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## **Land and Storytelling: Indigenous Pathways towards Healing, Spiritual Regeneration and Resurgence**

### **Abstract**

This article aims to contribute to discourses of healing, Indigenous resurgence and spiritual regeneration within the context of the Indian Residential School Truth and Reconciliation Commission that took place in Canada between 2008 and 2015. First, it considers to what extent the TRC's restorative justice process can relate to Indigenous ways of conceptualising healing. Secondly, it reflects on the Commission's exclusive focus on the IRS system and its legacies, which, according to many Indigenous scholars, overlooks a much broader and more complex history of colonisation, political domination and land dispossession still ongoing. I underline that, from an Indigenous perspective, land plays a fundamental role to achieve healing, spiritual regeneration and resurgence. In the last section, I move the discussion to the literary dimension as I explore Richard Wagamese's 2012 novel *Indian Horse*; in particular, I argue that fiction, especially that fiction produced during the years of the Commission's work, can be a crucial site to challenge the TRC's restorative process and to bring out the significance of storytelling and of an Indigenous deep sense of connection to the land as a source of learning, spiritual reclaiming, and healing.

### **Keywords**

Indian Residential School System, Healing, Regeneration, Resurgence, Land, Storytelling, Richard Wagamese, *Indian Horse*

### **Introduction**

Charged with the task of addressing the harms caused by the Indian Residential School (IRS) system, the Indian Residential School Truth and Reconciliation Commission that took place in Canada between 2008-2015 (TRC or Commission) was mainly designed to provide a culturally appropriate and safe setting for former IRS students, their families and communities as they came forward to the Commission and shared their stories. The Commission was also tasked with creating a historical record and promoting awareness and public education of Canadians about the IRS system, its impacts and legacies, and with facilitating truth and reconciliation events at both the national and community levels between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.<sup>1</sup> Running for more than a century since their establishment in the mid-nineteenth century, residential schools aimed at assimilating Indigenous peoples into white Canadian society and achieving what has gone down in history as the erasure of the "Indian in the child" (Milloy, 1999: xv). The last federally operated residential school was Gordon Indian Residential School, located in Saskatchewan, which closed in 1996.

The harms caused by residential schools include but are not limited to: widespread sexual, physical, emotional, and spiritual abuse; bullying (student-on-student abuse); the aggressive assimilation of Indigenous children into Euro-Canadian culture; substandard living conditions; and neglect resulting in death and disease (Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2002).

This article seeks to contribute to discourses of healing, reconciliation and Indigenous resurgence by reflecting on the extent to which the concept of restorative justice promoted by the Commission relates to Indigenous epistemologies and perspectives. In addition to providing a brief historical and political context to the establishment of the TRC, I compare the Commission's concept of justice and Indigenous values, drawing attention to points of overlap but also to the differences between the restorative justice underpinning the TRC's work and Indigenous pathways to healing. I then move to consider the Commission's exclusive focus on the IRS system and its legacies, which overlooks a much broader and more complex history of colonisation, political domination and land dispossession which is still ongoing. Emphasis is thus placed on the concept of land and on the profound connection between land and Indigenous peoples and cultural practices. Drawing on the works of Glen Coulthard, Gerald Taiaiake Alfred, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, and Jeanette Armstrong I underline the paramount role of the land – or rather (re-)connection to the land – for Indigenous pathways towards healing, spiritual regeneration and Indigenous resurgence against past and present injustices caused by settler-colonialism. This perspective is further investigated in the last section, where I explore Richard Wagamese's 2012 novel, *Indian Horse*, as it exemplifies the contribution of Indigenous literature to discourses of Indigenous healing and resurgence.

Since breaking the silence about the IRS system in the early 1990s, many Indigenous literary works have addressed the harms caused by residential schools, ranging from memoirs to novels, from poem collections and plays to children books and graphic novels, and *Indian Horse* clearly belongs to this narrative tradition.<sup>2</sup> Whilst acknowledging the healing and educational powers inherent in all forms of residential school narratives, I have decided to focus on fiction, specifically on an example of fictional narrative that has been produced during the years of the Commission's mandate because, as I argue, it provides a productive critical platform through which to investigate the meaning of Indigenous healing and spiritual resurgence and to establish a comparison between Indigenous perspectives and the restorative justice principles and testimonial practices supported and carried out by the Canadian TRC.

### **Restorative justice and Indigenous pathways to healing**

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has declared that “[i]t is increasingly common for countries emerging from civil war or authoritarian

rule to create a truth commission to operate during the immediate post-transition period” (2006: 1). Relying on the principles of restorative justice rather than punishment and retribution, these commissions are officially state-sanctioned, non-judicial investigative bodies, usually culminating in the production of a public report with recommendations, which aim to investigate “patterns of abuses” and violations of human rights committed over a specific period of time in order to promote healing and reconciliation (Gready, 2011: 3). Of the many truth commissions to date, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission has certainly been the one that has captured global attention, the proceedings of which have been most widely discussed, offering a model for subsequent truth commissions (Hayner, 2001: 5). Charged with the task of addressing and raising awareness about past injustices committed during the apartheid era, the South African TRC aimed to create a human rights culture, to provide victims with a safe space where they could share their stories of suffering, to grant perpetrators an amnesty deal in exchange for full disclosure of the truth of their politically motivated crimes, and to promote reconciliation among all South Africans (see Villa-Vicencio and Verwood, 2000; Wilson, 2001; Chapman and van der Merwe, 2008).

On the other hand, “[t]he inauguration of the Indian Residential School Truth and Reconciliation Commission”, as noted by Jennifer Henderson and Pauline Wakeham in *Reconciling Canada*, “enabled Canada to claim the title of the first ‘established democracy’ and the first G8 nation to initiate a truth and reconciliation commission” (2013: 3). In the same essay collection, Julia Emberley also observes that the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement, which mandated a government apology, a reparation program, and the creation of the TRC, was primarily implemented in 2007 to “address the burgeoning numbers of legal cases before the courts demanding compensation for the detrimental effects attributed to what is called the ‘common experience’ of residential schools” (Emberley, 2013: 146). It is then suggested that the work of the Commission was not brought about by the “good intentions” of the government, but it was the result of a complicated series of reconciliatory efforts, political mobilisation, and tireless negotiations between the government and many Indigenous organisations such as the Assembly of First Nations, the Métis National Congress, the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, and the Native Women’s Association of Canada (Henderson and Wakeham, 2013: 4). In light of these reconciliatory efforts, and taking into consideration the fact that truth commissions usually operate within the context of a political transition, for example from a dictatorial regime to a more democratic order, it becomes paramount to ask whether the terms of restorative justice inherent in the work of truth commissions can also be applied to the case of a liberal-democratic settler polity such as Canada’s and, most importantly, to Indigenous perspectives and traditional ways of conceptualising healing and justice.

Many scholars have highlighted points of overlap between the principles of restorative justice and Indigenous values. For example, Indigenous sociologist John Hansen, member of the Opaskwayak Cree Nation, observes that “[t]he essence of survival of tribal societies is working together and this cooperation is reflected in the system of restorative justice” (2012: 4). Importance is placed on restoring to health those who have been harmed, but also those who have done the harm. A harm done to anyone is viewed as affecting the entire community and, as such, the entire community must heal.

While commenting on Western approaches to justice, retired assistant Crown Attorney for the district of Kenora, Ontario, Rupert Ross observes that to align with an Indigenous perspective:

The focus must be shifted [...] towards the teaching and healing of all the parties involved, with an eye on the past to understand how things have come to be, and an eye on the future to design measures that show the greatest promise of making it healthier for all concerned. (1996: 12)

Ross provides the example of the Hollow Water First Nations Community Holistic Healing Circle, based in the community of Hollow Water on the shores of Lake Winnipeg, the work of which builds on the values of respect, honesty, sharing, listening, and responsibility, aligning itself with the principles of restorative justice. The sentencing circle, presided by a judge, is designed to bring healing and understanding to the victim, the offender, their respective families, and the whole community, who are also involved in deciding the kind of response expected of the offender to restore harmony and balance. Significantly, Ross uses the image of the whirlpool to emphasise that a great number of people are “pulled into” the pain initiated by the original crime (1996: 180); the healing process therefore should include both victims and offenders but also their respective family members who inevitably have been affected by the crime. The restoration of balance, harmony, and healthy relationships within the community through storytelling on the one hand, and through accepting responsibility and being accountable for the crime on the other, is a fundamental step in Indigenous pathways towards healing and justice.

This emphasis on healing and the restoration of healthy relationships that characterizes Indigenous ways clearly resonates with the Canadian TRC’s promotion of healing and reconciliation through testimonial narratives. In this sense, Julia Emberley points out how “the production of residential school testimony through governmental, legal, and scholarly practices (such as [...] the TRC) is not entirely disconnected from the cultural production of Indigenous storytelling” (2013: 150). The Canadian Commission offered many opportunities for both IRS survivors, their families, and former school staff members to give their statements and share their stories at national,

regional and/or community levels, both in private one-to-one sessions or public events such as the Sharing Panels and the Sharing Circles.<sup>3</sup> This approach certainly reflects the Commission's attempt to engage in dialogue with Indigenous storytelling practices, acknowledging the educational and healing role that stories play in Indigenous lifeways. Indigenous stories, in fact, can be "good medicine", Cherokee author Daniel H. Justice underlines, as they "can drive out the poison, heal the spirit as well as the body, remind us of the greatness of where we come from as well as the greatness of who we're meant to be" (2018: 5). IRS survivors' testimonies are an example of good medicine stories, as they aimed to facilitate healing, alongside educating white Canadians of the history of Indian residential schools and of the ways they negatively affected generations of Indigenous peoples.

In the telling of a story, Stó:lō and St'at'imc First Nations scholar Jo-Ann Archibald argues (2019), storytellers and story listeners are profoundly interconnected and engaged with "making-meaning" for educational purposes, the former through telling stories, the latter through actively listening to and comprehending these stories, thus participating in the cultural work that the storytelling process produces. In outlining the pedagogical framework of what she identifies as Indigenous storywork, Archibald explains how story listeners "must listen to Indigenous Peoples' stories with *respect*, develop story relationship in a *responsible* manner, treat story knowledge with *reverence*, and strengthen storied impact through *reciprocity*" (emphasis added, 2019: 2). Respect, responsibility, and reciprocity are fundamental values underpinning Indigenous storytelling practices and pathways towards healing, but they also play a paramount role in truth commissions' restorative proceedings. The Canadian TRC was indeed committed to providing IRS survivors and their families with a safe environment where they could share their lived stories and expect that those stories would be heard responsibly and respectfully.

The listeners, the audience, are thereby expected to play an active role in storytelling and, consequently, in healing journeys. Laguna Pueblo author and storyteller Leslie Marmon Silko observes that "a great deal of the story is believed to be inside the listener" and, most significantly, that "one does not recover by oneself" (Silko, [1981] 2017: 237-238). It is the supposedly active role of the listener that, however, should stir us away from an overly simplistic conflation between the principles of restorative justice at the heart of the Canadian Commission and Indigenous storytelling practices and healing pathways. To what extent is it possible to determine whether the audience of the TRC's hearings were engaging with the testimonial, storytelling process as active listeners? Which criteria should be adopted to evaluate the audience's participation and response to testimonies? Furthermore, who is the audience of IRS survivors' stories: fellow IRS survivors, Indigenous communities, former residential school staff members, the federal government and churches as institutions, non-Indigenous Canadian bystanders, or all these categories?

Reflecting on non-Indigenous Canadians' response to the testimony of residential school survivors and/or intergenerational trauma survivors, Roger I. Simon emphasizes the problems associated with the "too bad, so sad" syndrome, which often characterizes these responses:

When the "too bad, so sad" syndrome defines a response to stories of suffering, injury is recognized, but there is a "splitting off" of any responsibility for the injury or the injured. This splitting off then creates the conditions that enable a justified refusal to give up any of the structural privileges accumulated over the last 250 years. (2013: 133)

Ultimately, Simon goes on to observe, "how people respond to testimony relating various experiences in Indian residential school is complicated" (2013: 134). If people's responses to IRS survivors' testimonies are complicated and, I would argue, difficult to measure, how can we be sure that people have truly participated, "with an open heart and mind" (2013: 131) in the educating, healing and reconciling processes initiated by the Commission? How can we evaluate the actual validity of the TRC's restorative process to heal Indigenous peoples and repair Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations?

These questions are further complicated if we consider that the TRC, as Margery Fee notices, brought IRS survivors together to tell their stories to "sympathetic witnesses, often members of the same churches who were responsible for the neglect and cruelty at the schools" (2015: 219). Whilst recognising that the decision of many IRS survivors to participate in the TRC's process should be respected and honoured, Fee also points out that "it is hard not to see this process as the state protecting itself and the churches", also highlighting that "[i]nsofar as the witnesses stand in for perpetrators, they can be seen as shielding them from public scrutiny and just punishment" (2015: 220). In this connection, Indigenous scholar Audra Simpson (2016) compares the strategies of restorative justice that Canada and South Africa adopted, noting how South Africa, in contrast to Canada's approach, attempted to make perpetrators accountable for their crimes through the implementation of amnesty: perpetrators of politically motivated crimes were in fact strongly encouraged to come forward to the TRC and to take responsibility of their crimes in exchange for amnesty.

By contrast, the Canadian TRC did not provide a similar compelling incentive to encourage people to give their statements and, most importantly, it did not include any political transformation in government such as the South African case. Consequently, many former residential school staff members did not provide their statements either because they had already passed away or because they were not willing to do so. According to the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation's statistics concerning private statements, 202 statements were provided by former staff, 112 statement-providers did not declare specific information, 2,600 statements were given by



residential school survivors, 1,130 statements were given by intergenerational trauma survivors and 124 statements were provided by survivors and intergenerational trauma survivors.<sup>4</sup> These figures clearly show the huge divide between survivors' and perpetrators' participation in the restorative process initiated by the Canadian TRC; they thereby invite us to reflect on the extent to which, despite the undeniable points of overlap between Indigenous values and restorative justice, the Canadian TRC could create the appropriate conditions that would encourage both perpetrators and bystanders to participate actively in and engage with the healing process and the restoration of healthy relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Moreover, there are other challenges to consider that further call into question the efficacy of the TRC's proceedings in a settler-reality such as Canada's, especially concerning Indigenous resurgence and land relations.

Many Indigenous scholars have underlined how the Canadian TRC's exclusive focus on the IRS system and its legacies allows the federal government to situate the harms of settler-colonialism in the past, as a sad chapter in Canadian history. Nonetheless, the IRS system forms only a part of a much broader and more complex history of colonisation, political domination and land dispossession which is still ongoing. In *Red Skins, White Masks*, Yellowknives Dene scholar, Glen Coulthard argues that in a settler-colonial context:

Where there is no period marking a clear or formal transition from an authoritarian past to a democratic present – state-sanctioned approaches to reconciliation must ideologically manufacture such a transition by allocating the abuses of settler colonialization to the dustbins of history, and/or purposely disentangle processes of reconciliation from questions of settler coloniality as such. (2014: 108)

The TRC temporally situates the problems of settler-colonialism as an “event” in the past (Coulthard, 2014: 127), thus sidestepping the abusive colonial structure itself and the colonial forces still at work – evident, for example, in the ongoing issues of land claims, Indigenous sovereignty, broken treaties and discrimination.

In “Restitution is the Real Pathway to Justice for Indigenous Peoples”, Mohawk philosopher, writer and teacher, Taiaiake Alfred frames the question of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples by placing emphasis on restitution. He argues that:

Without massive restitution made to Indigenous peoples, collectively and as individuals, including land, transfers of federal and provincial funds, and other forms of compensations for past harms and continuing injustices committed

against the land and Indigenous peoples, reconciliation will permanently absolve colonial injustice and is itself a further injustice. (2009: 165)

Alfred clarifies that restitution or “give it back” does not entail that settlers have to move away or “give up” the country, but they have to demonstrate respect for what they share with Indigenous peoples – land and its resources (2009: 166). Without recognising Indigenous peoples’ right to freedom and self-determination, and without returning enough of their lands so that Indigenous peoples can regain economic self-sufficiency, Alfred observes, reconciliation will remain a “pacifying discourse” that functions to assuage settler guilt.

Mississauga Nishnaabeg storyteller, scholar and activist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson echoes Alfred’s call for land restitution and Indigenous resurgence:

Justice is a concept within Western thought that is intrinsically linked to settler colonialism. Indigenous thought systems conceptualize justice differently. [...] “Justice” to me, in the face of all that, means the return of land, the regeneration of Indigenous political, educational, and knowledge systems, the rehabilitation of the natural world, and the destruction of white supremacy, capitalism, and heteropatriarchy. (2016: 21)

Western approaches to justice are thus not Simpson’s primary concern. In *As We Have Always Done* (Simpson L, 2017), she instead advocates a radical resurgent movement, which is both political and cultural, simultaneously aiming to dismantle settler-colonial structures as well as reinvigorating Indigenous intelligence systems. This resurgence centres Indigenous attachment to each other and to the land, where the land is conceptualised as a fundamental pedagogical source. For Simpson, Indigenous land is the source of Indigenous knowledge; Indigenous peoples learn *from* and *with* the land. Simpson places a radical resurgent education – that is, restoring the connection to and grounding Indigenous education on the land and Indigenous intelligence systems – at the heart of a radical resurgent movement, which is, in her view, the “just” pathway to challenge settler-colonialism.

Most significantly, land has also a deep connection to language and stories for Indigenous communities. In “Land Speaking”, Okanagan author Jeanette Armstrong explains that land holds all knowledge and constantly speaks: “[Indigenous peoples] survived and thrived by listening intently to its teachings – to its language – and then inventing human words to retell its stories to our succeeding generations” ([1998] 2017: 142). According to Armstrong, all Indigenous peoples’ languages are generated by a “precise geography”, which informs how the world is viewed, approached and expressed verbally by its speakers through stories (Armstrong, [1998] 2017: 144). If land and storytelling are undeniably intertwined on the one hand, and if storytelling

plays a crucial role in Indigenous healing values on the other, it should be no surprise then that many Indigenous scholars, including those cited here, advocate the centrality of the land in Indigenous pathways towards healing, spiritual regeneration, and resurgence. In the next section, I turn my focus to Richard Wagamese's 2012 novel *Indian Horses*, as it provides an important example of how Indigenous literature can attest to the profound connection between land, storytelling, and healing from an Indigenous perspective, as well as contributing to ongoing discourses concerning the efficacy of the Canadian Commission's work to promote Indigenous resurgence.

### **Storytelling, Land and Spiritual Regeneration in Richard Wagamese's *Indian Horse***

Richard Wagamese did not experience first-hand the hardships of the IRS system but he suffered from the impact of his parents' emotional trauma from having attended residential schools. In one interview, Wagamese describes how "[t]he nature of [his parents'] experience, their common experience in residential schools, really robbed them of their tribal and cultural ability to be nurturing and to be loving parents", emphasising that he and his siblings "were subjected to the neglect and the pain that that generation had suffered, so intergenerationally, residential schools infiltrated my generation in my family, and that's true across the country" (2014: n.p.). Wagamese was thus an intergenerational trauma survivor and that trauma, as well as his family trauma, informed the narrative of *Indian Horse*'s protagonist and narrator, Saul Indian Horse, an Ojibwe young man from north-western Ontario.

Saul chronicles his life story as a means of recovering from alcoholism while staying at the New Dawn Centre. Finding it difficult to tell his story in the sharing circle at the treatment facility, Saul gets permission from his counsellor to write it down instead, taking readers on his journey of remembrance; for most of the novel we are reading Saul's written story. It is possible to identify seven stages in which the narrative of the whole novel unfolds. The first stage introduces readers to Saul's family relations and traditional territory, and to his current situation at the treatment facility, which also serves as a frame narrative to his written journey of remembrance. Entering the second stage of the whole narrative, Saul opens his journey of remembrance with memories of his childhood, which he spends in the bush of north-western Ontario with his Ojibwe family. It then moves to narrate Saul's boyhood years at St. Jerome's Indian Residential School, where he discovers a love for ice hockey among the hardships of the school's strict and alienating rules. This is followed by his adolescent life in Manitouwadge, where Saul plays hockey for the Indigenous community team, the Moose, and lives with an Indigenous adoptive family, the Kellys. A fifth stage sees Saul relocate to Toronto to join a minor-league hockey team. Here Saul is endlessly taunted by the other players' racist comments and behaviours, leading him to move back in with the Kellys in order

to recover from that painful experience. However, unable to let go of the rage and bitterness that consume him, Saul decides to sever any contacts with his adoptive family and to start a nomadic alcohol-fuelled life, jumping from one place to another. The seventh and final stage brings readers back to the frame narrative, portraying a thirty-three-year-old Saul who is trying to recover from his addiction at the treatment facility, while focusing on his healing journey.

Métis scholar Jo-Ann Episkenew argues that contemporary Indigenous literature serves:

two transformative functions – healing Indigenous people and advancing social justice in settler society – both components in the process of decolonization. [...] When their testimony reaches a large and diverse audience, it is possible for Indigenous writers to effect healing by advancing social justice. (2009: 15-17)

In a similar fashion to the ways in which oral storytelling is supposed to engage the listener, Indigenous literature too aims to engage an audience, its readers, in order to perform its two transformative functions, namely healing Indigenous readers and advancing social justice by educating non-Indigenous readers of past and present injustices that have affected Indigenous communities. *Indian Horse* enacts both functions. The novel advances social justice by exposing the spiritual/emotional/cultural/physical harm caused by the IRS system. Wagamese shows the devastating effects of residential schools on Indigenous peoples' lives from a double perspective: Saul is at the same time an intergenerational trauma survivor and a trauma survivor. Even before he enters St. Jerome's at the age of eight, Saul suffers from the impacts of the IRS system, as both his parents and other family members are school survivors and they have been profoundly scarred by that experience:

The spectre lived in the other adults too, my father and my aunt and uncle. But its most chilling presence was in my mother. [...] It was the school that had turned my mother so far inward she sometimes ceased to exist in the outside world. ([2012] 2018: 9)<sup>5</sup>

While his parents turn to alcohol to cope with their painful memories, Saul is looked after by his grandmother, who is the only family member who tries to keep Indigenous old ways and their connection to the land alive and to pass this knowledge on to Saul.

The cycle of violence and pain initiated by the IRS system, however, does not end with Saul's parents: first Saul's siblings, then Saul himself become victims of residential schooling. Abandoned by his parents, and following the death of his beloved grandmother, Saul is taken to St. Jerome's, a "hell on earth" (78) in Saul's words. In their attempt "to remove the Indian from our children" (46-47), the nuns cut the children's long, straight hair, as well as changing their names, with the exception of

Saul because “[t]hat’s a fine biblical name” (45). What soon becomes clear to Saul is that the school was established to break Indigenous students’ spirits and sever any ties with their old, traditional ways of life – including languages, traditions, and ceremonies – through the use of physical violence and strict discipline: “[t]he beatings hurt. The threats belittled us. The incessant labour wearied us, made us old before our time. The death, disease and disappearances filled us with fear” (80).

In addition to narrating the impacts and legacies of the IRS system, Wagamese draws attention to racist behaviours against Indigenous peoples that go far beyond the school walls through Saul’s hockey experience. Saul shows a natural talent for the game, which he first starts playing at St. Jerome’s under the attentive care and training of Father Leboutilier. The game gives Saul a new-found joy, a sense of freedom and of brotherhood with his teammates (64–67). Most importantly, hockey becomes Saul’s ticket to leave the school: the young boy is, in fact, given the opportunity to join an Indigenous hockey team and live with the Kellys, who welcome him with warmth and love (114). This idyllic period is, however, interrupted abruptly when Saul is noticed by minor-league team in Toronto, which he decides to join, thus becoming the target of racial discrimination and prejudice for being an Indigenous player in a white team: “They called me Indian Whores, Horse Piss, Stolen Pony. [...] And when I refused to retaliate, my teammates started leaving a space around me on the bench” (164).

The reference to hockey is significant at two levels. First, hockey can be viewed as a vehicle through which white settlers “‘make meaning out of winter’ and thereby establish a sense of belonging in the northern landscape”, McKegney and Phillips notice (2018: 169). Hockey becomes an instrument for settlers, white Canadians, to establish a connection to the land, a connection that legitimizes settler entitlement to the land and normalizes white privilege, “while obfuscating the relationships to land that continue to obtain for Indigenous individuals, communities, and nations” (McKegney and Phillips, 2018: 170). The racist comments that are directed at Saul must then be interpreted as Wagamese’s attempt at exposing those racialized colonial structures that affected and continue to affect Indigenous peoples’ lives and their connection to the land far beyond the IRS system. Secondly, Wagamese also shows how hockey, a tool of Canadian nationalism, could be used as an instrument of assimilation. Indian residential schools aimed to sever cultural connections with Indigenous traditions and cultures, and the introduction of white-dominated sports such as hockey in the schools’ activities encouraged this process by facilitating assimilation into mainstream, white Canadian values and leisure practices (see Paraschak 1995, 1997, 1998).

It is useful, within this context, to refer to Andrew Woolford’s notion of symbolic violence. Drawing on the work of French sociologist and anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu, Woolford argues that symbolic violence is “a violence that emanates from the social [and] symbolic power of the actor who uses it, who is able [...] to have the practices and rationalities that define [his/her] worldview accepted by the addressee as

normal and taken for granted” (2015: 195). He goes on to assert that symbolic violence, exerting its powers through “[k]ind teachers, caring superintendents, gifts and other such niceties”, “disguises the interests that lie behind its force and even the fact that force is being used”, but, nonetheless, it aims at the destruction of Indigenous identities as much as physical and cultural violence (Woolford, 2015: 195–196). Encouraging Indigenous children to play hockey is a clear example of symbolic violence at work in the fictional St. Jerome’s Indian Residential School. Father Leboutillier’s care and attentive behaviour, the ice, and “the mornings and the promise of a game” (66) become essential reference points in Saul’s life at the school, reference points that come to substitute his previous life, cultural practices and set of values. Hockey, in fact, seems to ease, at least to some extent, Saul’s pain from having been forced to leave his traditional ways behind, as well as helping the young boy to embrace St. Jerome’s rigid rules. Hockey allows Saul not to “feel lonely or afraid, deserted or abandoned, but connected to something far bigger than [himself] (62), thus obfuscating the School’s overt purpose of annihilating Indigenous identity and spirit.

In relation to the healing function identified by Episkenew, while it might be difficult to evaluate the degree of healing that Wagamese’s novel has actually effected in Indigenous communities, the use of the first-person narrative facilitates readers’ identification with Saul’s story of pain and healing. In this sense, Renate Eigenbrod highlights that first-person narratives encourage readers “to understand and feel empathy with the main character through whose perception the story is told” making them “go through a process of transformation, ‘becoming’ that very character” (1995: 96–97). Applying Eigenbrod’s perspective to *Indian Horse*, readers are invited to relate to Saul’s story, “understanding, feeling, smelling, tasting” Saul’s traumatic life experiences and then the challenges of his healing journey (Eigenbrod, 1995: 97). The novel’s contribution to the concept of healing is, however, even more evident in the ways in which Wagamese deploys storytelling and Indigenous connection to the land.

Partially resonating with the TRC’s restorative justice approach that I discuss in the previous section, *Indian Horse* emphasizes the vital role of storytelling in Indigenous healing journeys. Eigenbrod observes that Indigenous cultures are traditionally associated with orality and the communal experience of story-sharing, while the written form is often perceived as the Western colonizer’s medium (1995: 92). Indigenous authors, however, often write and publish in and for mainstream market; their writing is then situated in a power struggle between “the Native in us and the English” (LaRoque, qtd. in Eigenbrod, 1995: 92). Remarkably, Wagamese blends together the oral and the written, the communal and the individual both at plot and formal levels, thus suggesting that healing can also be facilitated by the individual writing experience. Saul is, in fact, initially unable to tell his traumatic story in the sharing circle at the treatment facility and opts for the written medium (3). Oral storytelling and story-sharing come later in the protagonist’s healing journey, only after

reconnecting with his Indigenous identity through the land and the ancestors. Wagamese thus seems to suggest that healing is characterized by different steps and that people might experience it differently.

Most notably, Wagamese also showcases the agency of fiction in shedding light on different perspectives on healing. In this connection, Episkenew argues that “fiction has become an attractive option for writers whose goal is to produce narratives that express what is [truth] for them”, a “truth” that is flexible rather than fixed (2009: 108). *Indian Horse* thus creates a fictional space that draws on Wagamese’s family’s residential school experience and his own intergenerational trauma without providing *definite* answers or solutions that are supposed to work for all his Indigenous readers and their journeys towards healing. Relying on imagination, the novel can accommodate different voices and perspectives that might (or might not) resonate with the experiences of other Indigenous peoples. Also, Saul’s initial inability to share his painful story at the sharing circle of the treatment facility implicitly calls into question the TRC’s invitation for IRS survivors to story-sharing, whether in private or more public settings, challenging the expectations that survivors will automatically be willing and ready to participate in the communal experience of story-sharing. More specifically, fiction is able to give voice, imaginatively speaking, to those that cannot be heard or are not ready to be heard. It also reminds readers that, even though we cannot hear (or inhabit) the experiences of those who remain out of reach, these experiences are real, deserve our attention and can be imagined, and, as such, they too contribute to healing and to the restoration of healthy relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Imagination is, in fact, “essential to the empathy required for healthy, respectful, and sustainable relationships”, Daniel H. Justice underlines (2018: 77).

Moreover, this negotiation between oral and written storytelling, which the novel’s plot dramatizes, is also enacted at a formal level. *Indian Horse* is presented both as a written document and an oral story, as the narrative starts with Saul introducing himself by stating his name, his family and clan relations, and his traditional territory, following the traditional protocol of an oral teller of sacred stories (Robinson, 2013: 90). More significantly, the novel is characterized by circularity, another typical feature of oral narratives (Robinson, 2013: 90). In particular, Wagamese relies on a circular structure to portray Saul’s relationship to the land throughout the novel, thus representing the different stages of the protagonist’s life journey of trauma and healing.

The land plays a prominent role in Saul’s early years in the bush of north-western Ontario with his Ojibwe family. Although these years are not devoid of suffering, as Saul is affected by his parents’ residential school trauma and their alcohol addiction, the young boy is able to experience a deep connection to the land through his grandmother’s teachings of the old ways (12–13). This connection is made tangible through the imagery Wagamese adopts to describe the land. Saul and his family’s visit to their ancestral territory, Gods Lake, is significant in this sense. Through Saul’s

narrative voice, Wagamese provides readers with a vivid description of the land, its natural gifts, and the animals that inhabit it (21). Relying on sight, hearing, and touch, the author conveys the profound spirituality that characterizes Indigenous connection to the land and to its natural elements:

As I sat there with the warmth of the sun spilled over me, I closed my eyes. I could hear the breeze in the trees. There was a tempo to it. Slow. Measured. My breathing slowed to match it. That's when I heard my name [...] My eyes flew open and I look around. No one was there, only the branches of the trees bouncing easily in the breeze. [...] When I look down at the lake again, I saw people. (22)

The land is depicted as a spiritual force that shows Saul fragments of his ancestors' past lives, when Indigenous peoples still spoke in the "Old Talk" and performed traditional ceremonies (22–25).

On the other hand, arrival at St. Jerome's signals Saul's gradual loss of his connection to the land, the ancestors, and the old ways, as announced by the abrupt change of scenery: the residential school is "a four-storey red brick building" with "no trees around it, only ground shrubs" (43) and the dominant smell is that of bleach and disinfectant, "so strong to peel the skin off the inside of my nose" (44). The only comfort appears to come from those rare unsupervised escapes towards a narrow creek at the bottom of the ridge the school sits on, where Saul and the other children enjoy catching fish with "burlap bags" (53). This feeling is short-lived though: identifying with the fish's struggle "for air, for life, for freedom" (53), the children set the fish back into the water, crying "for the loss of the life [they]'d known before" (54).

Saul's gradual disconnection from the land continues in Toronto, a city that is depicted in stark contrast to the wilderness of Saul's pre-school years: Toronto is a "chimera", a "mad jumble of speed, noise, and people", where Saul can only taste "soot and oil and gas"; there are trees "but none of the big pines or spruce or fir I was used to. There were no rocks. There was nothing wild" (158). Saul's hockey experience in Toronto plays a crucial role in his life, as it further drives him away from his Indigenous heritage and relations. The racism and prejudice that he suffers for being the only Indigenous player in a white-dominated game act as catalysts for his decision to start a nomadic life, where the land has lost his healing function (177) and "the only thing [he] knew how to do about it was to drink" (186). Alcoholism will lead Saul to the New Dawn Centre, where, although initially reluctant, he begins his recovery and narrative journey. The end of Saul's writing exercise coincides with him narrating his arrival at the treatment facility, thus bringing us back to the opening of the novel.

The completion of his writing exercise does not seem to produce the intended effect though (191), as Saul is not ready to share his story orally with the other guests at



the facility yet; however, it does encourage Saul to embark on a journey towards the places of his past. In line with the circular structure of oral storytelling, Saul returns to St. Jerome's Indian Residential School, to Gods Lake, then back to the treatment facility, and finally to his adopted family, the Kellys. Each place allows Saul to take a step further in his healing process. At the residential school, for example, Saul suddenly unlocks a painful memory from his school days when he remembers Father Leboutilier's particular attentions that Saul initially mistook for love, but which were in fact sexual abuse:

I wanted so much to be held and stroked. As he gathered my face in his hands and kissed me, I closed my eyes. I thought of my grandmother. The warmth of her arms holding me. I missed that so much. (198).

It is also here that Saul realizes the "symbolic violence" enacted by Father Leboutilier through hockey. Taking advantage of Saul's love for the game, the priest abuses the young boy repeatedly, buys his silence, and succeeds in persuading him that his are acts of love:

he'd given me the job of cleaning the ice to buy my silence, to guard his secret. He'd told me I could play when I was big enough. I loved the idea so much that I kept quiet. I loved the idea of being loved so much that I did what he asked. (199)

The morning practices and the game prevented Saul from facing the truth of the sexual violence that he experienced at St. Jerome's (199).

The next stop at Gods Lake triggers an even more visceral reaction in Saul, which is conveyed by the evocative description of the land: the river taking Saul to Gods Lake, for instance, becomes "a huge, serpentine creature, undulating and curving" (201). Wagamese once again relies on different senses, primarily on hearing, sight, and smell to describe this ancestral territory:

The smell in the air was rich and earthy [...]. The air was filled with birdsong [...] A I knelt on the stone beach, gazing up at the cliff, the clouds at its upper edge moved as though it was a living being, breathing. (204)

The spiritual strength of Gods Lake allows Saul to reconnect with the land and with his Indigenous identity: "every step closer to our old family campsite transported [him] further back", his thoughts clear and he walks in a peace that he cannot recall having experienced before (204). More remarkably, Saul meets the spirit of his great-grandfather Shaboggesick, a shaman, who tells him that he has "come to learn to carry

this place within you. This place of beginnings and endings” (204). It is only in that spiritual place, so meaningful for his family’s history, and only after his ancestor’s words, that Saul can mourn properly and let “every ounce of sorrow and desperation, loneliness and regret to eke out of me” (206). Through this example the novel illustrates the importance of “continuity across the generations [...] continuity of stories, languages, relations, ceremonies, and, of course, the very lives of the People themselves” (Justice 2018: 115). Reconnection to his ancestral land, heritage, and the spirit of his great-grandfather, a connection that he had lost during his school years and the years afterwards, allows Saul to look back at his past *and* to look forward to his future.

Once back at the treatment facility, Saul is finally able to share the “truth I had discovered locked deep inside me” with his counsellor and the other guests: “I went back [to the Centre] because I wanted to learn how to live with it without drinking” (207). Only when he feels sufficiently strong, confident, and secure (207), Saul leaves the Centre and reunites with his adoptive Indigenous family, the Kellys, with whom he finally shares the truth of his past abuse. Playing the role of active listeners, the Kellys too confide in Saul and tell him the painful stories of their residential school experiences, thus contributing to creating what Archibald identifies as storywork (2019). Although it is not certain how long it will take for Saul to complete his healing journey, the novel ends on a hopeful note, as Saul decides to coach the Indigenous community hockey team. Interestingly, the young man decides to connect with the next generation, here represented by the Indigenous community children, through a game that supposedly belongs to white people and that caused Saul both pain and joy. Reappropriating the “enemy’s game”, Saul rediscovers “[t]he white glory of the rink” (219) and the joy that hockey used to bring to him; it is this joy that now Saul wants to pass on to the children: “the speed, the grace, the strength and the beauty of the game. I want to give that back” (212).

Through Saul’s story and narrative voice, Wagamese conveys a fundamental message: storytelling, whether in written or oral form, whether as an individual or communal experience, might not be a sufficient instrument of healing for Indigenous peoples, as it needs to be complemented by the possibility of experiencing the land. The land is the means that allows Saul to rediscover his Indigenous spirituality, to find the strength to share his story with the counsellor and the guests at the treatment facility, and to repair his Indigenous relations with the Kellys. As Saul explains from the outset of the novel, Indigenous stories “tell of how we emerged from the womb of our Mother the Earth; Aki is the name we [Ojibwe] have for her. We sprang forth intact, with Aki’s heartbeat thrumming in our ears, prepared to become her stewards and protectors” (1). Echoing Alfred’s words (2005), “land is life” for Indigenous existence and, consequently, it cannot be overlooked when approaching discourses of Indigenous healing.

*Indian Horse* also demonstrates that fiction produced during the years of the Canadian TRC is a productive critical site of investigation that can challenge and open up questions concerning those restorative justice principles and reconciliation discourses promoted by the Commission. Wagamese questions, albeit indirectly, the TRC's testimonial narrative process as the quasi exclusive approach to healing, as well as its restricted focus on the harms and impacts of the IRS system. In contrast, Wagamese exposes ongoing discriminatory and racist attitudes towards Indigenous peoples that are legacies of settler colonial practices; most importantly, he highlights how land, storytelling, and healing are deeply entwined. In particular, he brings out the Indigenous deep sense of connection to the land as a source of learning, spiritual reclaiming, and resurgence. Simultaneously, the choice of writing fiction provides readers, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, with the possibility of reflecting on the aforementioned questions and imagining new ways of approaching them. Furthermore, fiction allows us to imagine the storied experiences of those voices that might go unheard because they belong to the past or because they are unwilling to participate in current state-sponsored reconciliation discourses. Ultimately, fiction reminds readers of the responsibility that they hold once they have listened to or read a story, especially a story that they might not have had the possibility of knowing otherwise: "Don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You've heard it now" (King, 2003: 29). *Indian Horse* thus invite readers to engage with the ongoing debate on repairing Indigenous and non-Indigenous relationships, as well as reflecting on how land and storytelling are deeply entangled in Indigenous pathways towards healing and regeneration; most significantly, it invites readers to *act* upon this meaningful relation between land, storytelling, and Indigenous spiritual resurgence.

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<sup>1</sup> I acknowledge that Indigenous peoples of Canada are very diverse culturally, linguistically, and geographically. In this article, I will primarily use the term Indigenous as a collective noun to refer to the diversified Indigenous groups living in Canada – unless otherwise indicated in specific legislative acts.

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When referring to a distinct Indigenous group or to a particular Indigenous author and/or scholar, I will indicate, when possible, their own tribal affiliations.

<sup>2</sup> Notable examples include: Basil H. Johnston's *Indian School Days* (1998) and Theodore Fontaine's *Broken Circle: The Dark Legacy of Indian Residential Schools: A Memoir* (2010), novels such as Thomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (1998) and Robert Arthur Alexie's *Porcupines and China Dolls* (2003), Louise Bernice Halfe's poem collection *Burning in this Midnight Dream* (2016), Donna-Michelle St. Bernard's *Indian Act: Residential School Plays* (2018), and children's books such as Christy Jordan-Fenton and Margaret Pokiak-Fenton's *Fatty Legs: A True Story* (2010), and David Alexander Robertson's graphic novel *Sugar Falls: A Residential School Story* (2011), to name a few.

<sup>3</sup> When statement providers attended the TRC's national events, there were several options available to them on how they could have their statement recorded: sharing panels or public hearings, which were broadcast online and in front of an audience and the Commissioners; one-on-one statements (could be made public or private), and sharing circles, which were recorded in front of an audience without the presence of the Commissioners.

<sup>4</sup> From correspondence with the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation's team on 19 June 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Subsequent references are to this edition of *Indian Horse* and will be cited parenthetically by page number in the text.

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