Ethical Engagement Through 'Critical Dispositioning': A Pedagogical and Research Praxis for Responsible Engagement with Indigenous Literature

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Abstract: In the past, a dangerous pan-Indigenization has flattened tribal or community-specific differences between unique Indigenous groups when 'outsiders' conduct research without using distinct frameworks. As a settler, I place ethical engagement in the foreground of my research and pedagogical praxes. This paper proposes a new way to read, research, and teach Indigenous Literatures for settlers or non-Indigenous scholars to engage ethically with texts, which I am calling Critical Dispositioning. To do this work, I will draw from other settler scholars, such as Adam Barker and Mary Louise Pratt, who also produce Indigenous-informed, ethical scholarship. I will also look to Indigenous writers like Willie Ermine (Cree), Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee), Simon Ortiz (Acoma Pueblo), and Gerald Vizenor (White Earth Minnesota Chippewa). Critical Dispositioning involves settler and BIPOC scholars participating in a self-awareness of their positionality, what biases and privileges that come with it, and a willful surrender of such loci in order to step outside of their positions (i.e. un-positioning themselves) in order to acknowledge and read texts in the critical and cultural frameworks particular to their nation-specific contexts. The multiple resonances of "disposition," as a concept of relationality, a personal outlook, or more literally, to remove someone from their current positionality, are essential to doing this work in an engaged, conscious way. This article explores the intersections of teaching and research where ethical scholarship can be done from my perspective as both a settler-scholar and graduate student.

Keywords: settler theory, Indigenous literature, ethical pedagogy, critical dispositioning.

Who is entitled to speak for whom? This question is one that settler scholars of Indigenous texts can and should be constantly considering as they move through their research. Considering the complex layers of teaching and learning, engaging with Indigenous literatures (or other texts authored by minority writers) as a settler-scholar can be a fraught relationship. Authors who engage in this work with care can sometimes get caught up in the different facets of

ethical engagement. However, authors who do not prioritize ethical engagement pose different kinds of dangers when working with Indigenous texts. As a settler-scholar who engages with Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe literatures in the geographical location where I live (Southern Ontario, Canada), I am deeply connected to my work, but also inherently separate from it as a settler. Placing ethical scholarship in the foreground of my praxis as a researcher and as a graduate student and teaching assistant at my university (McMaster University), I am increasingly aware of my positionality in relation to my work. Because of this, I am proposing a methodological framework that allows settler scholars to ethically engage with Indigenous texts while keeping texts rooted in their community-specific frameworks. I am calling this praxis Critical Dispositioning, and intentionally consider the multiple resonances of '(dis)positioning' when doing this work. This framework is not designed to give settlers the authority to engage with Indigenous texts as a dominant force but rather sets up a space for dialogue, where the onus is placed on settlers to put additional effort into studying, understanding, and finding relevant community-specific epistemologies when engaging with Indigenous literatures. Some questions I will consider in this paper and when doing the work of Critical Dispositioning include: How can one engage with marginalized texts ethically without removing the text from its community-specific framework and without applying their own cosmological framework to that text? How can Critical Dispositioning be practiced within literature studies and also as an interdisciplinary approach to ethical engagement?

Settler scholars have a long and sticky history of claiming intellectual authority over Indigenous texts, stories, and cultural practices. In the worst cases, appropriation or ownership can factor into this mode of scholarship. In academia, we are often encouraged to take these

positions of authority; being hyper-focalized in our research allows us to act as 'field experts' in many disciplines, including literature studies. However, in Indigenous studies, this position can elide the lived experience of those who share the same worldview or epistemology as the texts being analyzed, if not lead to outright claiming or appropriation by scholars who assert this position of authority. Other times, while desiring to do the utmost ethical work, many scholars consider abandoning Indigenous texts from syllabi as they feel they do not have the necessary background or the right to teach them. While potentially stemming from good intentions, this can actually lead to fewer Indigenous texts being studied at the university level and recapitulate the widening gaps in university-level education of Indigenous literatures. While an instructor might feel personally unequipped to do this work, there are many Indigenous theorists and scholars who can provide critical analysis and frameworks for their specific communities that can then be applied to the texts being studied. To *not* do this work serves to miss out on opportunities to celebrate Indigenous voices and promote further knowledge about Indigenous peoples, making the work of a land acknowledgement, for example, part of a lived methodology. To not do this work, in a sense, is continuing the colonial erasure of Indigenous peoples in academia.

In an effort to keep ethics centered in my work, I utilize Critical Dispositioning to guide my research. Critical Dispositioning asks settler-scholars (or non-Indigenous scholars) to find community-specific theory and criticism to frame the texts they analyze in an effort to keep these Indigenous texts rooted in their community context . This methodological and pedagogical praxis requires a lot of work on the part of the researcher, using introspective thought to interrogate their own positionality before ever engaging with the Indigenous texts. By questioning oneself on their own position, one might ask questions like those Adam Barker and Emma Battell Lowman

ask in their text, *Settler: Identity and Colonization in 21st Century Canada,* when considering their positions within colonial structures: "What is my role in colonization (here and elsewhere)? How does colonialism structure my life? Can I live the life I want without contributing to the oppression, displacement, and genocide of Indigenous peoples? ... What are my responsibilities? Whose land do I live on and what are the traditional laws and practices here? (Barker 180). Asking these kinds of questions forces settler researchers to interrogate their own positionality in relation to Indigenous texts. It allows researchers to acknowledge their own biases and the assumed knowledge they carry into their research with them.

When considering other Indigenous critical lenses, like LeAnne Howe's (Choctaw) Tribalography, or Indigenous Literary Nationalism, as coined by Simon Ortiz (Acoma Pueblo), we can see how each author instills their critical lens with their understanding of Indigeneity based on their lived experience within their respective communities. In her essay, "Tribalography: The Power of Native Stories," Howe flags for the reader that when discussing stories, she interchangeably uses the terms "story, fiction, history and play," drawing on the Choctaw belief that "views these things as an integrated whole rather than individual parts" (Howe 118). She supports this with an example from the Choctaw language with the word 'Anoli,' which is "a teller, someone who does all of the above, relating all living things' (118). Ortiz also speaks to the importance of language and the oral tradition as a way of preserving Indigenous knowledges and enacting resistance against colonial forces. Ortiz, drawing on his Acoma Pueblo context, recalls the longstanding tradition of Indigenous "songmakers and story-tellers" (9) who appropriate "the languages of the colonialists and us[e] them for their own purposes" as a way to resist colonial imposition (10). These are just two possible lenses that

exemplify the ways each author draws on their own community's history, language, and worldview to shape the way they engage with Indigenous literature. While some educators still hold the belief that Indigenous texts can or should be read in a vacuum (on their own, without framing or experience in Indigenous studies), it is increasingly dangerous to absolve these texts of their cultural significance and context. To do that would be to enact a literary colonization of the texts, removing their cultural significance and history, and framing them (especially within the academy) through their adherence to Western institutional values and style. By enacting a framework of Critical Dispositioning, educators and students alike can interrogate their positionalities (including any biases, judgements, or preconceived notions) in relation to the texts, problematizing or rupturing such presumptions, while honoring the resistance each text enacts.

Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee), in his 2018 book, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, speaks to the value of Indigenous stories, reminding readers that Indigenous stories have the power to "drive out the poison, heal the spirit as well as the body, remind [Indigenous peoples] of the greatness of where [they] came from as well as the greatness of who [they're] meant to be, so that [they're] not determined by the colonial narrative of deficiency" (Justice 5). Justice also makes the distinction between these stories, told by and for Indigenous peoples, and the stories that come "from outside" (2), told by settlers to undermine and devalue Indigenous peoples, culture, and beliefs. To further what Justice believes, I argue that not only are Indigenous stories important for perpetuating Indigenous survivance, drawing on Gerald Vizenor's (White Earth Minnesota Chippewa) term, but must remain situated in their specific cultural contexts to retain their power and resist external (settler) influence. Justice sees Indigenous stories as integral to

Indigenous survival and resistance to colonialism. They have "been part of [Indigenous] cultural, political, and familial resurgence and [their] continuing efforts to maintain [Indigenous] rights and responsibilities in these contested lands . . . They remind [Indigenous peoples] about who [they] are and where [they're] going, on [their] own and in relation to those with whom [they] share this world" (5-6). If we take what Justice believes and see the value and power of Indigenous stories to heal, to teach, and to resist, we can see how important it is to keep these stories rooted in their own community-specific contexts. Analyzing Indigenous texts while removing them from their context exposes these stories, making them vulnerable to the external influence of colonialism, and thus exposes them to dangers of the 'outside,' as Justice suggests, potentially turning them into "bad medicine" (2).

When considering the ethics of doing the work of Critical Dispositioning, it is important to return to Indigenous ways of being. The area where I live and do my research has both Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe connections, so considering both communities' ways of coming to knowledge is essential to a holistic view of the stakes of ethical engagement. For example, the Anishinaabe framework of coming to knowledge involves the Seven Grandfathers' Teachings, which are "law, truth, bravery, humility, wisdom, honesty, and respect" (Borrows 3). John Borrows (Chippewas of Nawash) sees these teachings as the grounds of Anishinaabe ethics and culture, as they can be found "in constitutions, by-laws, teacher's guides, school walls, books, blogs, posts, songs, stories, and other artist works across Anishinaabe-akiing (Anishinaabe territory)" (14). Conversely, the Haudenosaunee draw on the "Ohenten Kariwatekwen," or the Thanksgiving Address, to give thanks and practice a pedagogy of citing knowledge when beginning a gathering. The Mohawk Nation at Akwesasne begin and end

meetings with the Thanksgiving Address “as a way to get everyone in a good mind to work together for the best for all” and “a general mindfulness practice for living in harmony with nature” (“Mohawk Thanksgiving"). Using these two specific examples of Indigenous storytelling and ways of coming to knowledge, we can see how each community has a different way of approaching knowledge, ethics, and epistemologies. By using a methodological framework of Critical Dispositioning, a scholar could use the Seven Grandfathers’ Teachings when examining an Anishinaabe text, or consider the ways the Thanksgiving Address plays a role in Haudenosaunee work.

Drawing on the multiple resonances of ‘(dis)position,’ we can consider this work to engage with a kind of strategic examination of where one is located in relation to the text they are considering. Position can also refer to the location of something in terms of a hierarchy, which dispositioning destabilizes or equalizes. Dispositioning can also encapsulate the power or authority to arrange, settle, manage; [or] control (Disposition), allowing one to consider their orientation in relation to a text, framework, or system.

While it is impossible, and even dangerous, to assume being able to fully step outside of oneself (and therefore one’s position), this particular thinking might be used by some as an argument for absolving themselves of colonial responsibilities as a settler. However, it can still be productive to consider Indigenous texts with the kind of double-vision, or multi-valent thinking, Critical Dispositioning calls for. Some other dangers of this work can also stem from a hyper-focalized positionality. While we, as scholars, all strive to find ourselves in our work, when we focus too much on our own positionality we can sometimes eclipse the voices of the Indigenous authors we intended to elevate. Critical Dispositioning allows for a meeting place

between Indigenous and settler worldviews without overshadowing Indigenous perspectives or the hyper-concentrated introspection and dangerous appropriation that can happen when settlers insert themselves into Indigenous texts, issues, and community discourse without ethical considerations. The critical analysis that can occur in this meeting place at a textual level can act as a practice ground for the political and ideological debates that exist between Indigenous groups and settler institutions in the physical realm. For Indigenous groups, appropriation, misinterpretation, and theft of their cultural, intellectual, and creative material is a danger to their communities and worldviews. When settlers or non-Indigenous scholars engage with Indigenous materials, the stakes are high. Removing texts from their context (i.e. displacing them from their community-specific frameworks) can result in the recapitulation of colonial ideology, leaving texts, and the communities they represent, vulnerable. It is increasingly important for scholars of Indigenous texts to remember these stakes and the ideological 'baggage' of colonialism that can seep into analysis when scholars do not enter their work with a praxis of respect, reciprocity, gratitude, and humility.

This kind of reasoning makes me think of settler scholar Mary Louise Pratt's concept of the 'contact zone,' which she defines as "the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (Pratt 6). The contact zone becomes another kind of "colonial frontier" (6) where unequal power relations often result in violence between two previously separated groups. This space is defined in terms of "copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power" (7). When two previously separate

spheres, like that of the settler scholar and the Indigenous text, are poised to interact, there is the potential for their encounter to reproduce the violence and erasure of the colonial frontier. This relates to what Cree scholar, Willie Ermine, considers to be the 'ethical space of engagement.' Where Pratt sees the contact zone as an inevitably violent space, Ermine's concept exists in the moment just before contact, when two separate groups are inevitably set up to interact with one another. Ermine sees the "ethical space, at the field of convergence for disparate systems" as a potential "refuge of possibility in cross-cultural relations and the legal order of society, for the effect of shifting the status quo of an asymmetrical social order to a partnership model between world communities" (Ermine 203). The ethical space is one of possibility, and ultimately, of hope, according to Ermine. He sees the "idea of the ethical space, produced by contrasting perspectives of the world" as one which "entertains the notion of a meeting place, or initial thinking about a neutral zone between entities or cultures" (202). This is the hope of Critical Dispositioning.

While Ermine imagines a way to "step out of our allegiances . . . [and] assume a position where human-to-human dialogue can occur" (202), Critical Dispositioning aims to find this ethical space that Ermine proposes, where Indigenous-settler relations can occur in respectful ways, a space where dialogue is possible between these two spheres or communities, but also where productive analysis can happen for educators who seek to put Indigenous work on their syllabi. I acknowledge that reading Ermine's concept as an ideal possibility has the potential to reproduce the politics of civility in a way that can threaten Indigenous epistemology and sovereignty. However, I think that since politics are not extraneous to artistic and philosophical production, we must consider that Ermine is setting up a space for mutual and equal reciprocity

for ‘human-to-human dialogue’ that is not always possible or likely when put into practice. That being said, Ermine’s ethical space asks how we can “reconcile worldviews” and posits the ethical space of engagement as a kind of “theory of ... one such framework and configuring ethical/moral/legal principles in cross-cultural cooperation” (201). Critical Dispositioning, in relation to this, sets up an alternative space of engagement that lets Indigenous texts stay situated within their specific community context. It therefore aims to resist the ‘whitewashing’ or removal of Indigenous texts from their context and opposes the bringing of these texts into a settler-space by allowing the settler-scholar to engage as an ‘outsider.’ The onus for this work is placed on scholars to take an extra step and do the research to find appropriate cultural frameworks, to engage with Indigenous theoreticians and scholars, as well as extend their research outside of academic texts and find non-institutional resources.

While these concepts are both imaginings of colonial encounter from different worldviews, Pratt’s being that of a settler worldview and Ermine’s being based on his Cree worldview, they have commonalities in the disparity between converging nations, as well as the place of convergence: the land. Positionality can be pared down to one’s relationship to the land. From an Indigenous worldview, both “ontology and epistemology are inseparable. The way of thinking about the land and the experience of relating to it are essentially the same” (Barker 86). The land is a place where knowledge, stories, and experience come from, considering that many “creation stories and oral histories” find their roots “in land and place” as this is “how Indigenous people understand themselves and their societies” (87). Keeping land grounded in the analysis and research of Indigenous texts is essential to keeping this work ethical. Settler scholars can do

this by ensuring they use community-specific frameworks that are specific to the texts they are analyzing .

In my own work, I am attentive to my positionality, but I am also cautious. Keeping Pratt and Ermine in mind, when I practice Critical Dispositioning, I refuse to bring Indigenous texts into my worldview where they would be subject to my biases and Euro-Western worldview, as well as susceptible to the application of Western generic conventions when examining them. Instead, I choose to find culturally similar, community-specific theories and critiques to apply to these texts so as to keep them firmly rooted in the worldview they were written in. For example, if I were to analyze the poetry of Michi Saagig scholar, poet, and activist, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, I would try to use theory by another Anishinaabe scholar who can provide context to her worldview and make connections in ways I am unable to and unwilling to as a settler. In this case, the stories and histories of author and elder Basil H. Johnston (Wasauksing First Nation) could provide such a context or framework. That being said, it is my job as an academic to do this labor to find appropriate frameworks and to bridge the gaps between them by putting them in conversation with one another.

As a settler, I am unable to step into the worldviews that these Indigenous texts are written in, not just because it is something I would not understand but because I do not belong there. I also cannot pull these texts out of their frameworks and into my worldview as that would act as another kind of colonial conquest. Ethical scholarship, in my belief, is a third sphere, somewhere in the middle that is ideally separate of both worldviews where this connection can be made safely; a third space that is not inherently Indigenous but also not inherently colonial,

but rather takes all the thoughts, beliefs, and worldviews of a text and lays them on a platter, sitting alongside but separate from one another.

So how does this relate to teaching Indigenous literatures from an outsider's position? It might prove useful to consider the concept of the 'Black shoal' as outlined by Tiffany Lethabo King, to see how we might reconsider our own positions. The shoal is both "a geological and ocean formation" which "force[s] one to pause before proceeding" (King 2). While being not wholly land, but also not totally water, the shoal becomes "a dynamic and moving set of processes and ecological relations as it is a longitudinal and latitudinal coordinate that cartographers attempt to fix in time and space" (3). Its liminal identity means that it is "always [in a] changing and shifting state of flux. As an ecological space, it represents an errant and ecotonal location made of both water and not water" (3). This constant state of movement and of transition makes it unpredictable, and this "unpredictability exceeds full knowability/mappability," meaning the shoal can never be pinned down or contained (3). Not only is the shoal impossible to map, but it is a dangerous thing for sailors to encounter. They are untraceable and therefore sailors and cartographers are unable to predict where they will be. This causes them to slow their vessel, proceed with caution, to take stock of where they are in relation to the shoal and find the best route to maintain distance while still making their way through the passage. We can think of this method as a kind of Critical Dispositioning, as we should slow down when entering the space of encounter: the text. If we do this, we can try to see ourselves in relation to the shoaling thing, i.e. the material we are encountering. Like the 'Black shoal,' we too can experience "a moment of friction and the production of a new topography" (4). As King sees it, the "shoal creates a rupture and at the same time opens up analytical possibilities" (4).

This in-between space that I am calling Critical Dispositioning is the third sphere, a new topography where this work can be done ethically; it is a space born from a rupture, a site of friction and new potentialities, but it also allows researchers and educators to maintain distance from their work. This helps keep scholars from inserting themselves into Indigenous texts and thus reproducing the effects of colonial conquest, but it also prevents pulling these texts out of their contextual sphere, out of their worldview, and into the worldview of the scholar.

King's 'shoal' is in line with Vanessa Watts' (Anishinaabe/Mohawk) concept of 'place-thought.' Since relationship to the land is a defining aspect of settler and Indigenous identity, 'place-thought' is necessary to consider Indigenous texts in context. Watts feels that a "problem with non-Indigenous ways of thinking about land and place is the separation of ontology and epistemology—the way of thinking about the land and the experience of being on the land" (Barker 85, qtd in Watts 22). Place-thought is seen as "the inseparable relationship between how Indigenous peoples understand and interact with the world as a living entity, with will and agency of its own, and how the living, intelligent elements of the world shape Indigenous thinking, culture, and social practice" (88, qtd in Watts). Everyone that lives on the land lives in relationship to it, but that relationship is not always reciprocal and respectful. Settler ideology hinges on the idea of settlers 'staying' wherever they arrive, meaning they are deeply rooted in concepts of land ownership and claiming of space, and are also intent on erasure from the land anything that disrupts their ideals of 'terra nullius,' or 'no one's land,' which sees Indigenous peoples as absent from the land and therefore leaves it open for claiming. Considering place-thought, from Watts' Indigenous perspective, the land is in direct connection with Indigenous peoples and communities, there is respect and honor for the land and what it

might teach them, what knowledge it holds and imparts through animals, seasons, migrational patterns, etc.

As someone who is aware of my positionality and benefits directly from settler colonialism and the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from the land I currently live and learn on, I know I am not the best person to teach Indigenous literatures. If a university has the option, they should always give preferential hiring to Indigenous folks with lived and learned experience to teach the literatures of their own people. That being said, I am still a settler-scholar actively participating in this work. While I engage with these materials nearly every day, I constantly question myself, and am rightly questioned by others on my intentions and practices in doing this work. I use Critical Dispositioning to pull back from the texts I encounter before I can insert myself into them. One way of doing this is looking at one's own writing as well as the text one is looking at, paying special attention to community-building words, like 'our' and 'we' for example, as these words signal a relationship, either a relationship an Indigenous author has to their community or signaling an attempt to integrate an Indigenous audience into the Indigenous author's community. These relational words can be a tool for Indigenous authors to highlight and amplify Indigenous community-building within their text. it is a settler's responsibility, therefore, to keep themselves removed (both physically and ideologically) from the perceived audience of such Indigenous texts.

While being aware of the ways I've benefited from settler colonialism, I want to learn more about the land I occupy, its history, and the peoples whose ancestral land and birthright I currently live on. I want to honor these people and their stories. To do that, I must do this work, I must do this research, and I also must teach others about this place, using Indigenous voices to

do so. While I feel this desire, I also know that it is important to do this work ethically so as to not cause more hurt, but to provide something that has the potential to heal, and that can hopefully empower Indigenous peoples to tell their own stories, speak their own histories, and share their lived experiences. I reject the idea of a scholarly 'expert,' but rather see myself as an interlocutor, putting texts in conversation with each other while not actually claiming ownership, expertise, or intellectual authority over these texts.

Considering Critical Dispositioning as a framework, I am struck with the memory of one particular morning commute to McMaster's campus in Hamilton, Ontario. Coming in from Mississauga, I have one hour each way of dedicated public transportation time. One particularly foggy morning, it was rather dark and dull outside, spitting rain every so often. Lucky enough to have a window seat, I enjoyed, as I usually do when I have this opportunity, taking in the scenery along Highway 407 that takes me from Mississauga, through Oakville, Burlington, and eventually, Hamilton—all what is traditionally Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee territory. As I looked outside this particular morning, I was able to see the many different kinds of trees and bushes and flowers that grow on the side of the highway. I could also see the valleys and creeks and shale rock cliffs that cut through much of Mississauga, Oakville, and Burlington as we traveled along bridges that cross these geographical landscape features. Not only could I see the environment passing by, but since it was dark, I could also see my own reflection in the glass. I watched myself watching the world outside, like a kind of double-exposed image. Applying this to Critical Dispositioning, seeing one's position in this double-exposure allows a scholar to see their position in relation to the things they observe, the things they are surrounded by. While no

one is able to fully remove themselves from bias, being able to see one's biases clearly can help prevent a scholar from carrying them unconsciously into their work.

Settler scholars Adam Barker and Emma Battell Lowman also consider a kind of double-vision in Canada, where the general public has "some willingness to admit that colonization happened, that it had devastating impacts on Indigenous nations and communities, and that a colonial legacy persists into the present in the form of socio-economic inequality, racism and discrimination, and political marginalization of Indigenous communities" (Barker 22). In this double-vision, we can see how "two identities coalesce around an observable, general, and crucial difference: relationship to the land" (43). This is what Barker and Lowman see as the supreme difference in Indigenous and settler worldviews, how these groups view their relationship with the land in the past, present, and how they will continue to treat the land in future engagements.

Overall, Critical Dispositioning is not just a methodological praxis, but it is also a scholarly praxis that requires researchers and educators to do critical introspective work, interrogating their biases, and finding community-based frameworks for the Indigenous texts they analyze. It is, after all, a settler's responsibility to educate themselves, to take on the "responsibility of learning about Indigenous ontologies . . . create respectful spaces of knowing, and as Settlers, learn how we might relate in non-dominating, non-colonial relationships (46). Finding where one is in relation to the work in question, seeing and naming the preconceptions one carries into their work with them, as well as examining the kinds of frameworks one gravitates towards as a scholar are key ways to critically interrogate one's positionality, as well as

begin the hard work of ‘dispositioning’ themselves in order to enter a separate, ethical space where dialogue between settler and Indigenous ideology and communities can occur.

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