

POSITION PAPER

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**Approaching Indigenous Literatures with Respect**

Written by  
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## Approaching Indigenous Literatures with Respect

Naomi Stewart

As a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant living and working on unceded Indigenous territory and an immigrant to Canada from England, I am aware of my position as an uninvited guest. My family is British for generations back, while the origins of my last name, “Stewart,” come from Scotland and the Stewart clan. What I know of my family is a history of white-collar and blue-collar workers, mothers, household staff, fighter pilots, and working-middle class Brits. Having personally experienced a move to a new country (Canada) at the relatively young age of eight, and then returning to the original country (England) as a young adult, before ultimately moving back to Canada, I have an odd connection with my two homelands, and the feeling of not quite belonging to either. As a Christian and the daughter of an Anglican priest, I am unsettled by the church’s historical role in the mistreatment of Aboriginal peoples, and haunted by the need for acknowledgement and reparation. As a teacher, I do my best to respectfully guide my students into an understanding of their places in an ever-changing world and their task to make it a better one.

Knowledge can be attained.  
Neither unproblematically, of course, nor completely,  
and certainly not with the depth  
of a lifetime of experiential learning  
through simple academic study,  
but those non-Native critics  
willing to put in the time and effort in terms of  
research, dialogue, social interaction, and community involvement  
can approach valid cultural understandings.  
(In fact, to my mind, it is our responsibility  
to do so if we desire our work to be relevant.)

— Sam McKegney, “Strategies for Ethical Engagement”

For me, the word *position* has always had a unique connotation. As someone who grew up heavily invested in the world of dance, when I hear the word *position*, my muscle memory kicks in and my body prepares to move to the first, second, third, fourth, and fifth ballet positions. This speaks poignantly to the ways in which our upbringing, influences, social practices and background shape our sense of “location” and being (Kovach 95). As with these positions in dance, “positioning” is a foundation on which to build; it is not an ending, but a starting point. It is a discipline to practice and to always begin again, especially as teachers, as we ground ourselves in the truths, biases, and origins that have and continue to mold and create us. As Plains Cree / Saulteaux scholar Margaret Kovach describes, in Indigenous research, self-location means “cultural identification” (96). For non-Indigenous or settler scholars and teachers, this act is crucial. As a teacher or as a student, this act of self-locating allows us to “examine our [...] purpose and motive,” as well as keeping us “aware of the power dynamic” (97) between researchers and the communities they learn about, or between teachers and the content, histories, and contexts they engage with. As a settler scholar and teacher, I have become aware of my responsibility to model for my students what it means to be self-aware. However, self-positioning should not be an end in itself. What is more important is

putting the work into learning something from Indigenous scholars and thinkers, and stepping away from allowing ourselves and our knowledge to remain the primary focus.

Inspired by Tuscorora author Alicia Elliott's *A Mind Spread Out on the Ground* (2019), I have chosen to frame my thoughts in the form of an interactive essay, posing a series of questions (written in italics) as an opportunity for the reader to reflect on key points.

*When you think of the word 'position,' what comes to mind for you? What is your position when it comes to teaching Indigenous content? Has it shifted or evolved?*

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*How do you think positioning yourself might shape your teaching practice for the better?*

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One of the biggest concerns teachers have in approaching the teaching of Indigenous literatures is teaching it in the "right" way. Most educators are aware that there is a need to discuss, explore, and incorporate Indigenous content. The issue is not "if," but "how." These same educators are seeking the *right* stories, the *right* lesson plans, the *right* questions, the *right* terminology to use in their classrooms. However, what we find when we delve into the world of Indigenous literatures and ethical engagement, is that while there might be certain *wrong* ways to approach it, there is no singular *right* way. As settler scholar Sam Mckegney discusses, there are a few things to be aware of as a non-Indigenous scholar or teacher when approaching content. The first is not to retreat into silence. If they remain silent settler scholars are again taking "focus away, willingly failing to heed the creative voices of those adversely affected by the legacy of colonial oppression" (Mckegney 81).

*Have you ever 'retreated into silence' in your fear of tackling Indigenous content properly? What happened?*

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Though McKegney's advice might be specifically referring to scholars, teachers can take the same advice. In fear of either "misunderstanding" or "recolonizing" (Mckegney 81), the temptation is to simply move on to other topics, other content, other units. This is fatal, as it once again relegates Indigenous authors and content off the table because it is deemed acceptable to simply avoid it. McKegney's second caution is to avoid an excessively inward focus. While it is important (even necessary) to situate yourself in relation to the content, it is equally important not to make yourself

the centrepiece. As he writes, “Yes, scholars need to be aware of their own limitations, and yes, they must be self-reflexive, but no, they do not need to make themselves the stars of their studies” (82).

*What might this look like to you? Do you have a tendency to make yourself the star of the study? How do you balance the need for self-reflection while still engaging with points of view and experiences different from your own?*

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The next ‘wrong’ way in approaching Indigenous literatures involves “Deal[ing] in the purviews of non-natives” (82). For me, this means being aware of the voices we choose to highlight, and specifically not valorizing settler scholar voices discussing Indigenous content, over Indigenous authors and critics themselves. Just because an ‘outsider’s’ view of an Indigenous community might be more accessible, do not seek quick and easy Google Search answers to your questions.

Finally, we should consciously avoid “[presenting] only tentative, qualified, and provisional critical statements” (83). Again, while it is key that you yourself are aware of the limitations of all knowledges, do not do a disservice to both your students and your chosen writers by constantly calling yourself and your attempts into question. “Correct me if I’m wrong,” “I’m not an expert here,” “I’m going to butcher this pronunciation,” “I haven’t actually studied this myself,” and “I’m new to this” might all have their place and time, but in the classroom they can often be used as an excuse not to engage fully, or to explain and free yourself from “attempting to gain that knowledge” (84). Take your own awareness of the truths of some of these statements as an “incentive to learn” more, rather than an easy cop-out (84).

*Have you used any of these statements before? What was the outcome? How did your students respond?*

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There are so many questions to ponder when attempting to ethically and respectfully incorporate Indigenous literatures into our classrooms. But we will make a start when we come to terms with the fact that there are many different ways to go about it, so long as we are being critically self-reflective, doing our best to understand our limitations, making an effort to move beyond them, and being bold in engaging with Indigenous voices.

*Knowing what you know now about engaging with Indigenous content, what is one simple step you could take to actively engage more with Indigenous works?*

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## **SOURCES**

Elliott, Alicia. *A Mind Spread out on the Ground*. Doubleday Canada, 2019.

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McKegney, Sam. "Strategies for Ethical Engagement: An Open Letter Concerning Non-Native Scholars of Native Literatures." *Learn, Teach, Challenge: Approaching Indigenous Literatures*. Ed. Deanna Reder and Linda M. Morra. Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2016. 79-89.