

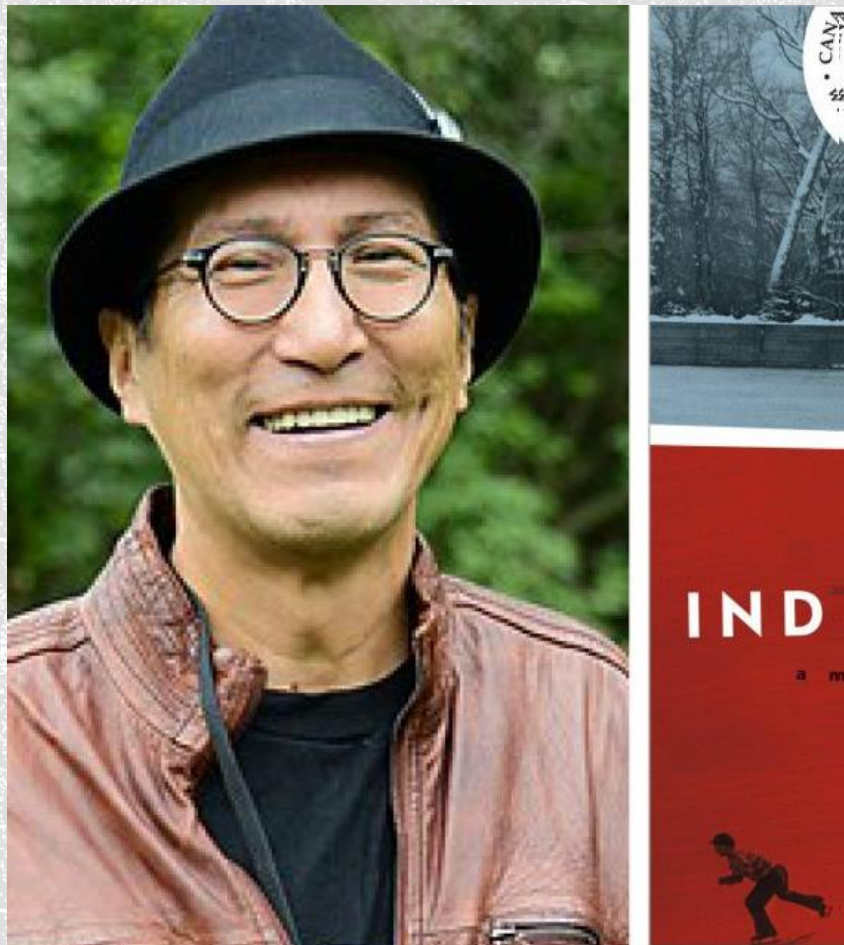
TRAUMA AND TRANSFORMATION:

THE POWER OF STORYTELLING
IN RICHARD WAGAMESE'S *INDIAN HORSE*

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OVERVIEW

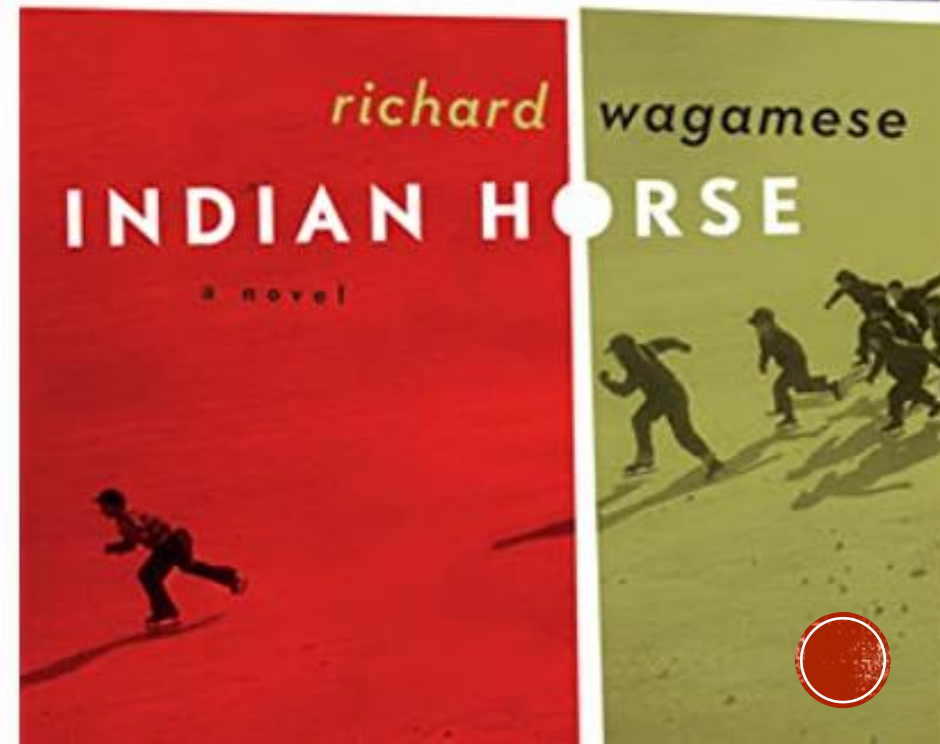
Richard Wagamese's *Indian Horse* is a frame narrative that sees the titular character, Saul Indian Horse, invited by Moses, his rehabilitation treatment counsellor, to share his story orally in the circle; when that fails, he suggests that Saul write his story. Saul reluctantly decides to travel that path, recognizing the importance of story as an opportunity to make sense of his history and "get on with life" (Wagamese, *Indian Horse* 3). Having lost connection to his Indigenous identity, he confides, "Sometimes it feels as though I have spent my entire life on a trek to rediscover it" (Wagamese, *Indian Horse* 3). So begins Saul's return to his childhood, which forms an important part of uncovering his deeply rooted trauma and beginning his recovery. On his mental journey back over his life, he reconnects and re-roots himself in family, community, and the living world of nature, all of which are essential to Indigenous cosmology. In doing so, he begins to heal and continue his path to recovery.



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research project explores how storytelling offers prospects for the storyteller and the listener to reimagine themselves. As a settler scholar and reader, I am curious about the workings of story in the ongoing journey of healing from residential school trauma in Richard Wagamese's novel *Indian Horse*.

- 1) How has storytelling adapted to discuss and address residential school trauma?
- 2) How does storytelling work to grant a subject agency?
- 3) How does storywork provide a transformative power to the storyteller and the listener, thereby allowing opportunity to encounter the trauma and use story to heal?
- 4) How does story function on the private personal dimension of the self and how does it connect to the broader public collective dimension so that a changed self is also a changed culture and society?



LITERATURE REVIEW

While it is tempting to employ Western scholars and theory, Kimberley Blaeser (Ojibwe) stresses, “Western theoretical models [are] inappropriate for application to American Indian literature/stories” (as qtd. in Archibald 16). Following Jo-ann Archibald (Stó:lo), Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee), and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Nishnaabeg), the ethical and respectful, but also the more critical and powerful, approach is to engage solely with Indigenous scholars who have a long history with story, who know trauma intimately, and who best understand how to search for answers in their recovery within an Indigenous tradition.



LITERATURE REVIEW

Storytelling: Telling a story orally provides opportunity for a storyteller to speak directly to an audience and allows an Elder to assess what their “learner is capable of absorbing” (Archibald 24). In addition, when a story is told and retold, or read and re-read, the individual learner may take **different meanings** from the story, depending on their **personal need**.

Jo-anne
Archibald.
*Indigenous
Storywork.*

Grace
Dillon.
*Walking the
Clouds*

Thomas
King. *The
Truth About
Stories.*

Daniel Heath
Justice. *Why
Indigenous
Literatures
Matter.*

Colonization and Indigeneity: Contributing to historical ideas of Indigenous writing and interpretation, Alicia Elliott’s (Tuscarora) work provides valuable insight into settler colonial practice. Her scholarship exposes **colonial assimilation practices** in force by school and church leaders to **maintain authority**, to **control or erase language**, to **remove children from their culture**, and to **confound Indigenous space** by speaking of past and present but rarely of future.

Alicia Elliott.
*A Mind
Spread Out
on the
Ground.*

Robin
Kimmerer.
*Braiding
Sweetgrass.*

Gregory
Younging.
*Elements of
Indigenous
Style.*

LITERATURE REVIEW

Trauma: I apply Renee Linklater's (Anishinaabe) **concept of trauma** to mean “a person's reaction or response to an injury” (22). Suzanne Methot asserts it is critical that a survivor of abuse **create their own story** about the past traumatic event and their present feelings, thereby allowing them to be an observer to their trauma and divorcing themselves from the **perpetrator's story**.

Daniel Heath
Justice. *Why
Indigenous
Literatures
Matter.*

Robin
Kimmerer.
*Braiding
Sweetgrass.*

Suzanne
Methot. *Legacy:
Trauma, Story,
and Indigenous
Healing.*

Recovery: It is critical for Indigenous health and healing to “[address] the soul wound” and focus on restoring balance to the individual by **creating relationships with community and with creation** (Linklater 33). Linklater recognizes the value of **resiliency**, defined as an elasticity that Indigenous peoples draw on through their connection and contribution to community relative to healing practices and health research.

Marie Battiste.
*Reclaiming
Indigenous
Voice and
Vision.*

Renee
Linklater.
*Decolonizing
Trauma Work.*

METHODOLOGY



- I will mobilize Jo-ann Archibald's **seven principles of story—respect, responsibility, reciprocity, reverence, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy**—to study young Saul's character and then reconsider each term as he journeys back to family, love, culture, and his familiar landscapes. In employing story as part of recovery, Wagamese poses Saul as a worthy, redeemable figure who uses his story to tell others of his pain and growth.
- I will take up and incorporate Archibald and Justice's lessons shared about the **importance of story** to the Indigenous tradition.



METHODOLOGY



- I will apply Indigenous theory from Elliott's **colonization discussion** to examine students' time at St Jerome's residential school as it reveals marks of **colonial power and authority**, particularly through the language that students activate when encountering white authorities, whether imposed by colonialists or offered as voices of resistance.
- I will perform a close reading of *Indian Horse* and focus on **setting, imagery, and the language of colonialism and Indigeneity** as Saul begins, journeys through, and ends his story.

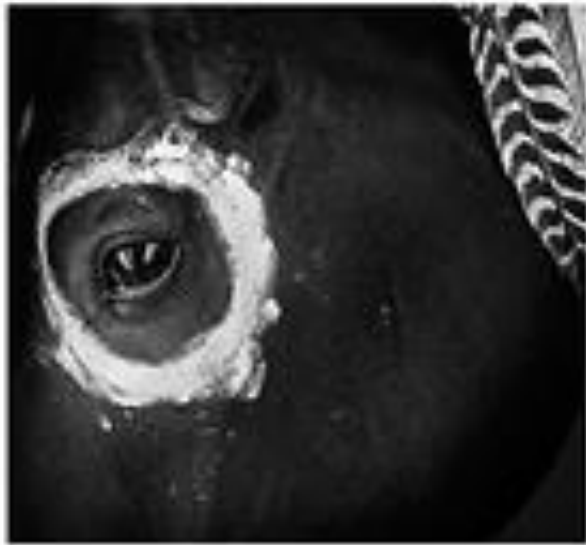


METHODOLOGY



- I will draw upon Methot's example of the **four quadrants of the medicine wheel** and employ them as a roadmap in studying how **trauma** manifests in a trauma survivor's narrative. The different quadrants represent vision (spiritual), time (physical), feelings and reason (emotional), and movement (intellectual).
- Additionally, I will analyze her ideas of **reintegration to community** and her understanding of how "individual narratives are . . . part of the collective narrative" in interpreting Saul's return to wellness (Methot 169).





METHODOLOGY

- Linklater's Indigenous knowledge will be insightful in examining how **Indigenous healing methods**, such as sweat lodges, fasting, and holistic healing can support and strengthen the trauma survivor. I will study Linklater's strategies of helping and healing through prayer, spiritual connection, love, relationships, cultural and ceremonial resources, and apply them to Saul's character to show how they contribute to his **reconnection** to his **home territory, traditions, and Indigenous knowledge**.
- I will dwell on the concept of **resilience** and how it places Saul on his path to wholeness. Only through telling story, connecting to wellness, and unearthing purpose does he find meaning and change. Meaning does not come from theory "but through a compassionate web of interdependent relationships" (Simpson 156).



TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE

“MY LIFE HAS been changed by the use of a single word—‘yes.’ Leaving school at sixteen, having only completed Grade 9, I was untrained and unskilled at anything. I struggled for years: homeless, in dire poverty, lost. Then one day a possibility was presented to me—to be a storyteller—and I said ‘yes.’ A journalism career, more than a dozen books and numerous honours later, it’s all because of that yes. There are a thousand ways to say “no,” “but,” “I can’t,” “it’s impossible,” “it’s too late,” but there’s only one way to say “yes.” With your whole being. When you do that, when you choose that word, it becomes the most spiritual word in the universe...And your world can change”

Richard Wagamese, *Meditations* 71, 2016.



SLIDE SHOW IMAGES WORKS CITED

- *Indian Horse* Text; Wagamese Image.: <https://westvanlibrary.ca/indian-horse-by-richard-wagamese/>
- Literature Review Image: <https://eventscalendar.umanitoba.ca/site/indigenous/event/indigenous-scholars-speaker-series-4/>
- Methodology (Horse/Eye Image: <https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/Product/Indian-Horse-Information-Slideshow-2990417>
- Research Question Image: <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/11994903-indian-horse>



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