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Introduction to Special Issue on Literature Pedagogy Confronting Colonialism

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In Memoriam: Michael Wessels (1958–2018)

Until a few decades ago, a liberal education was everywhere assumed to be essential to the process of socialization, acculturation, and civilizing. Literature, in particular, has always been closely linked to ideas of education, learning, and growth. In the former British Empire, from Canada to South Africa to India, literature was deemed to have a civilizing influence on the working classes and indigenous colonial elites. All that is now rightly being challenged. In Canada, where I am, the 2015 report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission issued calls to action to universities to acknowledge their complicity in colonialism and to open themselves to indigenous forms of knowledge and ways of knowing. In South Africa starting in 2015, students under the banners of Rhodes Must Fall and later Fees Must Fall have turned campuses into contested spaces, challenging the exclusionary nature of the higher education system and its practices in the name of a far-reaching process of decolonization in ways that have tested the assumptions, affiliations, and positions of even the most progressive academics. In the Netherlands, following the student protests of spring 2015, the Diversity Commission of the University of Amsterdam brought the importance of diversity literacy and decolonizing the classroom to the fore. And in 2014, the *Hokkolorob* ("let there be noise") protest movement wracked Jadavpur University in Kolkata with students' demands, and Jawaharlal Nehru University has been the site of large protests against judicial action brought against student leaders.

Teachers of literature in universities around the world are feeling a need to reexamine our understanding of ourselves and what we do in the classroom. The students we face are different from the students we were: they come from different cultures and classes, grew up with new technologies, and suffer from anxieties that we as yet poorly understand. The logic informing the study of literature (or history or philosophy) no longer seems self-evident: our students are making us question what we do and even who we are. What do they want to learn? How do we teach them?

Not all the challenges to the university and to humanities come from below. This moment is also characterized by the corporatization of the university. The humanities appear under threat from above and outside by forces that do not appreciate the values of critical distance and alternative imaginings that literature and its study fostered. The

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contemporary teaching of literature takes place in a context where the university is under pressure to think in terms of investment, job training, and relevance, all terms that humanities scholars want to contest but too often find ourselves contesting on the other's ground. We teachers want to defend the capacity for resistance proffered by literature itself and its potential for subversion of dominant codes: economic priorities, bourgeois certainties, racial, patriarchal, and heteronormative values. The university literature classroom has undeniable continuities with the Victorian classroom and the mission school classroom, but literature itself has always embodied and pointed to other modes of learning. Some things we must change; some change we must figure out how to resist.

In November 2017, the Jackman Humanities Institute at the University of Toronto hosted a workshop called "Literature Pedagogy and Decolonization." This was in the context of a four-year Mellon-funded collaboration with the Centre for Humanities Research at the University of the Western Cape called "Aesthetic Education: A South-North Dialogue." The 2017 workshop brought eight faculty and graduate students from Cape Town to discuss experience and strategies in the classroom with counterparts from Toronto. Colleagues too rarely have an opportunity with talk to one another about something that concerns us all at the heart of who we are: our teaching. The workshop was premised on the belief that professors in Canada and South Africa have many things in common—the forces we are responding to are global in nature—but we will learn best by listening to one another's local stories and personal experience.

There have been three sequels to the 2017 workshop: in October 2018 and April 2019 in Toronto, and February 2019 in Utrecht. The sequels in Toronto have been notable for the way they abandoned the conference format of panelists sitting behind a table at the front of the room and facing an audience seated in rows. Lee Maracle, a Sto:lo elder based at the University of Toronto, made us see that, if we were to think and act differently, change would have to begin with the way we framed our questions and our discussion. (The workshops were organized by Lee Maracle, Suzanne Akbari, Lochin Brouillard, Uzoma Esonwanne, and me.) Lee encouraged us to try a different way of working through our questions collaboratively, a way favored by Indigenous people. At our meetings, we arranged fifteen or so chairs in a circle. Here sat a speaker, panelists, and respondents, all of whom engaged with a common question having to do with teaching at the university. Around this inner circle were arranged larger circles to accommodate others who had a role as witnesses. The circular arrangement immediately broke down the usual workshop hierarchies between those who supposedly know and the audience who receives knowledge, between those at the front and those facing them, often those who sit higher and those who sit below. Everyone was at a common level. The speaker invited each panelist to address the question at hand (for instance, How to Teach Indigenous Stories or How to Teach the Past). The contributions were often personal and were deliberately informal and short. After each panelist spoke, everyone else in the circle took it in turn to respond with what had struck them in the panelist's contribution. After the discussion had gone around the circle, witnesses were asked if they wanted to add something. The discussion traveled around the circle as many times as there were panelists. The physical layout made visible the sense that we were a collective circling around a question and getting closer to an answer, there were no right answers, and we shared responsibility for the direction of the discussion.

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One effect of our configuration of the workshop was simply to make Indigenous scholars and students feel welcome. The most powerful contribution of the October 2018 workshop was by Indigenous participants, and we organized the April 2019 workshop around the question of how to incorporate Indigenous stories and storytelling practices in the university. Lee Maracle and Dawnis Kennedy told stories that brought home the profound psychological, cultural, and social effects of residential schools on First Nations people. Together, they dramatized how colonialist pedagogy dismantled, reconfigured, and distorted the foundational institutions and practices of First Nations communities, thus altering how successive generations have thought of their pasts and imagine their futures. In February 2019, Barnita Bagchi and Ann Rigney organized a workshop on the same theme "Pedagogy Confronting Colonization" at the University of Utrecht, attended by scholars from Utrecht, Toronto, Cape Town, and Kolkata. We intend to keep organizing such workshops.

We are still working out what other formats we can use to share the ideas developed in the workshops, but this special issue is an important start. It is in the nature of these workshops that they did not produce final papers. Presentations were deliberately short and informal. The emphasis was on collective sharing. Nevertheless, we have managed to put together a small group of papers inspired by the workshops. The authors come from Canada, South Africa, the Netherlands, and India. The papers are about teaching materials, the embodied experience of faculty, curriculum, and pedagogy. They are not representative because they do not include anything about Indigenous pedagogy! But they do point to the common sense that our teaching must change and that we must share strategies and experience in the classroom.

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