in your home and in your space that it's a reciprocal intimacy that can facilitate some of that relationship building.

While acknowledging that literatures can influence people, Lindberg also undermines the ground on which the question stands by backing away from the notion of reconciliation, bringing this assumed outcome into question.

Following Lindberg's response, Lee Maracle enters the conversation, providing her analysis of reading for reconciliation. "We're talking about two different things," she says: one is that piece about emotional relationships, which literature can foster—but requires Canadians to unlearn racism—and the second is the interrogation of reconciliation as a framework. Maracle makes two arguments in this segment: that reconciliation requires making restitution, which "only Canada as a governing body can" do; and that the reconciliation framework in Canada right now, as articulated through the work of the TRC, even if fully implemented, is a response only to residential schooling. It is not, she emphasizes, a response to the wider issues of settler colonialism in Canada. Building upon Lindberg's push away from the term "reconciliation," Maracle interrogates the framework attached to the interviewer's question. For these two authors to insist on interrogating the question of what literature can contribute to reconciliation is a crucial act of remembering.

Reading for reconciliation, or reading for resurgence?

Remembering is necessary to countering conceptions of reconciliation that are premised upon a forgetting of difficult colonial realities, past and present—or what Paulette Regan calls the "cheap reconciliation that is the hallmark of denial" (185). I see Regan's critique of "cheap reconciliation" as an important contribution to her overall contention that settler Canadians, like herself, must engage in more substantial ways with Indigenous people and perspectives if they seek to position themselves as allies. I agree with her premise that significant change in that relationship requires some unsettling of the narratives that shape Canadian public consciousness, such as the national myth that Canada is a country of peacemakers (Regan 14). As Regan's critiques illustrate, reconciliation discourse is contested territory.³

3 I focus on Regan's and Martin's interventions here, but a much broader discourse surrounds the notion of reconciliation. See, for instance, Henderson and Wakeham's edited collection *Reconciling Canada*, which emerged out of a spring 2010 special issue of *ESC*. See also Margery Fee's article on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Matthew Dorrell's article on Canada's residential schools apology.

Allied scholar Keavy Martin, importantly, has argued that the concept of reconciliation relies upon a form of amnesia. She argues that reconciliation entails “a fixation upon *resolution* that is not only premature but problematic in its correlation with *forgetting*” (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” (49.) Martin argues that one of the functions of Indigenous literatures in retelling stories of colonial experiences is to contradict this problematic fixation on resolution by insisting that healing is an ongoing process, and it is one that needs to be understood in Indigenous terms. She shows how stories like Robert Arthur Alexie’s novel *Porcupines and China Dolls*, along with the personal testimonials embedded in Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation process, counter the amnesia and ensure that “scars remain visible—that historical wounds continue to seep” (63). I agree with Martin here that the TRC, while operating within a state-sponsored reconciliation framework, incorporates truths from Indigenous communities that transcend that framework.

Interrogations of reconciliation discourse by Martin and others insist on the complexity and breadth of the issues that Indigenous communities and artists are working to address. Challenging reconciliation as an end goal for Indigenous struggles is about remembering the deeper histories and the broader contexts. It entails pushing further into what is possible for Indigenous communities when it comes to self-determination. Indigenous communities and movements characterize Indigenous people’s struggles for justice in different ways: *resurgence* is one that I employ. Resurgence, unlike reconciliation, is a socio-cultural movement and theoretical framework that concentrates on regeneration within Indigenous communities. It validates Indigenous knowledges, cultures, histories, ingenuity, and continuity.⁴ Resurgence is an Indigenizing impulse; it acknowledges colonialism and domination through resistance but it does not focus solely on colonialism as the most important concern. Instead, resurgence insistently focuses on Indigenous communities as sites of power and regeneration. In the words of Leanne Simpson (who is of Nishnaabeg ancestry), resurgence

4 In pointing to broader scholarship on resurgence here, I am thinking in particular of the work of Leanne Simpson. Those interested in education may also want to look at how it is taken up by Tracy Friedel, Jo-ann Archibald, Ramona Big Head, Georgina Martin, and Marissa Muñoz in their 2012 editorial on Indigenous pedagogies.

is “a flourishing of the Indigenous inside” (*Dancing on our Turtle’s Back* 16). Unlike reconciliation, resurgence does not focus primarily on relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

Resurgence is an organizing principle that can be tremendously useful in understanding the significance of Indigenous literary arts to the communities that create and celebrate them. Thinking through resurgence is useful, for instance, because it requires attention to the specificity of Indigenous cultures and contexts: resurgence is about people in their own communities nourishing their own traditions, languages, worldviews, stories, knowledges, and ways of being. In understanding the significance of Indigenous literatures to Indigenous communities, resurgence is a vitalizing and important political framework. Building on the work of scholars like Simpson, I am working to understand how literary writing is a space in which Indigenous communities can imagine and enact resurgence. My research on this question suggests that there is a continuing gap between national discourses that promote reconciliation and Indigenous communities’ turn toward resurgence. As allied scholar Pauline Wakeham so cogently argues, the settler state can appropriate Indigenous creative labour, setting out paradigms for understanding them that do not work in Indigenous communities’ interests. What happens at this point of tension demonstrates a great deal about how scholarship in Indigenous literary studies can inform the political work that is being done today.

Indigenous literatures and communities, non-Indigenous learning

What, then, is the difference between reading for reconciliation and reading for resurgence, when it comes to Indigenous literatures and learning? I am interested in how learning through Indigenous literatures, as Minister Bennett suggests Canadians can do, is connected to the resurgence of healthy Indigenous communities. To examine this dynamic, I turn to the belief, reflected in contemporary Indigenous literary studies, that literatures can have powerful impacts on people’s lives. Indigenous literatures can enable healing, carry forward histories, embody ways of knowing and ways of being, envision better worlds, facilitate memory, inspire social change, foster empathy, and encourage relational understandings.⁵ These possibilities, in my view, rely upon the reciprocity and intimacy entailed in the relational processes of creating and reading literary works. A growing

⁵ For deeper exploration of the issues I am summarizing here, see writings by Jo-ann Archibald, Renate Eigenbrod, Jo-Ann Episkenew, Daniel Heath Justice, Sam McKegney, and Leanne Simpson, for example.

In understanding the significance of Indigenous literatures to Indigenous communities, resurgence is a vitalizing and important political framework.

body of strong critical scholarship explores why Indigenous literatures matter for Indigenous communities. Métis scholar Jo-Ann Episkenew's scholarship, for instance, shows that Indigenous literatures have a profound impact on the real world ("Socially Responsible Criticism") and that they can enable healing and decolonization (*Taking Back our Spirits*).⁶ How critics and educators read Indigenous texts is consequently not only a methodological or disciplinary question but, rather, a question of responsibility.

When it comes to changing teaching to better engage with Indigenous content, I am inspired by the creative practices of artists who bring out stories that serve their communities and that connect with wider audiences. However, I am interested in if the power of Indigenous stories is able to manifest in the learning that non-Indigenous readers do in classrooms. Are settler-Canadian learners able to identify with and respond to those creative practices? Is learning situated in relation to the complex questions around readership that inevitably arise with mixed audiences?

I focus upon non-Indigenous readers and their learning in this section in order to unpack the assumptions at play in Carolyn Bennett's book club proposal. If she is right that non-Indigenous people can engage in important learning by reading Indigenous literatures, then it is vital for literary scholars to understand why that is so—perhaps most significantly because that learning connects to the learning that goes on in their classrooms. Within the big picture of non-Indigenous Canadians engaging with Indigenous literatures, literature classrooms hold some responsibility for leadership. At present, such classrooms are often institutional spaces that include a large proportion of non-Indigenous students, a non-Indigenous instructor, and an epistemological framework largely rooted in Eurocentric traditions. While there are important exceptions to these generalizations, and while Indigenousizing shifts are now afoot across education at all levels, I think it is fair to suggest that Indigenous literatures often enter largely non-Indigenous spaces. Such mixed spaces offer pedagogical challenges for reading Indigenous literatures. Indigenous literary studies as a field has established that literary arts matter to Indigenous communities, and I agree with the belief, inherent in the Indigenous book club month idea,

⁶ I focus on Episkenew's work here to honour the respect she has earned within the Indigenous literary arts community, which is mourning her recent passing, and because her contributions as a scholar and community member have shaped so much of my own thinking around what it means for literatures to have an impact.

that they have a huge amount of potential when it comes to learning for non-Indigenous people. However, is that potential being realized?

I do not take it for granted, for instance, that teaching Indigenous literatures in Canadian classrooms will inevitably be positive. I echo this caution from Métis writer Sharron Proulx(-Turner) and Aruna Srivastava, which continues to be salient:

It is perfectly possible ... 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 ... more harmful ... to read these texts ... 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. (189)

It takes good intentions on the part of teachers and educational authorities to engage with Indigenous texts in open-minded ways. However, intentions, as Proulx and Srivastava contend, are not sufficient enough, just as the so-called inclusion of Indigenous content within existing frameworks is not sufficient enough, to creating significant change in colonial dynamics. Just as it is important to critique superficial conceptions of reconciliation by contrasting them with resurgence, it is necessary to critique the superficial inclusion of Indigenous content in Canadian classrooms—the *what*—by contrasting inclusion with possibilities for transformation in teaching—the *how*.

Scholarship across Indigenous education and literary studies offers strong foundations for considering such possibilities.⁷ From the existing scholarship I see, for instance, that pedagogical transformation relies upon non-Indigenous readers' willingness to engage substantially with Indigenous literary texts. Allied scholar Sam McKegney's formulations are instructive in articulating what substantial engagement entails. McKegney argues that ethical engagement as a critic and instructor entails stepping up to read, discuss, and respond in rigorous ways, rather than disengaging from or deferring endlessly to Indigenous writers ("Writer-Reader Reciprocity"). I also see that Indigenous literary pedagogies must follow carefully in the footsteps of the past few decades in Indigenous literary criticism. Anishinaabe scholar Kimberly Blaeser argued more than twenty years ago that readers of Indigenous texts must look to the literature and

7 See, for instance, Marie Battiste, Susan Dion, and Jo-Ann Episkeneuw.

its community specificities in order to build understanding, not to a Eurocentric literary tradition. Likewise, Indigenous education scholars, such as Mi'kmaw scholar Marie Battiste, have argued for decades against assimilative, Eurocentric approaches to pedagogy and in favour of teaching that, in Battiste's words, "values and respects Indigenous ways of knowing" (180). Fundamental understandings like these call for engaged and Indigenous pedagogies—not for learning through conventional institutional norms.

Questions remain for me as to how educators might continue to build upon such understandings in order to further enable the power of Indigenous stories to manifest in classrooms. I believe, for instance, that teaching Indigenous literatures works best when educators demonstrate a willingness to attend carefully to the voices in the text and to unlearn racist, colonial, or Eurocentric perspectives that impose prior understandings. How might such attention be deployed to transform how teaching and learning take place rather than just what is taught and learned? Likewise, I believe that more engaged learning can occur when non-Indigenous readers are willing to face difficult truths about colonial violence and injustice in Canada and to connect to people in contemporary Indigenous communities. How can educators integrate such confrontations and connections, perhaps building upon promising practices for community-engaged pedagogies?⁸ Indigenous literary arts and the accompanying body of critical and theoretical scholarship are flourishing, vibrant spaces with long histories; they have gathered a great deal of momentum. Now is a good time to build upon connections between criticism and pedagogy in literary studies. In the wake of the TRC's *Calls to Action*, now is a very good time for educators to bring their non-Indigenous students to engage in this challenging but necessary learning in Canadian classrooms.

Education for reconciliation

In order to further examine the relationship between reconciliation and learning, I look next at how educational work is embedded within the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's *Calls to Action*. One of the remarkable things about the ninety-four recommendations in this document is that they do not limit the mandate for teaching and learning to formal education contexts: the educational scope is much broader. Certainly it is broad enough that looking to implement or interrogate the *Calls to*

⁸ I would point, as one example, to the discussions on teaching that took place during the roundtable on community-based scholarship at the Indigenous Literary Studies Association's gathering in October 2015, featuring Tasha Hubbard, Tenille Campbell, Adar Charlton, and Nancy van Styvendale.

Action in the context of literary studies requires that learning be brought into the conversation.

The *Calls to Action* include a specific section on “education for reconciliation” that calls for curricula and teacher training so that it will be mandatory for kindergarten to grade 12 students to learn about “residential schools, Treaties, and Aboriginal peoples’ historical and contemporary contributions to Canada” (7). Necessary to this work is also a call for “post-secondary institutions to educate teachers on how to integrate Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods into classrooms” (7). This shift in K–12 and postsecondary education entails a purposeful expansion of the persistent work that Indigenous education scholars have been doing for decades and of newer initiatives, such as the installation of mandatory course requirements on Indigenous histories and perspectives in teacher education programs like the one that my institution has had since 2013.

However, the ways in which the *Calls to Action* invoke education are not limited to this emphasis on K–12 curricula or, indeed, to formal education. Very shortly after they were released, I conducted a close reading of the ninety-four recommendations in order to identify any that address the education of non-Indigenous people in Canada about Indigenous perspectives. In setting out to do this analysis, I was curious about the extent to which the *Calls to Action* addressed the need for the broader population to learn more about colonialism; about systemic forms of violence; about Indigenous communities, cultures, and knowledges; and about shared and divergent histories and narratives and worldviews. Did the TRC report limit the importance of education to children and youth in schools, or did it consider adults and scholarly or artistic audiences as well? My examination turned up numerous examples of recommendations related to education; I will point to a few of them here.

First, several of the ninety-four recommendations directly encompass educational imperatives. The *Calls to Action* include explicit calls for education and training for “social workers and others who conduct child-welfare investigations” (1), for “students” in “medical and nursing schools in Canada” (3), for “lawyers” and “all law students” (3), for “public servants” (7), for “management and staff” in “the corporate sector” (10), and for “newcomers to Canada” (10). The document includes a call for a “National Action Plan for Reconciliation, which includes research and policy development, public education programs, and resources” (6)—an explicit educational mandate. It also includes a call “for church parties ... to develop ongoing education strategies” and for “denominational schools ... to provide an education on comparative religious studies, which must

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include a segment on Aboriginal spiritual beliefs and practices” (7). Such calls are explicitly about educating various groups in Canada in ways that will enable the TRC’s recommendations to be realized.

Second, an educational mandate is implied within or requisite to a wide number of other recommendations for implementing culturally appropriate programming or services. Take this example from within the sections related to the justice system: “We call upon the federal, provincial, and territorial governments to work with Aboriginal communities to provide culturally relevant services to inmates on issues such as substance abuse, family and domestic violence, and overcoming the experience of having been sexually abused” (4). Educational imperatives are embedded within this recommendation. The provision of “culturally relevant services” in this context requires some degree of communication, collaboration, education, awareness raising, and/or learning between the various parties involved (governments, communities, service providers within the justice system, and inmates) in planning and implementing the services. Along these lines, some kind of education will be requisite to or a consequence of many other recommendations, such as the development of programs at community-based youth organizations (8), research and commemoration initiatives (8–9), news coverage and media programming (9–10), and community sports programs (10) that are culturally relevant or aimed at fostering reconciliation.

Particularly noteworthy for literary scholars is the suggestion that the arts have a role to play. The document makes this suggestion through the following statement: “We call upon the Canada Council for the Arts to establish, as a funding priority, a strategy for Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists to undertake collaborative projects and produce works that contribute to the reconciliation process” (9). The educational dimensions of such artistic initiatives are important to consider. The notion that art could contribute to a social agenda in this way might be interpreted, for instance, as relying upon art’s didactic capacities.

This reading of the TRC’s *Calls to Action* suggests that education, or learning, is essential to working for reconciliation. Recognizing the educational dimensions of the ninety-four recommendations fits with recognizing that movements for change rely upon shifts in understanding. Bringing about reconciliation as envisioned in this document relies upon challenging ignorance, certainly—to reiterate the words of the Honourable Carolyn Bennett. However, more than that, it requires an active opposition to that erasure or forgetting, that “amnesia” Martin describes (49). How can education in literary studies contribute to shifts in understanding

that push beyond Regan’s “cheap reconciliation” into something more substantial (185)?

To describe this shift in thinking in another way, I will draw upon the work of Susan Dion, who is Lenape and Potawatomi. Dion considers what it takes for non-Indigenous Canadians—in this case education students planning to be teachers—to really “hear” what they are learning about Indigenous people and histories (Dion 56). Dion argues that Canadians’ thinking about Indigenous people is dominated by the trope of the “romantic, mythical Other,” a static conception that relegates Indigenous people firmly to the past, to unrecognizability, and to *elsewhere* (5). According to this perception, Indigenous people do not exist in relevant ways or time frames or, even if they do, they exist outside of contemporary spaces. Cherokee writer Thomas King has also pointed out this dynamic in his much-cited essay “You’re Not the Indian I Had in Mind,” arguing that colonial expectations of what it means to be “authentic” reduce the possibility for Indigenous people to exist in real ways: “In the end, there is no reason for the Indian to be real. The Indian simply has to exist in our imaginations” (54). This elision of real Indigenous people perpetuates mainstream Canada’s ability to forget difficult histories and realities in favour of the status quo.

How to challenge these static imaginings of Indigeneity, to learn something deeper, is a hefty question, and one of course that many scholars and practitioners are working on across many disciplines. As scholars in the literary arts seek to disrupt colonial understandings of Indigenous communities, it is vital to examine the educational dimensions of their undertakings. The recognition inherent in the *Calls to Action* that learning is necessary to social change is an important reminder that scholars and educators in literary studies have an opportunity to formulate conceptions of learning through literature that facilitate significant change—change that respects the resurgence of Indigenous communities that is represented in Indigenous literary arts.

Writers’ and teachers’ perspectives on literatures and communities

This point about connecting literatures and learning brings me back to the concept of Indigenous book club month and the role that literatures might play in classrooms and houses across Canada. I have suggested that literatures have the capacity to be a powerful catalyst for change and for the learning that change entails. This belief led me to into my current research program: given the positive potential of Indigenous literatures

for learning and for relationship building, and given how powerful stories can be, I have been investigating how people who work with Indigenous literatures conceptualize the impact they can have. Understanding the meaning and significance of an Indigenous text is important to me, but I am often just as interested in what happens outside the text: in how texts impact the people who read them, teach them, study them, create them, celebrate them, and connect around them. Why are Indigenous literatures significant? Why, for artists, for pedagogy, for learners, and, particularly, why for Indigenous communities?

To pursue such questions, I recently conducted a study in which I spoke with Indigenous writers and with teachers who take up Indigenous literatures in their classrooms. During the course of this research, I spoke with more than a dozen people who write and/or teach Indigenous literatures about why Indigenous literatures matter to communities. These conversations contribute to my considerations in this paper on what it means to read for reconciliation or resurgence. While it is beyond the scope of this article to engage with those interviews in depth, I examine two specific passages here in order to develop my considerations of literatures and learning.

As a first example, I spoke with a teacher who is convinced that Indigenous literatures can spark students to engage with the work of learning but who runs into systemic challenges in her attempts. I share this example because it shows how, unfortunately, the inspirational potential of Indigenous literatures and literary studies can be difficult to realize in mainstream institutional settings. This teacher, whose chosen pseudonym is “Alice Curtis,” expresses her conviction that Indigenous literatures can help to break down stereotyping and discrimination against Indigenous people and foster social change. Curtis is frustrated at the pace of change in schools, in her experience, where departments tend to spend limited budgets on books that are canonical and that any teacher will be able to work with—as opposed to investing in initiatives by newer, often precariously employed teachers to teach what are perceived to be riskier texts.

I believe that the following passage illustrates her belief that literatures can help to draw educators and students into relationships and learning, as well as her frustration over this issue of institutional support. Curtis says,

I think that is so important for students to learn and see the background of, okay, well 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, well how can we help this to heal? How can we understand someone else's perspective?... And what a shame, that, I think, so many people don't have that experience ... 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.

According to this teacher, a number of factors combine to work against her when she wants to teach Indigenous literatures in her K–12 context: lack of funding for new books, conventional genre-based teaching practices in English, the weight of the Euro-American literary canon, the lack of resources and supports for teaching and studying Indigenous literature, the likelihood that new teachers are on temporary contracts and have little say in how department budgets are spent, and the feeling that toeing the line instead of sticking your neck out—as she puts it elsewhere in the interview—is a better way to land a permanent job (something that might also be possible in a postsecondary context). However, she is also very enthusiastic and dedicated and is making strong strides as she pursues this area of learning for herself and her students.

As a second example, Dogrib writer Richard Van Camp spoke to me about how inspired he is to be able to see the growth in Northern and Aboriginal literatures. Richard's discussion expanded my considerations of literatures and community beyond what happens through the reading of texts to what happens around the creation of literary texts. In the following passage, he expresses his enthusiasm for a recent graphic novel he has written:

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. 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 ... I think that's really important. We shouldn't discount locally produced books ... if it means that our community is reading the stories where they can see themselves in it.... People are going to see Fort Smith in the graphic novel. And 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.

What Van Camp says here demonstrates that communities are not only represented in Indigenous literatures but that they can also be generated, connected, and strengthened through the creation and consumption of literary arts. I contend that resurgence is fostered by these material aspects of how texts are put together, shared, and celebrated. Such cultural work is rooted in community: honouring places, regenerating stories, connecting people, and using Indigenous languages. Understanding the significance of such community processes is an important task for the classroom and is one that might—as Lindberg and Maracle suggest in their discussion on the CBC—mean reading for more than reconciliation. What might it mean, instead, to read for resurgence?

Embodying resurgence: Tracey Lindberg's *Birdie*

To carry forward this question, I will provide one promising example of the type of reading I am invoking. Given the material I have already drawn from Cree author Tracey Lindberg, I turn to her bestselling first novel *Birdie*, which has attracted a good deal of critical and public attention since its publication in 2015, including being taken up as a nominee in the Canadian-awareness-fostering Canada Reads competition. In relation to the understandings I have outlined thus far, this novel enables me to explore, in practice, what it might mean to read for resurgence.

Lindberg, in other talks and interviews since the conversation with her fellow authors in January 2015, has further pushed back against the notion of reconciliation. She has spoken about other processes that need to take place before Indigenous peoples might be ready to reconcile with a colonial nation-state, such as reconciliation with self, with family, or with community (“Cree Academic and Novelist”). Looking at the broader landscape of Canadian conversations about reconciliation following the release of the TRC report—which coincided with the release of her novel—Lindberg suggests that Canada cannot rush reconciliation, rather that a great deal of truth needs to be dealt with first (“Tracey Lindberg on Telling Indigenous Stories”). For instance, she points to the fact that gendered violence within Indigenous families and communities, like that depicted in her novel, is an ongoing form of colonial violence: without a recognition of how such dynamics originate in colonial histories, reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people is not yet possible, in her view (“Cree Academic”). Lindberg’s perspectives on *Birdie* make useful

contributions to ongoing conversations on reconciliation: I respect how the author has leveraged her time in the public eye to shift the reconciliation conversation toward such necessary considerations. However, in this reading, I want to extend her critique of reconciliation in order to show how Lindberg's novel enables the conversation to shift toward different terms entirely. *Birdie*, I argue, demonstrates possibilities to read for resurgence rather than reconciliation.

Bernice, or Birdie, Meetoos is not looking for reconciliation with those who have wronged her. She has set fire to the house that was unable to be a safe home to her and burned to death the man (one of the men) who should have been family but was instead a predator. She has opted out of external expectations governing reality, sanity, time, and living in general. As she enters the transitional state-time that is the present tense of the story, Bernice knows that "she is somehow becoming. Something. Else" (Lindberg 6). She has taken refuge within her body, distanced from the world by layers of flesh and "scarred and cut scabby" skin (5). She is "traveling" (18): while she is literally "taking to her bed," she is also "on a voyage," although unsure at first whether it is "to someplace or from it" (18). This liminal experience is entirely necessary for her being: "Her un/conscious decision was one her spirit made. When it was time, and when the fury of her past began to race ahead of her future, she simply lay down" (18). She lies down, shuts down, breaks down, retreating into herself to grapple with her memories, supported by the women who watch over her: "The three women moving around her generate some sort of resistance that allows her to travel back and forth (Now and Then, Here and There)" in her own experience (157). Bernice's experience could be read as one of reconciling with her past: she returns to living after confronting her own full story. This process enables her to "find the space where her memory could live peaceably with her body" (232). However, I contend that what Bernice does can also be seen as more than reconciliation: it is a re-emergence, a resurgence.

What Bernice immerses herself in and re-emerges from—her relative Freda thinks of it as "a fast, a vision, a change" (135)—is transformative. She feels she is "cocooning" (68)—a feeling that I see reflected in the layers that surround her: flesh, scaly skin, sheets, bed, room. The "women moving around her" (157) are surrounding her with further layers: smoke, talk, silence, care, prayers, watchfulness, memory, love. Her movement toward this cocooning has been steady, and this is not the first time she has experienced something extraordinary. Through Bernice's memories, the text describes her longstanding ability to experience more than the

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here and now, including her sense of shifting at Christ's Academy, where she could not hear the prayers being recited over "the quiet murmur of *iswewak*" that she could hear inside her (80). Further, the night of the fire was a time of change, in that she could no longer withstand the sexual attacks of her uncles: "her ability to numb herself to what the uncle did was closed ... her eyes were wide open" (176). However, Bernice's breaking down, cocooned in her bed over Lola's bakery in Gibson's, is marked as a turning point in her story. Freda recognizes that, "Bernice may be, for the first time, making a choice" (136). Bernice stays in bed until she is able to feel she is renewed, re-strengthened: even from the outside it is visible that, while the fasting Bernice "looks like she is melting. Dimming. Half gone," she also "looks gorgeous.... *Like her body fits her spirit*" (234). With her cryptic, magical ingredients gathering on slips of paper around her—channeled from the television chef to whom she listens so raptly—Bernice prepares for a future life in which she can feast on wellbeing.

In her defiant renewal, Bernice embodies resurgence. During her time in bed, she recognizes that she needs things to be different:

She is so hungry. Not for food, not for drink, not for foreign skin.... She is hungry for family. For the women she loves. For the sounds of her language. For the peace of no introduction, no backstory, no explanation. She misses her aunties, her cousins and her mom.... She misses the Cree sense of humour. (102)

Having metabolized her past—"Living through recall. Feeding herself memories" (162)—Bernice climbs out of the bed ready to begin in a good way, a sacred way. It is beyond the scope of this paper to treat with sufficient care the steps that Bernice takes when she leaves her bed—I look forward to future readings of this book by strong Cree women—but it is vital to note the ceremony, the relatives, the *Pimatisewin*, the feasting, the *Maskihky*, the Cree language. It is vital to note the loving "women-family, Lola, Val and Skinny Freda" (245) that Birdie has drawn together around her. I agree with Lindberg's assertion that, not having grown up with a home that was safe or a family where reciprocal obligations were lived out between the people around her ("Tracey Lindberg on Telling"), Bernice has built home and family for herself by the end of the story. She has "freed" herself to a new extent (233) and can now embody and inspire herself differently, more lightly—"she feels rather like a bird" (233). Birdie has reclaimed herself and shifted what is possible for her future.

Not just another night at the book club

It is clear to me that Indigenous writers like Tracey Lindberg are making integral contributions to the vitality and continuity of their communities, bringing community members together and storying their communities forward. However, the gap between resurgent writing and dominant Canadian understandings persists. While Indigenous literatures may have the capacity to change how Canada is understood, enabling that capacity to materialize in classrooms and across the colonial nation-state is no small undertaking. *Birdie*, the example I have explored here, offers ample opportunity to practise reading for resurgence, rather than for a reconciliation that perpetuates Canadian colonialism. It is vital for educators, along with their students, to work to understand the ethical underpinnings of the relationships entailed in such readings.

When it comes to reconciliation, the role of schooling holds a particular ethical dimension: as Chief Justice Murray Sinclair said during the TRC's process, "Education is what got us into this mess—...at least in terms of residential schools—but education is the key to reconciliation" (Watters). Learning from and demonstrating alliance with the resurgent practices of Indigenous writers requires non-Indigenous readers to unsettle colonial frameworks and to build responsive relationships with Indigenous communities. I insist that this work can, and must, be done in classroom spaces where literatures are taught.

As I conclude this article, I want to provide questions extending beyond the discussion that I have been staging here. First, what framework for understanding change in the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples is appropriate, or possible, given the extensive scope of colonialism in Canada? I have pointed to some interrogations of reconciliation discourse and some suggestions for deeper engagement: Where do they lead? Second and subsequently, how is the role of non-Indigenous Canadians who are—as Minister Carolyn Bennett phrased it during her interview on *The Current*—"people who want to help" to be understood? Particularly, how does that role exist in relation to the kinds of change that Indigenous communities are working for, if what Indigenous communities are working for is resurgence, not reconciliation? Third, how is the educational mandate embedded in the TRC's *Calls to Action* relevant for writers and scholars of Indigenous literatures? The field of Indigenous literary criticism has grown immensely and continues, at present, to do so. More work needs to be done, I believe, in order to translate that scholarship into the material contexts of classrooms and reading practices. Finally, what possibilities and problems arise when the literary arts are examined

Questions like these open up directions for future scholarship and pedagogical practices.

for what they offer to learning? For instance, what can happen when a text like *Birdie* is asked to do educational work? Questions like these open up directions for future scholarship and pedagogical practices.

In closing, I return to the suggestion that an Indigenous book club month could bring Canadian readers to engage in some of the learning necessary for reconciliation to proceed. I believe that, if readers can learn from literary texts in ways that impact social change, it is important for literary scholars to investigate what such learning entails. Further, it is vital to interrogate if reading for reconciliation is the best way for non-Indigenous Canadians to read toward better relationships with resurgent Indigenous communities.

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