Introduction to Native Feminist Texts

This special issue is concerned with Native feminist texts and what they might mean for the work of secondary teachers in English language arts (ELA) classrooms. As we worked to bring this set of articles and interviews to publication, we began to understand this as a project of translation and imagination; translation because Native feminist theories and classroom praxis don’t always use the same discursive registers, and imagination because the connections—while important—are not always immediately identifiable. Indeed, some are still emerging. Our hope in this opening is to set the stage for the articles and interviews in this special issue, and to press for more engagement between Native feminist theorists and classroom teachers.

To prepare to write this introduction, we asked Julie Gorlewski, lead editor of English Journal, to look to the journal’s archives to find prior publications on Native feminisms, Indigeneity, or feminist theory. Julie found several related articles, but two in particular stood out. The first, by Christine Rogers Stanton and Karl Sutton (2012), titled “I guess I do know a good story: Re-envisioning Writing Process with Native American Students and Communities,” attends to the cultural dimensions of teaching writing to Indigenous students, dimensions that are also meaningful in working with non-Indigenous students. The authors write that teachers and students need access to orientations to working with place-based literacy to help them understand appropriate practices for working with these texts in Indigenous communities. The authors emphasize the importance of respect, reciprocity, and interrelatedness in this work (81), and they tell the story of changes they made to their own conceptualizations of the writing process because of their listening to and learning from Indigenous students.

The second article, “Feminist Pedagogy Is for Everybody: Troubling Gender in Reading and Writing” by Heather E. Bruce, Shirley Brown, Nancy Mellin McCracken, and Mary Bell-Nolan (2008), borrows its title from bell hooks’s notion that feminist pedagogy is for everybody. Launching from that notion, the authors explain how “[i]ntroducing students to ways that texts and human interactions can be read differently heightens their awareness to ways that literature, fiction and nonfiction alike, and gendered patterns in the world foreground or silence groups of people or issues” (82). The authors emphasize the importance of teaching literature in which powerful women are fighting injustice and attending to missing or silenced voices. The article affirms the significance of troubling gender in English teaching.

Both of these articles represent initial forays of English Journal into the conversations at the heart of this special issue. However, it is clear that this special issue topic may involve much new ground for the journal. This is why we turn to an introductory discussion on Native feminisms in the next section.

Native Feminisms Bring Together Critiques of Settler Colonialism and Heteropatriarchy

In academia and in communities, many people—including 2spirit people, trans* people, and people who identify as women in many different
Eve Tuck and Karyn Recollet

Native feminist theories bring together critiques of settler colonialism with critiques of heteropatriarchy. Settler colonialism is a form of colonialism in which land is stolen and otherwise accumulated by settlers by any means possible. Settlers are different than migrants, immigrants, or other newcomers because they bring their own laws and worldviews, and enforce them in a new land. Settlers clear land of Indigenous peoples, often through genocide but also through forced removals, residential schooling, blood quantum policies, and other policies designed to diminish Indigenous peoples’ claims to land. As Patrick Wolfe has noted, invasion is a structure, not just a past historical event. This means that settler colonialism continues to shape how settler colonial societies function in contemporary everyday life. This is why many people are taught to believe that Indigenous people are a part of US history and ignore the thriving Indigenous communities that continue to live all over the country. This is why many people believe that Indigenous people are less Indigenous now than they were in the distant past. This is also why many people believe and enact terrible stereotypes about Indigenous people but never connect the extreme poverty experienced by many Indigenous communities in the United States and Canada to their continued dispossession by settler societies. All of these myths work together to communicate again and again that Indigenous people have disappeared and that settlers have rightly inherited the land.

Heteropatriarchy is also a way that society is structured, but this structuring is concerned with the over-significance of “biological” gender in distributing power and ability. We put “biological” in scare quotes because much that is commonly thought to be scientific or biological about gender is actually culturally constructed and enforced through norms and policies (such as the recent legislation passed in North Carolina that requires trans* people to use bathrooms that match the sex they were assigned at birth; see Stafford). Heteropatriarchy works to place men at the top of many power structures, but it also works to strictly define what counts as “man” and what counts as “woman.” Heteropatriarchy structures the superiority of men while suppressing gender fluidity, gender diversity, and portions of a lived life associated with being a woman.

Native feminist scholarship has attended to the ways that settler colonialism and heteropatriarchy are mutually informing structures. In much Native feminist scholarship, the emphasis has been on how settler colonial governments require Indigenous communities to engage in heteropatriarchal systems to cope with and survive colonial occupation (Barker; Simpson). Native feminist scholarship has also attended to the gendered violence of settler colonialism and the ways that occupation is carried out via the persistent violence enacted on Indigenous women, girls, and trans* and 2spirit peoples (Harper; Olsen; Simpson; Stevenson; Wilson).

As indicated above, community organizers and community educators have also made significant contributions in the work of Native feminist theorizing. The Native Youth Sexual Health Network, for instance, is a community-based Native organization by and for Indigenous youth that centers land reclamation and regenerative practices, creating modes to explore and intervene in the impacts of environmental violence, including extractive industries (mining, gas, oil and logging), on sexual reproductive health and justice. These creative modes constitute Indigenous feminist texts within the context of community-building strategies to develop vocabularies and processes of centering land and bodies through youth leadership, sex positivity, trans* and 2spirit leadership, and antiviolence. Expanding the possibilities of Native feminist texts as resurgent, community-building strategies, the Native Youth Sexual Health Network activates stencil art, Indigenous feminist condom cases and beaded condoms workshops, sexy health carnivals, and the technologies of media arts justice as radical forms of intergenerational organizing.

Another Native feminist community organization, the Onaman Collective, mobilizes art and
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land-based activities and was formed to find ways to connect youth to land, traditional knowledge, language, and Elders. This collective attends to the multiple layers or scales of Indigenous texts through activating relationships to lands, waters, and constellatory star space as creation/re-creation stories shared through various mediums including stencil art and youth mural projects. Other Onaman Collective projects, including Anishinaabemowin language houses and harvesting plant materials for art making (ochre and making paint) from the natural world, provide lived instruction on how to center and reaffirm connections to lands and territories as the basis for community building.

Describing Native Feminist Texts

Now that we have sketched the broader concerns of Native feminist theorizing, we turn to three recent works that help to reveal the connections that authors in this issue have been invited to take up. By describing rather than simply defining Native feminist texts, we’re saying something more complicated than simply that Native feminist texts exceed definition (though they do). We are also refusing to make Native feminist texts static or still. Instead, we want to focus on what Native feminist texts make possible. For example, Native feminist texts yield opportunities for secondary teachers and students to consider Indigenous theorizations of gender and sexuality alongside Indigenous understandings of land and self-determination. Each of these works helps to illustrate what we mean by Native feminist texts, and from these descriptions we will begin to build some terms and shared commitments.

The first text is Seneca choreographer Rosy Simas’s dance and multimedia work, *We Wait in the Darkness*, a piece involving dance, film, letters, and images. In an interview with Marie Tollon on the piece, Simas notes that the piece came from her oral history research on her grandmother’s life. Simas’s grandmother was one of the founders of the San Francisco American Indian Center, and her mother is a journalist and author of a book, *We Are Still Here*, on the American Indian Movement. Simas is clear to point out that her work is not about educating non-Native people about issues faced by Indigenous people.

Speaking to the multiple venues for the piece so far, Simas observes, “Every environment shifts my relationship to the audience and it shifts how I move. The most interesting to me is the interactions with the audience and how that changes my performance” (qtd. in Tollon). Near the closing of the piece, Simas tears and distributes pieces of a large map to members of the audience. The map shows the relocation of Seneca people by the US government during the building of the Kinzua Dam. Simas notes that this act of tearing and giving out pieces of the relocation map prompts different responses from her audience, depending on who they are. “It’s not a confrontational act on my end at all,” Simas says. “[I]t’s very matter of fact, but how somebody responds is how they relate to the history of this land and their own relationship to that shared history.”

The next work that helps to reveal the terms and commitments of Native feminist texts is Cree cellist Cris Derksen’s album *Orchestral Powwow*. In this album, Derksen went on the powwow circuit to collaborate with drummers and singers, and then built orchestral music symphonies to emphasize, extend, and echo these traditional songs, often in expansive and resounding ways. The resulting album is harkened as a new genre, though Derksen seems to frame it as a combining of all of her heritage and traditional learnings, including her training in Western classical music (Deerchild).

The third text that we want to bring to this conversation is the work by Marie Wilcox, an 81-year-old Wukchumni woman living in the San Joaquin Valley. Wilcox is perhaps the last speaker of her language. Eight years ago, Wilcox began creating a dictionary of the Wukchumni language, first by writing words on envelopes and later by typing the entries on the computer. She made the dictionary “not for anyone else to learn” but rather “to get it together” (Tolentino). On the future of her language, Wilcox says, “It’ll just be gone one of these days, maybe, I don’t know. It might go on and on.”

We draw attention to these three works, these activations, to describe shared intentions among Native feminist texts. They are all different and perhaps are surprising choices to refer to as texts. As in these examples, this special issue employs texts as an open term, referring to many kinds of communication. Along with written and digital forms,
texts may include filmography, digital storytelling, gaming, gestures, movements and forms of dance, poetry, spoken word forms, and performances.

Simas’s *We Wait in the Darkness* is intently place-based, changed by and intervening in the specificity of the place of her performances. It is also decidedly relational, making available some interpretations and experience to some members of the audience while deliberately confounding other members. She does not make their reactions her responsibility, and instead goes about “shift[ing] the map . . . by tearing it and moving it around” (Tollon). Part of this shifting is activated through sampling remembrance, genealogies, and histories as place making practices. Digital layering, and the creation of “sonic intimacies” (Campbell), draw out the possibilities of Native feminist texts as gesturing toward other possible futures. Perhaps Native feminist texts are acts of style, combining forms that, at first glance, might not seem to complement each other, but in their fusion this layering produces new possibilities for futurity creation. Perhaps it is in these “between spaces” (the acts of syncopation), the unsettling, generative space between the layers, that we know how land and territory feels and sounds. Simas’s activation, for instance, evokes sonic and visual intimacies to contour land spaces, reminding us of how Native feminist texts vibrate creative intimacies with specific land and territories.

Derksen’s album also engages in a sampling, a layered reconfiguring, and shows how to engage Indigenous materials without appropriating them. Though the approach of classical music is usually conscribed to the past, in her combining of traditional powwow songs and orchestral and chamber music, she is actually referencing new possible futures. In describing the process of making the album and then preparing for live performances of the album, Derksen attributes the fit of these two unlikely modes to the “power” of powwow drumming and singing. Though there are affiliated difficulties in the combining (where and when to begin), Derksen notes, “The good thing about orchestral music is that we follow the beat, so we are always going to be following whatever the powwow does” (qtd. in Deerchild). What Derksen has described isn’t an easy matching, and perhaps it isn’t even always possible.

Finally, Wilcox’s dictionary is an intervention that is at the same time a refusal to rescue. It is in many ways a both hopeful but not overly romantic quest. Wilcox is unsure whether her language will continue, or whether the creation of the dictionary will be enough to ensure its longevity. This is the situation that so many speakers of Indigenous languages are facing—and many communities have taken steps to recover their languages even after last speakers have passed on. When we say that Wilcox is refusing to rescue, we mean that she is doing her part so that others can do more in the future. She is helping to ensure a future, which is related to, but not the same as, rescuing a language.

Taken together, Simas’s performance, Derksen’s album, and Wilcox’s dictionary reveal understandings of audience, place, intervention, combining, and futurity at work in Native feminist texts. These threads are continued in the discussions featured in this special issue.

**Indigenous Poetics**

In a compelling book, *The Decolonizing Poetics of Indigenous Literatures*, Mareike Neuhaus describes “Indigenous poetics” as the arts and practices of reading Indigenous texts. Indigenous poetics, like Indigenous texts, are multiple because there are as many ways of reading Indigenous texts as there are texts and Indigenous nations. Neuhaus explains that Indigenous poetics are approaches to making sense of Indigenous expressions, a map that can guide readings (2). Neuhaus writes, “Indigenous literatures grow out of different realities than do Anglo-American literatures, and these other realities should be reflected in our readings of Indigenous texts. . . . What is needed, then, is a reading strategy that allows us to ground our readings of Indigenous texts in Indigenous discourse traditions but without compromising the important political, historical, social, intellectual, and other contexts from which these texts emerge” (2). In particular, Neuhaus describes the practice of reading “holophrastically.” A holophrase is a way of describing a sentence that is contained in one word. Neuhaus provides the example of the Cree word *ki-nohte-hâcimo-stâ-tinâwâw*, which translates as “I want to tell you folks a story” (1). This idea is expressed as a multiword sentence in English but expressed as...
Neuhaus explains that the holophrase is the single most dominant structure of Indigenous languages in North America, and for this reason, she emphasizes the reading for and with the holophrase as a key Indigenous poetic. Neuhaus advocates for reading Indigenous texts, especially those that are written in English, holophrastically. This approach is both effective and ethical, she notes. "To read holophrastically means to let one’s readings of Indigenous literatures be informed by the uses of languages and the construction of stories in Indigenous-language discourse, and to be guided by that knowledge in making sense of Indigenous texts. In other words, holophrastic reading attempts to empower Indigenous peoples within their own language and discourse traditions by helping us ground our readings of Indigenous writing within those very traditions, as they characterize and define the writing” (9). Neuhaus’s emphasis on the utility of holophrastic readings of Indigenous texts produced in English language pushes back against the problematic assumptions that such texts are less Indigenous, or conversely, are more colonized because of their use of English. Indeed, “once we shift how we read Indigenous literatures in English—namely by thinking outside the very language they are composed in—we are able to realize how much the colonizer’s language has become an essential factor in the project of decolonization” (7).

**Overview of the Articles and Interviews**

The articles and interviews in this special issue engage possibilities for Native feminist texts in secondary English classrooms. Each of the articles discusses Native feminist text(s) while also providing an example of an Indigenous poetic—an approach to reading Native feminist texts. To create this special issue, we also conducted interviews with two prominent thinkers on Native feminist texts. These interviews provide much for secondary English teachers to consider in their adoption of texts on and by Indigenous peoples, especially with regard to representation and appropriation.

Leilani Sabzalian’s “Native Feminisms in Motion” offers a productive and generative mobilization of Grande’s conceptualizations of “in motion” to describe how Native youth evoke radical relationalities through embodied and symbolic relationships to land through the creation of Native feminist texts. Sabzalian explores how land is given meaning through narrative practices and possibilities, spatially configuring complex Indigenousities as grounded in motion, offering that rooted/routed(ness) can inform critical Indigenous land pedagogy. This article describes cultural productions that expand our conceptions of text to encompass “forms of movement.” Drawing on a Native youth collective’s activation of a Native center as part of the Title v111 program, Sabzalian illuminates the variant ways that text can narrate place/space through engaging collective, community rooted modes of space making and presenting within the public school system. Provocative in the sense of challenging the ways Indigeneity is framed within the context of multiculturalism, Sabzalian’s analysis shows us how texts can refuse colonial borders through embodied, material, and immaterial forms. For instance, Sabzalian evokes map making to push back against Indigenous erasure, dislocation, and dispossession, describing how maps evoke counterknowledges, productive in illustrating their use as spatial installations of affiliation, belonging, and as sites of resistance.

Métis filmmaker Cara Mumford’s article, “Le(e/a)ks: Being Anishinaabekwe on the Land Is Political,” speaks of refusals to settler colonial dispossession through writing about her process of producing and filming Leanne Betasamoke Simpson’s spoken word piece *Leaks*, featuring Tara Williamson on vocals and piano. *Leaks* optically centers decolonial love as sonic/visual technologies acknowledging ongoing state practices of removal, removing Indigenous peoples from access to their traditional territories to exercise their relationships to the natural world. Mumford’s important contribution to this discussion on Native feminist texts illuminates what it means to be in radical relationship as part of the filmmaking process as an ethic of care. Mumford contributes an artistic approach that is attentive to the various forms of settler colonial violence, generative in offering an artistic process that takes into consideration complicated histories of struggle, violence against Indigenous women, girls, men, trans*, and queer community members. This creative and critical work explores what it means to engage critical land pedagogy,
environmental justice through poetry, gesturing toward making links between environmental justice and reproductive justice. Revealed through this creative piece, territory and ongoing/consensual relationships to land are necessary for the continued resurgence of Anishinaabe through activations of water, seeds, and earth. Mumford articulates an approach to Anishinaabemowin (Anishinaabe language) simplicity and complexity in activating Michi-Saagig territory. She describes, "simply learning how this land looks and sounds in Anishinaabemowin changes how you look at the land; complex because the language mirrors the motion and process of the natural world, it springs from the connection to the land itself."

Cherry-McDaniel’s article, “The Precarious Position of the Black Settler Pedagogue: Decolonizing (De-weaponizing) Our Praxis through the Critical Reading of Native Feminist Texts,” engages classroom practice and pedagogy in negotiating the complicated histories and relationships to settler colonial occupation on Native lands from her perspective as an African American teacher educator at a historically Black college. Critical of structures supporting anti-blackness and dispossession, Cherry-McDaniel offers a critique of what she calls the “settler teacher syndrome” and offers the transformative potential of Native feminist literature to inform how teacher candidates think about themselves and their future students. She negotiates the complexities of “arrivant” and settler subjectivities within the context of the pedagogical, practical situatedness of Black teachers, who she states are seen as “fungible beings, able to stand in as settler.” We are especially excited to publish this article because it speaks to important conversations happening between scholars and activists in Indigenous studies and in Black studies about the connections between constructions of Indigeneity and Blackness within settler colonial structures.

Priscilla Settee (Plains Cree) offers a salient discussion of the possibilities of an engaged urban educational curriculum that centers young people’s change-making processes toward the intersecting structures of oppressions influencing the lives of Indigenous women, men, queer, trans*, and 2spirit community members. Settee’s critical pedagogy mobilizes Cree conceptualizations of wakotawin (relations), kisahigan (love), and pimatisiwin (the good life) to inform teaching methods such as the embrace of participatory action and cooperative learning in service to communities. Settee’s analysis of Plains Cree hip-hop artist Eekwol’s spoken word poetry illuminates multiscalar activations of change making highlighting interventions to missing and murdered Indigenous women, men, trans*, queer, and 2spirit community members. Settee’s contribution to the journal gestures toward “the development of practical resistances in the decolonization process” and thus mobilizes possibilities of Native feminist texts to create community-rooted revisionary futuristic spaces.

Our interview with Debbie Reese attends to the politics of choosing literature for secondary English classrooms. There are many young adult books that are celebrated as authentic or accurate portrayals of Indigenous life or history, but are in fact riddled with false information and dehumanizing portraits of Indigenous peoples. Debbie Reese, who runs the blog American Indians in Children’s Literature, provides a helpful list of resources for ELA teachers. Reese discusses the affects of the stereotypical/homogenizing representations of Indigenous people in children’s literature, and also the consequences of teaching a curriculum that erases Indigenous stories. She offers ideas for teachers to incorporate a critical approach to reading Indigenous authors. Reese stresses the importance of bringing these discussions into classrooms not just for the benefit of Indigenous kids that may be in the room, but for all students to not further reproduce the ignorance that denies and erases Indigenous presence.

Our interview with Adrienne Keene focuses on the common mistakes that well-meaning teachers may make with regard to appropriating Indigenous materials in curriculum and pedagogy. Keene, who writes the popular blog Native Appropriations, offers her thoughts on the current state of cultural appropriation and why it matters for educators. Keene offers both advice for teachers on how to talk about issues of colonialism and appropriation in classrooms and also the political stakes of not doing so.

We began by saying that this issue has been a project of translation and imagining, but Neuhaus’s notion of holophrastic reading gives a different understanding of the terms of engagement between
secondary English teachers who may be new to Native feminist texts and these texts. Perhaps knowing more about the larger project of critique involved in Native feminist theories—a critique of settler colonialism and heteropatriarchy—is the most important holophrastic reading that teachers can engage in with students. Certainly knowing more about the Indigenous communities from which Indigenous texts emerge is a crucial component. But to do all of this without relying on inaccurate or dehumanizing representations or without appropriating Indigeneity is also required in these endeavors, as our interviews with Reese and Keene discuss. Learning to engage the Indigenous poetics of Native feminist texts in secondary English classrooms is difficult and meaningful work; the conversations here are just a beginning.

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Works Cited

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