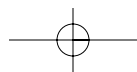
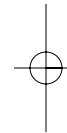
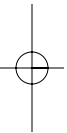

Braiding Histories



Susan D. Dion

Braiding Histories

Learning from Aboriginal People's
Experiences and Perspectives

Including the Braiding Histories stories
co-written with Michael R. Dion



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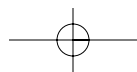
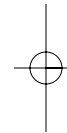
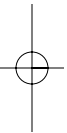
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Dedicated to Lindy Dion

To Dad, who encouraged and supported my speaking and
whose voice I continue to hear.

Always,
Susan



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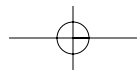
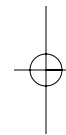
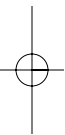
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Acknowledgments

During the summer of 2007, I read Thomas King's book *The Truth about Stories* (2003) with my mother, Audrey Dion. It started by accident, really. I needed to read the book in preparation for a class that I was teaching, and, well, truth be told, Mom and I didn't always have a lot to talk about when I visited. It came to be our routine: we would go outside to the patio, sit at the picnic table, and Mom would listen as I read. When I finished reading, she always asked the same question: "But am I an Indian?" One day my daughter Vanessa joined us on the patio, and when I finished reading, Mom explained to her, "When I was sixteen, seventeen, eighteen years old, being Indian was not a good thing, and I didn't want to be Indian." And then Mom turned to me and asked, "Why is it that Canadians can care about the disasters around the world, why do they care about people across the oceans but they do not care about the Indians living right here in Canada?" Only then did I realize: some of my mother's questions have become my own. In many ways, this book is a response to those questions. It is informed by my hope for new and better relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada.

Based on a PhD dissertation titled "Braiding Histories: Responding to the Problematics of Canadians Hearing a First Nations Perspective of Post-contact History," this book would not have been possible without the generous support and involvement of many people. I am thankful for the guidance offered by a committee of good teachers including Roger Simon, Kari Dehli, and Celia Haig-Brown. They offered thoughtful engagement with my work that required me to think deeply about my project and to recognize and learn from its complexities. They introduced me to theories and ways of thinking that allowed me to articulate my understanding of classroom practice. And, with

compassion and patience, they supported me in the struggle to write with my own academic voice.

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I am deeply indebted to the three intermediate classroom teachers who participated in this project. Jenna, Diane, and Chloe, your willingness to allow me to reflect on your classroom practice provided me the space and opportunity to learn. Thanks also to the three graduate students who allowed me to include their work in Chapter 7 of this book.

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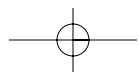
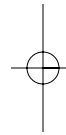
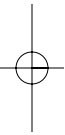
The work that informs this book was completed during my tenure at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, at the University of Toronto. At that time I received generous support from both the Ontario Graduate Scholarship Program and the Southern First Nations

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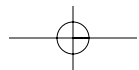
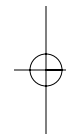
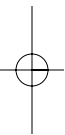
Earlier versions of a few chapters were published elsewhere. I thank the following publishers for granting permission to reprint and revise this work. A version of Chapter 2 appeared under the title “(Re)telling to Disrupt: Aboriginal People and Stories of Canadian History” in *Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies* 2, 1 (Spring 2004): 55-76. Chapter 7 was published under the title “Disrupting Molded Images: Identities, Responsibilities and Relationships – Teachers and Indigenous Subject Material” in *Teaching Education* 18, 4 (December 2007): 329-42. The Braiding Histories Stories were first published as “The Braiding Histories Stories” in *Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies* 2, 1 (Spring 2004): 77-100.

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Thanks to all for helping me to bring this project to fruition.



Braiding Histories



1

Historical Amnesia and the Discourse of the Romantic, Mythical Other

The roots of injustice lie in history and it is there where the key to the regeneration of Aboriginal society and a new and better relationship with the rest of Canada can be found.

– Georges Erasmus, *Address for the Launch of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People*

The dominant group in any nation state often resorts to nostalgia, to mental or cultural ellipses, and to general forgetfulness in search of meanings and definitions that serve its own ideological needs of the moment.

– Amritjit Singh, Joseph T. Skerrett Jr., and Robert E. Hogan, Introduction to *Memory and Cultural Politics*

If justice for Aboriginal people lies in remembering, but forgetting serves the supposed needs of the Canadian nation, where are the possibilities for accomplishing justice to be found?

Remembering to Forget: The Discourse of the Romantic, Mythical Other

Finally, nine years after Dudley George, a member of the Stoney Point First Nation, was shot and killed by an Ontario Provincial Police officer, a public inquiry was launched. The mandate of the Ipperwash Inquiry was to investigate and report on the events surrounding his death and to make recommendations that would avoid violence in similar circumstances. The shooting of Dudley George occurred on Tuesday, 5 September 1995, during a confrontation between police and Aboriginal people occupying Ipperwash Provincial Park.¹ A burial ground is located within the park boundaries, and people from the Stoney Point band were protesting the government's unwillingness to acknowledge the ground as sacred and to treat it accordingly.

Like other Aboriginal people across Canada, those from Stoney Point were taking action in response to the Canadian government's limited action in addressing land claims, social issues, and self-determination

4 *Historical Amnesia and the Discourse of the Other*

for Aboriginal people. In the aftermath of the shooting, Mike Harris, then premier of Ontario, refused to involve the government in negotiations with people from Stoney Point, claiming that their “illegal activity” was a matter for the police.² Positioning Aboriginal people who have taken up arms to protect their land and their rights as mere lawbreakers and dismissing their actions as illegal is based on a particular understanding of history.

I was not surprised by the premier’s response. My teaching and research practice involves sharing an Aboriginal perspective of post-contact history with non-Aboriginal teachers and students. Like the politicians, many teachers and students with whom I work resist an understanding of history that positions Aboriginal people as human agents actively resisting oppression by dominant Canadian society. Calling on images of tipis, tomahawks, furs, and feathers, teachers and students too often reveal a dehumanized representation of Aboriginal people.³ Gail Guthrie Valaskakis (1993, 156) of the Chippewa Nation writes, “From the romantic representations ... to the marginalized Indians of historical and political process, Canadian images of Indians have worked to construct a discourse of subordination.” I refer to this as the discourse of the romantic, mythical Other. In school textbooks, in movies, on television, and in all sorts of advertisements, Aboriginal people are positioned as romantic, mythical people of the past.⁴

In the *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (Canada 1996), the authors urge Canadians to attend to the past and argue that recognizing the historical relationship is the way to accomplishing a new and just relationship. They (*ibid.*, 27) also concluded that “most Canadians are simply unaware of the history of the Aboriginal presence in what is now Canada and that there is little understanding of the origins and evolution of the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people that have led us to the present moment.” Like the authors, I believe that rendering non-Aboriginal people cognizant of our stories is a crucial first step in establishing fertile ground on which to cultivate an equitable relationship. Clearly, increased attention to post-contact histories is needed; we can embark on this task by including First Nations perspectives in educational forums, including schools, Canadian historical sites, cinema, and broadcast television. However, further to sharing our stories of five hundred years of resistance and replacing negative or stereotypical representations with positive diverse representations, the discourse that positions First Nations people as romantic, mythical Others needs to be altered in such a way that Canadians will be engaged in a rethinking

of their understanding of Aboriginal people, their understanding of themselves, and of themselves in relationship with Aboriginal people.

Sharing our stories in a way that non-Aboriginal people will hear is problematic. The discourse of the romantic, mythical Other is premised on a “forgetting” of the past, and this forgetting of particular memories has had different consequences for different groups of people. When they (re)member the past, what Aboriginal people attempt to maintain at the centre is what many Canadians would like to forget.⁵ Stories that dominate Canadian history reflect an unwillingness and inability to come to terms with the reality of Canada’s relationship with Aboriginal people. Nation-to-nation treaties, forced relocation of Aboriginal people to reserve land, the policy of forced assimilation, residential schools, and the Indian Act are forgotten events of a past that does not coincide with a dominant concept of Canadian national identity. Canadians typically position themselves as defenders of human rights.⁶ If they occupy a position of relative comfort, it is because they earned it through their own hard work. The long history of oppressive actions taken against Aboriginal people is a direct contradiction to that understanding. Rather than challenging the contradiction, most Canadians continue to position Aboriginal people as figures of the past, as people of a make-believe world; and possibilities for accomplishing an equitable and just relationship are jeopardized. Students with whom I speak make statements such as “real Indians lived in tipis a long time ago” and “what happened then was wrong, but in Canada today everybody is equal and should be treated the same.”

Critical Events

Three events that occurred during the early 1990s both inform and explicate my understanding of the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada and contribute to my understanding of the complexity of teaching and learning from this shared history. In combination, these events brought to the surface a discomfort I have been wrestling with for a very long time. Currently, their chronological order seems less important than the way in which they weave together and bring to bear questions, concerns, and a basic unsettledness.

Nurturing Historical Amnesia in the Classroom

Too many Canadians are caught in assimilationist ideology expecting Aboriginal people to disappear. Although initial

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moves were made by design more recent moves are driven as much by ignorance.

– Celia Haig-Brown, “Healing a Fractured Circle”

During the 1980s and early 1990s, through my work as a practising teacher and as the mother of three elementary-school-aged children, I became familiar with the sequence and content of the Ontario school curriculum. As a teacher in the primary division, I observed older students from a distance as they completed their required unit of study about “People of Native Ancestry.”⁷ Suddenly, a totem pole constructed out of cardboard boxes would appear in the school foyer, a model of an “Indian village” would be displayed in the library, and brightly coloured, fierce-looking masks would line the hallways. These creations always left me feeling somewhat distressed about the content and methods of teaching about the First Nations. They brought back memories of my own days in elementary school. Had I not participated in the same sort of activities thirty years earlier? Although I was sure that the lessons of those days were not titled “People of Native Ancestry,” I was overwhelmed by the commonality of the content. These lessons focused on Western anthropology’s interpretation of material culture as it existed prior to European contact, reproduced the discourse of the romantic, mythical Other, and, as such, nurtured a kind of remembering to forget.

When my eldest child entered grade four, I was expecting him to complete a People of Native Ancestry unit. What I did not expect was the way in which his participation would bring back questions and images that had haunted me as a child. My mother was born and raised on the Moravian of the Thames Reserve near Chatham, Ontario. When my siblings and I were children, we didn’t talk about being Indian; our mother had been convinced by the Canadian government’s policy of forced assimilation that it was best to forget being Indian and simply act white. When I was in elementary school, lessons about “Indians” contributed to the confusion I felt regarding my mixed Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal identity. I was bewildered by the description of Indians as “noble savages,” which was presented to us at school and through the media. When I was a little girl, I had a recurring dream: I would find myself in the wooded area at the back of my schoolyard, playing alone. Suddenly, I would be racing through the woods, being chased by a “bunch of wild Indians.” Terrified, I turned back to see if I was getting away. Then I saw the faces underneath the

war paint. They were the faces of my mother, aunts, uncles, and cousins. I grew up haunted by the images of the wild savage. My confusion lay in knowing that I was Indian but not knowing what that meant. I did not live in a tipi, hunt for my food, wear war paint, or carry a tomahawk. Yet this was the construction of "Indianness" that I was offered in my everyday life. As N. Scott Momaday of the Kiowa Apache Nation has written, an "idea of one's ancestry and posterity is really an idea of the self" (quoted in Valaskakis 1988, 268). My sense of self was in a state of conflict. As an adolescent, I buried that conflict, which did not resurface until, as a teacher and parent, I found myself confronted with the same dehumanized images of Aboriginal people. What caused my distress was the presentation of the romanticized, mythical "Indian" figure to my own child. However, it was a letter from his teachers that instigated my action.

When my son's class completed their unit of study, the two grade four teachers sent a letter home. In it, they explained that, following in the traditions of the West Coast Native people, their students would celebrate the completion of their work with a "Potlatch." The celebration would include a potluck lunch. Students would bring in food to share, dress up as Native people, and make presentations about their mask making, Indian villages, and totem poles. Some would share the "Native" legends they had written. The letter began with "Dear Parents: You probably by now have seen and heard enough about Native people." When I read that, my immediate response was anger and a kind of shock that comes from the experience of wounding. For me, the notion of "hearing enough" was an impossibility. The traditional territory of my ancestors is in what is now the state of New Jersey. Located as it was on the eastern seaboard, ours was one of the first nations to be in contact with European newcomers. As a nation, we have survived over five hundred years of colonization, but much of our knowledge and history has been destroyed. My extremely personal response to the letter was coupled with questions and concerns regarding the ways in which First Nations people were positioned by the teachers not only in the letter itself but more importantly during their lessons.

When I asked about the letter, the teachers explained that it referred to the length of the unit and the amount of work students had been asked to complete, not to the people. Yet it reflects the extent to which the unit was something other than a study of the history and culture of real people. Their approach had dehumanized the unit content for the teachers and, consequently, for the students as well. The letter went on to say that "This unit was intended to give [the students] some of

the skills they would need for the next unit, Science Fair.” In essence, this emphasis on skills de-emphasized the content to the point of making it irrelevant. I asked myself what conclusions the students would draw from the information they were given. What impression would it leave – that Native people must simply have disappeared, that Western society dominated and must therefore be better, that Native people were primitive savages who were not capable of defending themselves and their land? Ignoring post-contact history from First Nations perspectives promotes an image in the minds of young people that the white Euro-Canadian dominant culture is superior to other cultures and that members of that cultural group deserve advantages not provided to “inferior Others.” It reinforces a belief that members of this culture occupy a place of privilege in society because they deserve it. Most importantly, I asked, “How can students begin to understand current conditions if this is what they are learning in school?” In spite of teachers’ desire to generate engaging lessons and respectful images of Aboriginal people, they were reproducing a discourse that positioned First Nations people as romanticized, mythical Others. Whether in class, in the halls, or on the playground, students absorb the values, see the power relations, and hear the debates of society every day. Educators need, therefore, to take a critical look at how the image of First Nations people as romantic, mythical Others is reproduced in schools and to consider strategies to challenge it. During the past thirty years, the field of First Nations education has received increased attention. Justifiably, the focus by parents, activists, teachers, and curriculum planners has been on education by and for First Nations students. Although that work is critical and demands our continued attention and support, it is also important to question what non-First Nations students are taught about the First Nations and to investigate the challenges teachers confront in teaching this subject material.⁸

Events at and Public Responses to Kanesatake

But even as these events unfold before us, it is clear that our response to them, as non-Natives, is still conditioned by the image of the Imaginary Indian.

– Daniel Francis, *The Imaginary Indian*

During the spring of 1990, tensions increased between the Mohawk community of Kanesatake and its non-Aboriginal neighbours in the

town of Oka, Quebec. A struggle concerning land located between the two communities had been intensifying for over a hundred years.⁹ When the residents of Oka announced plans to expand a golf course onto the disputed land, the Mohawk set up a blockade. On 11 July, Quebec police attempted to storm it; they failed and one policeman was killed. For eleven weeks, the standoff grew steadily worse. The Canadian army was called in and applied increasing pressure. About sixty kilometres away, Kahnawake residents supported the Kanesatake Mohawk by blocking highways crossing their reserve as well as the Mercier Bridge that links non-Aboriginal residents on the south shore to their jobs in Montreal. The standoff at Kanesatake and Kahnawake lasted for seventy-eight days.

The images from Kanesatake stayed, lodged painfully in the back of my mind: images of angry white residents throwing rocks at cars carrying Aboriginal elders, mothers, and children; the absolute anger on the part of white residents at the actions taken by Aboriginal people. That anger, it seemed to me, reflected an incredulous attitude, one demanding "By what right do 'they' (Indians) inconvenience 'us' (Canadians)?" What the images represent for me is the chasm that exists between too many of us. As Noel Dyck (1991, 13) writes, "Generally speaking, Indians and non-Indians stand on opposite sides of a history of interaction and tend to be polarized further by an unequal knowledge of each other. Non-Indians are, by and large, unaware of just how little they know about Indians and of how sharply the individual and cumulative cultural experience of living on federally administered reserves departs from the experience of other Canadians." There is little knowledge or understanding of just how sharply the experiences of Aboriginal people differ from the experiences of other Canadians. In addition, there is little appreciation for the frustration that comes from the lack of response to land claims (the roots of the most recent standoff at Kanesatake date back to 1718), social issues, and the demand for the right to self-determination accomplished on our own terms.

The events at Kanesatake in the summer of 1990 dominated the media and brought international attention to the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada. In the years following the events at Kanesatake, the map of Canada has been altered with the establishment of the territory of Nunavut. In addition, Aboriginal people are now included during constitutional talks and have gained recognition as one of the founding peoples of Canada. These changes have not been easily accomplished, and roadblocks and other

forms of confrontation continue. For many Canadians, the heightened attention to Aboriginal issues has simply increased their confusion. A five-minute media clip cannot begin to cover the complexity of the issue (LaForme 1997; Smart and Coyle 1997; Dyck 1991). Clearly, change has occurred, but this increased attention has had limited impact on the relationship of injustice. These limits serve as further evidence that the problem does not lie solely in the need for an accurate record – what we lack is the means to assimilate what is known. Without understanding the history of our relationship, how can Canadians make sense of current conditions? How is it possible to understand by what right we take a stand at the barricades? We have been speaking back to non-Aboriginal people since their arrival in our land, but what do they hear when we speak? How is justice possible in the wake of such learned ignorance?

A Letter of Thanks and the Hope of Remembrance Pedagogy

The very hope for a just and compassionate future lies, at least in part, in working through the traumatic catastrophes we have inherited.

– Roger I. Simon, Sharon Rosenberg, and
Claudia Eppert, *Between Hope and Despair*

Theresa Alexander (Lenni Lenape–Potawatami) is my cousin. When I read statistics about social conditions affecting Aboriginal people in Canada – suicide rates, substance abuse, assault, lack of educational opportunities, and poverty – I think of Theresa. While she grew up, her life was this reality. As a young adult, she continued to be plagued with pain. She was in and out of touch with me, and in the late 1980s had cut off all contact with her extended family. The last we heard, she had moved to Vancouver. Then, early in the winter of 1991, my parents received a letter from Theresa. In it, she told us about the First Nations healing program she was involved with. It had been desperately hard, but she was getting her life on track. She was now going to school and working at a part-time job. She spoke about finally realizing that she really was worthy of the life the Creator had given her and that she deserved the happiness she had finally found. In the letter she thanked my parents for their ongoing support: “Auntie Audrey and Uncle Lindy, I want to thank you, but mostly I just want you to know how happy I am.” Theresa’s letter was important on a personal

level, but it was more than good news about a loved one: for me, it became emblematic of the hope and possibilities of education.

Theresa's letter initiated in me what Roger Simon (1992, 9) describes as a disruptive daydream: "Education and disruptive daydreaming share a common project: the production of hopeful images. That is, the production of 'images of that which is not yet' that provoke people to consider, and inform them in considering, what would have to be done for things to be otherwise." What would it take to transform the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada? The hope that I found in Theresa's letter came from my realization that, if education could interrupt Theresa's concept of herself as one who deserved the pain and suffering that had been so much a part of her life, it was possible to imagine an education project capable of engaging Canadians in a process of working through the differing implications of our shared history.

The summer after she wrote the letter, I met up with Theresa at a family celebration. She talked about the difficult work of facing her past and coming to know herself. She explained how the program that she was involved with was working. It combined upgrading courses (so that she could get her high school diploma) with learning from Aboriginal elders, from history, culture, and ceremonies. She explained that through her courses she had begun to understand the Canadian policy of forced assimilation and its impact on her, on us, on our families, and on our communities. It was through this work, Theresa explained, that she was able to develop an alternative understanding of herself, her worthiness, and her place in relationship with others. She had completed her program, had found a steady job as a bookkeeper, and had made a home for herself. I told Theresa about the project I had begun, sharing a First Nations perspective of post-contact history with teachers and students. Together we talked about the change we were striving for and how (re)membering and working through the past was part of the difficult struggle to accomplish it. Theresa and I were walking on somewhat different paths, but we were headed in the same direction. We were both engaged in education projects, confronting memories of violence, investigating experiences of colonialism, understanding the impact of forced assimilation, and, importantly, we were working for the recognition of Aboriginal humanity.

Talking with Theresa affirmed my understanding of the hope of education. She also helped me to understand the complexity of the work I was wanting to accomplish. I was looking for ways of teaching that would not simply set my audience grasping for that which it had

always known. Rather, I wanted to engage Canadians in a project of (re)membering, to create learning opportunities that allow Canadians to recognize their relationship with Aboriginal people, to acknowledge and understand how their own identities in the present are implicated in the history of a shared relationship. Conceptually, my project was taking form; the specifics emerged in collaboration with my brother, Michael Dion, and evolved from an incident that occurred while I was working as a special education support teacher.

Remembering, Forgetting, and the Braiding Histories Project

I was in my classroom writing report cards when Robert, a student, came to see me. He showed me his reading comprehension book and asked for help.¹⁰ The story he had been assigned, titled “Sacagawea,” featured a strong, brave Indian woman who helps keep peace between explorers and Indians.¹¹ Sacagawea hunts, cooks, and translates for the white explorers, and, as the story goes, many mountains, rivers, and lakes are named after her. In the account of Sacagawea, the Aboriginal woman is positioned as material wealth, stolen and traded for as if she were an inhuman object. Her goodness lies in her ability to help the white traders and explorers. Like other schoolbook references to Aboriginal people, this story focuses on the pre-contact and early contact years, contributing to the view of Aboriginal people as a people of the past.¹² One of the most frustrating things about it is that it appears in a series of stories concerning animals and inanimate objects, positioning its subjects as part of the inhuman elements of the natural world.

When I mentioned the incident of my student and his Sacagawea narrative to Michael, we began to talk about producing our own stories featuring Aboriginal people. In the Sacagawea account, we recognized the romanticized, mythical Indian figure that we had encountered in the pages of our own elementary school textbooks. During our discussion, Michael and I made a commitment to write a series of stories that would provide alternative representations of Aboriginal people; we began work on a writing project we called *Braiding Histories: Learning from the Life Stories of First Nations People*. In this project, we would share the stories of our ancestors in response to a need for texts that offer alternative representations of Aboriginal people as well as of their relationship with non-Aboriginal people.¹³ Learning to (re)tell has been an arduous process, one that took us from producing documentary-like vignettes to what we now conceive of as

(re)tellings.¹⁴ The stories, which reflect our (re)membered past, contribute to a discourse that affirms the humanity and agency of Aboriginal people and recognizes our work as active social agents resisting ongoing conditions of injustice.

In the first part of this book, which includes the Braiding Histories Stories, I reflect on the issues and challenges involved in writing the stories as a way of unravelling the pedagogical possibilities and difficulties of presenting testimony that bears on post-contact First Nations–Canadian history. I have arranged my investigation around three thematic areas: Aboriginal conceptions of history and story, the relationship between testimony and witnessing, and questions of representation. Reflecting on the collaborative process that Michael and I undertook, looking at the work of other Aboriginal writers, and listening to their remarks on cultural production helped us comprehend the issues and challenges involved in producing texts that express the historical substance and significance of the events of colonization.

I recognize the constraints of teaching and learning within the structure of a classroom but also recognize the possibilities for, and have a desire to transform, the ways in which Aboriginal people are remembered and (re)presented in the school curriculum. In the second part of this book, I describe the Braiding Histories Project, an empirical study of how the Braiding Histories Stories, as texts offering an Aboriginal perspective of post-contact history, were taken up in the classroom. In this project, I worked with three non-Aboriginal intermediate teachers whose students were predominately non-Aboriginal to investigate how the teachers comprehended and used the stories. Their conception of their responsibilities as teachers and their approach to teaching were not atypical and offer important insights for understanding how the stories are situated in the concrete practices of classroom teaching. This project was not concerned with evaluating the teachers' capacities – instead, it was about uncovering the issues and challenges that educators confront when they take up the task of teaching and learning from Aboriginal subject material.