

# Thinking Together

A Forum on Jo-Ann Episkenew's *Taking Back Our Spirits: Indigenous Literature, Public Policy, and Healing*

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## Introduction: Indigenizing the “Author Meets Critics” Forum

*Susan Gingell and Deanna Reder*

**T**he current forum on Jo-Ann Episkenew's *Taking Back Our Spirits: Indigenous Literature, Public Policy, and Healing* is the fourth in a series initiated when Jill Didur brought back the idea—and name—of such an event from two interdisciplinary conferences in the United States.<sup>1</sup> She suggested to members of the Canadian Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (CACLALS) that they hold their own forums to stimulate conversation about a recently published work perceived to be of broad interest to the scholarly community of the association and beyond. Each Author Meets Critics forum centres on a book that represents one scholar's take on issues to which she or he has devoted years of thought, and then brings into the conversation other members of the scholarly community who can offer the insights of different generations of academics who have been thinking in related areas.<sup>2</sup>

Following the live event, the panellists submit written versions of their contributions to the convenors of the forum, prompting all centrally involved to reflect further on the thoughts of the other panellists and of those in the audience who offered further ideas. The opportunity to respond more fully in writing can be especially important to the authors because they do not know before the live forum what the critics are going to say and have to respond off the cuff.

The live forum on Episkenew's *Taking Back Our Spirits* invited conversation about only the second monograph of literary criticism on Indigenous writing by an Indigenous critic in Canada, the first being Janice Acoose's 1995 book *Iskwewak: Kah'Ki Yaw Ni Wahkomakanak: Neither Indian Princesses nor Easy Squaws*.<sup>3</sup> Episkenew herself challenged the format of the forum as anti-Indigenous—a position she grounded by citing the traditional Cree practice of discouraging direct commands in order to avoid conflict and preserve relationships—and thus brought into the open questions about the nature of the live events. Her observation that critics who took part in the panel seemed decidedly nervous or uncomfortable at the unusual circumstance of delivering a critique of a book with the author in the room certainly reflected the experience of critics on earlier panels, and authors have typically and understandably found themselves anxious in anticipation of the experience of having their books discussed live and then being expected to respond immediately. Asking how the structure and the exchanges of the forum affect the critics and the author of the book under discussion takes up an issue literary theory seldom if ever addresses, and Episkenew's encouraging organizers to consider the affective impact of participation in the forum is in keeping with her focus on the physical, emotional, and spiritual effects of reading.

She prompts us to rethink how we might best balance three broad concerns: the need to preserve the space for dissent and non-coercive discussion, which Daniel Heath Justice in "Kinship Criticism and the Decolonization Imperative" remarks is an important part of self-determination (166); critics' accountability to the author; and minimizing anxiety and academic competitiveness, thus helping to achieve the goal of building and maintaining a lively, healthy, productive, and respectful critical community. Ways of better serving the goals of the forum while trying to meet Episkenew's challenge could include reconceiving and renaming the event from a meeting of author and critics, which sets up an (at least initial) opposition between sides in which the author is badly outnumbered, to a thinking together as a community of intellectuals on analogy with the Native Critics Collective's *Reasoning Together* (Acoose et al.). Had we named the forum "Thinking Together about *Taking Back Our Spirits*," we could have signalled that we had not presupposed the levelling of direct criticism and explicitly addressed the emotional and professional tensions provoked by the event.

The choice of Episkenew's book for the present forum reflects the convenors' sense of its timeliness and importance in addressing multiple social needs. At a time in which Canadians are engaged in a state-sponsored

reconciliation process, encouraging more Canadian scholars and members of the educated public to read and talk about and/or continue to think about the claims and arguments of Episkenew's book seemed to us desirable for three main reasons:

1. Reconciliation can hardly succeed if many Canadians continue to think that the harm done to Indigenous people in Canada by compulsory residential schooling was an isolated phenomenon, and *Taking Back Our Spirits* does an excellent job of informing readers that residential schools were just one part of networked public policy initiatives to incorporate Indigenous peoples into the Canadian state by systematically erasing their differences from Euro-Canadians.
2. Episkenew offers a compelling diagnosis of the colonial pathology in our national body, pointedly asserting Euro-Canadians' unearned advantage and clarifying that public policy has been an engine for conferring that advantage.
3. *Taking Back Our Spirits* points out a persuasive route to healing, articulating a dual imperative for decolonization, namely that both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples are in need of that process.

Undoubtedly, Indigenous peoples need to heal from colonially and neocolonially inflicted damage, and Episkenew's book argues the idea that Indigenous prose and drama can effect narrative repair to the damaged spirits of Indigenous people, allowing them to reclaim healthy identities.<sup>4</sup> However, until non-Indigenous Canadians recognize that Canadian public policy damages *them* by setting them up as normative and perpetuating injustices in their name, thus structuring their complicity in ongoing colonizing relations with Indigenous peoples, and until settler-Canadians act on that recognition to decolonize themselves, reconciliation will remain a pious hope.

As the essays of the forum elaborate this line of thinking, they make clear the social *work* that *Taking Back Our Spirits* does, thus confirming that critical literature by Indigenous people in Canada acts in the same way as Episkenew argues other forms of Indigenous literature do. Both are agential and potentially transformative. However, as the thinking together of the forum also foregrounds, we need to consider the power for ill of our literary and critical words.



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## These Shared Truths: *Taking Back Our Spirits* and the Literary-Critical Practice of Decolonization

Allison Hargreaves

Like the literary and creative work to which it responds, criticism can itself constitute an act of both imagination and responsibility—and it is with a great measure of each that Métis literary scholar Jo-Ann Episkenew approaches the critical task of connecting contemporary Indigenous literary practice to public policy and healing in Canada. Tracing Indigenous literature's place in decolonizing the minds and spirits of First Peoples and settlers alike (Episkenew 19), *Taking Back Our Spirits* offers more than a robust expository account of colonial public policy as it is imaginatively engaged in the autobiography, fiction, and theatre of the post-*Halfbreed* canon; this book also invites reflexive consideration of the transformative properties of Indigenous literary practice itself (15).

Rejoining oral epistemologies that understand story as having the power to “change the course of events in both the material and the spiritual worlds” (4), Episkenew charts literature's potential for transforming the colonized imaginaries of those people Indigenous to this continent, and those who are—by complex and varied means—part of its ongoing invasion and settlement. In accounting for colonialism as the systemic and “pathological” condition by which First Peoples and settlers are joined in mutual but distinctly unequal relations of injury and gain, of harm and privilege (72), Episkenew suggests at once the power asymmetries in which colonialism embeds its subjects; the profound disavowal performed by settlers in order to legitimize, naturalize, or otherwise refute the “terrorism and theft” upon which the Canadian nation-state is fundamentally premised (5); and the prospective role of Indigenous literature in supplying a corrective truth to dominant forms of settler disavowal. She states: “Colonialism is a pathological condition, a sickness that requires a cure, and taking the shared truths of Indigenous people to the settler population comprises a component of that cure” (72).

Moreover, Episkenew's analysis accords Indigenous literature a public truth-telling capacity that is both prospectively therapeutic and socio-pedagogical (193), because such literature is thus generative of a dialectical

site into which both Indigenous and settler subjects are enfolded—along with the dominant competing narratives of the Canadian nation—such that Indigenous people might emerge healed from colonial trauma, and settlers cured of their pathological denial. Canada’s official narratives naturalize settler unearned advantage, rationalize the occupation of Indigenous land, and justify the resultant “social and environmental consequences” that have accrued (Episkenew 5). Indigenous literature, for its part, furnishes a curative counter-narrative that affirms the truths of Indigenous readers, while educating settlers toward the kind of reflexive empathy Episkenew finds necessary to the cause of social justice and the ideal of decolonized relations (191). And it is here, in this transformative process as facilitated by Indigenous literature itself, that Episkenew discerns the genuine possibilities of rapprochement, if not “reconciliation,” between Indigenous and settler communities (7; 73). Literature, she contends, both constructs among Indigenous and settler readers alike “a common truth about our shared past” (15), for all that we are differently positioned by it, and offers one space in which Indigenous and settler readers might together witness this shared past, reckon with its manifestation in the present, and critically align ourselves toward a different “vision of possibility” for the future (Justice, “Conjuring” 5).

In this way, *Taking Back Our Spirits* takes up the critical challenge that Creek-Cherokee critic Craig Womack envisions “of relating literature to the real world in hopes of seeing social change” (96). But Episkenew also avows, with frank and compelling pluck, that Indigenous literature itself “changes the world” (191). A bold claim for the material implications of imaginative work, this statement both recalls and extends existing notions of literature as reflective of lived contexts of struggle and hope to suggest the pedagogical and healing power entailed by those “extratextual” and inextricably *social* lives that stories lead (McKegney 57). For Episkenew, contemporary Indigenous literary practice is rooted in an intellectual tradition wherein the concept of material and imaginary transformation through story is a matter of inherited responsibility and truth (194).

The truths told by Indigenous literature—that Canada is founded upon systemic, state-sponsored violence and expropriation, and that this legacy is as much a lived inheritance in our present as it is a historical fact—these are truths belonging not only to Indigenous people, but to settlers as well. In advocating the transformative potential of these truths, especially insofar as they “implicate” those who read them in storied form (16-17), Episkenew articulates as an entry point into prospective “reconciliation” (73) a public

truth-telling process through literature that is, I think, epistemologically *distinct* from the asymmetrical exercise of cathartic release and unearned absolution in which the dominant rhetoric of truth and reconciliation arguably embeds its participants—colonial “victims” and “oppressors,” respectively—in this post-apology moment (Chrisjohn and Wasacase 226).<sup>5</sup> Significantly, *Taking Back Our Spirits*’ contribution to literary criticism and to the theorizing of Indigenous literature’s transformative potential emerges in a moment redolent with the guarded hope and fitting scepticism that characterize many public and critical responses to the federal Government of Canada’s June 2008 apology to former students of residential schools (as well as responses to the subsequent inauguration of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission [TRC]). Speaking inescapably to this context, then—even as its formal engagement with the apology and the TRC proper remain confined in large part to some concluding remarks in the last chapter—*Taking Back Our Spirits* perceives a different context in which Indigenous stories about Canada’s colonial past and present have meaning and a discrete (and decidedly more anti-colonial) outcome toward which such shared truths could be told. Of the “long overdue” apology (188) and the broader settlement of which it is a part, Episkenew says:

I fear that, since Canada has closed the residential schools, is paying compensation, and has apologized, the onus is now on Indigenous people to pull up our collective socks and heal ourselves, our families, and our communities . . . [O]ne benefit of White privilege in this country is the right to a guilt-free existence, and Canada’s apology has done much to free even the most liberal Canadians from guilt for the sins of the past. (190)

Against this wilful “therapeutic amnesia” (Martin 57) that pervades state-authored gestures toward contrition, resolution, and closure (Henderson and Wakeham 7; Martin 61), *Taking Back Our Spirits* envisions Indigenous literature as redistributing the asymmetrical burden of responsibility for colonial trauma. Because literature’s therapeutic and instructive functions figure so prominently in this project of collective reckoning and prospective reconciliation, the specific means by which both healing and cure here ostensibly occur is a matter to which I will turn now, before offering by way of conclusion some further comments on the possibilities and limits of the conciliatory project, particularly where the invader-settler subject is concerned.

In the first place, literature acts as a vital site of validation, reciprocity, and communion for Indigenous readers whose collective though diverse experiences of systematized colonial trauma have been pathologized,

disavowed, and individualized (Episkenew 11). Literature heals, Episkenew contends, but this process is more than a matter of mere “catharsis” (75). Rather, for Episkenew, literature enacts politicized sites of imaginative community wherein those who have been dislocated by colonial policy from tribal relations, traditional knowledge, and ancestral land and language might find, if not models by which to articulate those relations anew, then some way to theorize their forced displacement from them (16). From the Indian Act of 1876, which served to both consolidate and expand upon pre-existing assimilative legislation intended to limit and define Indigenous identity (28), to the child-welfare policies of apprehension and removal epitomized by (though not limited to) the emblematic “Sixties Scoop” (65), Episkenew accounts for historical “policies of devastation,” first as outlined in an early chapter of that title, and then as explored in a series of subsequent chapters that chart colonial public policy as recounted, contested, or opposed in an eclectic body of contemporary Indigenous-authored literature.

In each case these policies have been designed, in the words of Mi'kmaw scholar Bonita Lawrence, to manufacture the “elimination of Indigenous peoples as a legal and social fact” (31). Not so much the elapsed side effect of colonialism's assimilationist project, then, as its ongoing and deepest ambition, the intergenerational repercussion of these policies thus figures as an open and “unresolved” site of injury and prospective repair toward which Episkenew orients her readers in the present (148). Against the conspicuous characterization of residential schooling as the primary site of colonial injury (and as one that the dominant discourse of apology and redress would now locate firmly within Canada's “past”), *Taking Back Our Spirits* occasions a different way in which to conceive of our colonial legacy—not as the finite and now remedied outcome of the unfortunately damaging but ostensibly benevolent practices of an earlier settler-colonial state, but rather as an enduring set of genocidal policies as presently proliferated across a number of contexts, both material and imaginative.<sup>6</sup> Episkenew thus asks that the “onus” be placed not on Indigenous people to narrate for the sake of settlers, but on settlers themselves who are then called to witness *their part* in these truths.

This refiguring of responsibility and recognition runs as a central critical undercurrent throughout *Taking Back Our Spirits* and constitutes the primary means by which Episkenew theorizes Indigenous literature's instructive function relative to its settler readers. Rather than suggesting that settlers read literature simply in order that they might enact an externalized form of recognition relative to Indigenous peoples' truths, Episkenew argues

that settlers must read Indigenous stories of colonial trauma in order that they might recognize *themselves* (their own unearned advantage, their own complicity). Beyond offering a “window into the daily life of Indigenous people” (190) through which the “vicariously” experienced reality of social suffering is ostensibly gleaned (114), Indigenous literature is generative of transformative knowledge because the “empathy and understanding” (186) it promotes among settlers also invites the more profound recognition of their “complicity in the continued oppression of Indigenous people” (17).

Episkenew thus envisions in the literary-critical context a politics of recognition that differs substantively from, and may also have the potential to reshape, the accommodative policy and legal strategies by which the Canadian state presently seeks to reconcile “Indigenous claims to nationhood with Crown sovereignty” (Coulthard 438). Rather than a prospective politics of social transformation enacted by Indigenous peoples as equal partners in the nation-to-nation model recommended by the *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (“Restructuring”), liberal modes of recognition as currently constituted by the Canadian state are premised upon strategies of multicultural inclusion and representation that effectively “reproduce the very configurations of colonial power that Indigenous peoples’ demands for recognition have historically sought to transcend” (439). Whether through the selective redistribution of land, capital, and resources, or through the provisional rhetorical acknowledgement of certain “past” colonial harms, the state arguably recuperates Indigenous demands for justice as an opportunity to demonstrate its progressive virtue while nevertheless leaving systemic forms of colonial oppression intact. Though land claims, cash settlements, and other forms of material or symbolic restitution do have ameliorative effects, such measures take shape within the institutions of colonial society itself, and as part of a context of redress that would seem to be geared toward promoting among Indigenous peoples a reconciliation with ongoing colonialism and among non-Indigenous Canadians a dissociation from their part in this truth (Alfred 183). As Gerald Taiaiake Alfred has recently remarked, “Real change will happen only when settlers are forced into a reckoning of who they are, what they have done, and what they have inherited” (184); with *Taking Back Our Spirits*, Episkenew suggests a vision of recognition wherein the knowledge of (and empathy for) Indigenous dispossession is meant not to secure but rather to *militate against* liberal disavowal. And yet, to the extent that Episkenew’s work also asks us to consider how settler denial has been integral to colonialism’s persistence, I



wonder if there isn't some way in which this disavowal has been subtly refigured in the contemporary, "neo-colonial" moment (Episkenew 114). I see this as one of the central questions precipitated by the vision of mutual decolonization implicit in Episkenew's work, especially as it pertains to the invader-settler subject. For, if *Taking Back Our Spirits* compellingly theorizes the *possibilities* of how literature might cure settlers of their entrenchment in colonial ideology, I want to meditate, however briefly, on the prospective limits of this model, and to suggest, in closing, some thoughts for further consideration as occasioned by this important book.

If Indigenous literature proffers to settlers a "competing myth" to Canada's "authorized" national myth (156) and stimulates in them an appropriate empathetic response, they might come to understand their place in a legacy of colonial violence. But what if the surface acknowledgement of this legacy is in some cases *integral* to its deepest disavowal? What if the empathetic response of settler subjects is at times less a means of owning "guilt" or responsibility than of assuaging or effacing it? For, I would argue that the enduring myth of liberal benevolence and inclusivity (now, as currently configured in Canada's conciliatory projects of redress) actually requires as its antecedent, and thus projects as its very probable outcome, the continuation of colonial relations. Ongoing colonial violence, ongoing violations of Indigenous peoples' rights, and government-authored acts of strategic acknowledgement and erasure relative to its own participation in these realities—these might be productively regarded as instances that would not so much contradict as *make possible* certain forms of liberal empathy and contrition. In this sense, the fact of ongoing white supremacy makes possible our regret for it, and the project of imaginatively witnessing our part in that truth occasions perhaps a more profound therapeutic amnesia that is all the more insidious for its seeming affinity with the project of decolonization.

To consider the limits of this model is not to discount the political power of empathy as a starting point from which settlers might reflexively politicize their relation to both Indigenous peoples and the colonial state, but rather to draw out in its practicable implications the significant but sometimes understated distinction upon which Episkenew's call for a differently constituted settler consciousness necessarily depends: a distinction between a liberal individualist model of empathy that surreptitiously shores up rather than transcends asymmetrical social relations, and those rarer forms of critical empathy through which anti-colonial solidarity in "social justice initiatives" and policy critique might be pursued (191). This is to distinguish

between what Audra Simpson observes as the “consumptive pleasure” of Indigenous disappearance for dominant settler memory—where contrition might be performed and the status quo of colonial relations be confirmed (208)—and a more radical reckoning with settler privilege that offers no immediate redemptive comforts, but instead, much uncertainty and work. As a settler subject who shares with Episkenew a belief in literature’s capacity to do such material work in the world, I want to highlight as integral to its socio-pedagogical function and to its capacity to promote decolonized forms of recognition and empathy, this unsettling of the consolatory security of a “hopeful, shared (now liberal) future” (Simpson 208) in favour of a reckoning with the shared truths of an ongoing colonial legacy (the eradication of which we must all labour for). The project of decolonization, as Daniel Heath Justice reminds us, is a “difficult, multifaceted, and multigenerational struggle that demands ongoing discussion, argument, and debate” (“Conjuring Marks” 10). I am grateful for everything that *Taking Back Our Spirits* offers to this cause.



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Literature, Healing, and the  
Transformational Imaginary:  
Thoughts on Jo-Ann Episkenew's  
*Taking Back Our Spirits: Indigenous  
Literature, Public Policy, and Healing*

Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee Nation)

It is both a personal pleasure and a professional privilege to offer these words of response to Episkenew's extraordinary book, and I particularly appreciated the opportunity to share these thoughts with her directly in the live forum rather than at the comfortable but artificial remove of time and distance. I hope that my words will do honour to the ideas and concerns presented in the volume, and that it will help further the important discussions underway here and elsewhere on the role of literature in the decolonizing politics of Indigenous healing, sovereignty, and self-determination.

I want to begin with a rather broad question that roots the subsequent discussion quite firmly in the book's conceptual foundation: *what is literature good for?* This is one of the existential questions that literature professors struggle to answer. It's a question that some of our students ask in the classroom, or in their assignments; it's a question sometimes asked of us by faculty in other departments. (One of the most memorable professional conversations I ever had with a historian friend was posited on her rather loaded question: "How do you people in English justify your paycheque?") On occasion, when a book or a writer or even a university or college course becomes a topic of controversy, it's a question that shapes the actions of vote-watching politicians, money-conscious parents, and morals-guarding community members. Literary studies as a discipline is a relatively recent addition to the university curriculum in Europe and North America, a latecomer compared to history, linguistics, law, theology, and medicine.<sup>7</sup> And from its nineteenth-century beginnings, the discipline has always struggled to articulate its significance in the academy and the world.

So, what *is* literature good for? The very question assumes a utilitarian purpose, that literature should in some way serve a purpose beyond itself. It's a fair distance from "art for art's sake," the call-to-arms of Oscar Wilde and his Decadent compatriots in their aesthetic warfare against the stifling

moralism of the Victorian age. Yet questions of utilitarian value are difficult to avoid, especially when writers and artistic types of all sorts so often depend on the public largesse of taxpayer-funded grant agencies for funding to support their work. Given that complicating context, we should be able to offer a meaningful response to the question of value, whether or not we're fully comfortable with its implications. While I am certainly sympathetic to and sensible of the original context of resistance in which the Decadents presented their bold challenge to the reactionary prudery of their time, "art for art's sake" seems to me now something of a bankrupt notion that is too often trotted out by self-important and disaffected cynics who mistake narcissistic pretence for a true artistic commitment.

Episkenew is far from a literary dilettante, and her work far from a self-indulgent screed. She is a scholar and an activist, a teacher and a grandmother, a voice for justice and a vision-maker of transformative possibility. In *Taking Back Our Spirits: Indigenous Literature, Public Policy, and Healing*, Episkenew offers a book-length response to the question of literature's purpose, arguing for the transformative power of literature by Indigenous writers in Canada to effect healing from the ravages of colonialism. While the main focus is on the woundings suffered by Aboriginal communities, Episkenew notes that settlers, too, suffer from the dehumanizing effects of colonialism, though in different ways and to differing degrees. Policies and practices of racism diminish *everyone*, and they undermine the possibilities of building good, healthy, and mutually respectful relationships between peoples and across difference. In a study both thoughtful and provocative, she insists that "contemporary Indigenous literature cannot be divorced from its contextual framework" (186)—indeed, she points out that this framework is a rich source of inspiration for Indigenous writers today, as it has been historically. Episkenew places Indigenous writing in conversation with the present reality and the long history of public policies inflicted by the Canadian settler government upon Indigenous communities, and argues that these invasive "policies of devastation" are the inescapable backdrop for Indigenous literary resistance. She writes:

Not only does Indigenous literature respond to and critique the policies of the Government of Canada; it also functions as "medicine" to help cure the colonial contagion by healing the communities that these policies have injured. It does this by challenging the "master narrative," that is, a summary of the stories that embody the settlers' "socially shared understanding." This master narrative is, in fact, the myth of the new Canadian nation-state, which valorizes the settlers but which sometimes misrepresents and more often excludes Indigenous peoples. Indigenous literature acknowledges and validates Indigenous peoples' experiences by filling in the gaps and correcting the falsehoods in this master narrative. (2)

This master narrative is, in many ways, a product of and source for an oppressive literature of settlement—popular of works of literary fiction as well as policy papers, laws, procedures, and administrative directives—that has worked to diminish the humanity of Indigenous peoples and fuel the self-absorbed sense of triumphalism that has accompanied the colonial enterprise. Literature has power and, in settler narratives of Canada, that power has too often been used as a weapon that simultaneously brutalizes Indigenous peoples and erases their history while masking that violence under the self-deceptive guise of benevolent uplift.

Episkenew is not so reductive as to claim that colonialism is the only context of significance to Indigenous writers. Yet she does make a compelling case for its importance, tracing the long and sordid history of settler policies in Canada, from the civilization imperative of the nineteenth century to forced settlement of mobile communities, imposition of European gender and sexual mores, surveillance and denial of resource access, the reserve regime, land loss, residential schools, theft and adoption of Indigenous children, identity policing (especially in the case of Métis and non-Status “Not-Indians”), and numerous other assaults on Indigenous peoples and their sovereignty. In so doing, and in placing literary texts in response to many of these policies and practices, she forcefully reminds us that, “[d]espite the ferocity of the colonial regime’s attack on [Indigenous peoples] using public policy as a weapon, Indigenous people have not assimilated or disappeared. [They] have appropriated the language and literary practices of the colonizers, which they use to expose the consequences of imperial policies on their people.” Even so, “Indigenous literature is not merely an exposé of past and present injustices.” Rather, “Indigenous people have learned that the creative process has restorative powers” (67-68).

Herein is the moral and intellectual heart of the book. Colonialism has undeniably assaulted Indigenous communities and wounded untold numbers of individuals for generations. Yet Indigenous people—individually and in community—are not simply passive victims of settler violence, but are instead active respondents to both the troubling and beautiful aspects of their world, respondents who draw on rich cultural, intellectual, spiritual, historical, and aesthetic wellsprings to effect healing of self and society. In telling their own stories, in asserting their own imaginative sovereignty and placing themselves, their communities, and their worldviews at the centre of concern rather than the margins to which Indigenous subjectivities have so long been relegated, Indigenous writers affirm their own humanity and

dignity, thus countering the “national collective myth” of the settler nation, and helping both Indigenous people and settler descendants “learn that the national collective myth of [Canada], and by extension its societal foundation, is flawed and that its prosperity is built upon the suffering of others” (73). If the supremacist literature of Euro-Western settlement is part of the problem, then a decolonizing and culturally affirming literature can, and to some degree must, be part of the solution. Such a literature offers a different perspective on the world, one that makes space for other voices to tell of their experiences and to insist on their own narrative presence. To cure oneself and one’s community from the sickness of colonialism requires the healing power of truth—personal and communal, contemporary and historical. That healing extends outward as well: “to cure settlers from the pathology of colonialism, Indigenous people must make public the alternative collective myth that comprises our truths,” for “[w]ithout truth there can be no reconciliation” (73).

Episkenew therefore argues for literature’s transformative truth-value, in that it presents the storied imaginations, experiences, worldviews, and perspectives of Indigenous peoples to a wounded colonial world that has too long erased, dismissed, or ignored those stories. So, whether autobiography, fiction, drama, or testimony, Indigenous literature *by its very existence* asserts that there are other stories, other histories, other visions of community than those authorized by the colonialist “overculture.” She explores the transformative, healing power of Indigenous writing through careful close readings of numerous contemporary texts, some with an established scholarly archive, others largely neglected by literary scholars who dismiss the works as “mere ‘protest’ literature, literature about ‘issues’ rather than aesthetics, and therefore more suitable for study in Native Studies programs” than in English departments (146)—a clear case of a politically evacuated and self-serving version of “art for art’s sake” serving the very oppressive ends that the original philosophy had itself risen to challenge.

Episkenew does not try to present an authoritative list of creative works by Indigenous writers in Canada in making her argument. Instead, her aim is more focused, attending primarily to those works that most directly address the public policies that have so demeaned and dehumanized Indigenous communities. Her close readings are thus of autobiography—“an act of imagination that inspires social regeneration by providing eyewitness testimony to historical injustice” (75)—such as Maria Campbell’s *Halfbreed* (1973) and Basil Johnston’s *Indian School Days* (1988); autobiographical fiction that blends the testimonial

authority and subjective perspective of personal experience with the broad-reaching narrative conventions of popular fiction, such as Beatrice Culleton Mosionier's *In Search of April Raintree* (1983), Shirley Sterling's *My Name is Seepeetza* (1992), and Richard Wagamese's *Keeper 'n Me* (1994); and the communal works of Indigenous drama in Canada, by companies such as Common Weal and the Saskatchewan Native Theatre Company, and playwrights Daniel David Moses, Vera Manuel, and Ian Ross. In each case, the artists and artworks under analysis not only offer testimony and affirmation of personal and historical truth, but they also lay the foundation for building healthier communities that are both challenging colonial narratives and creating their own.

In the final chapter of the book, Episkenew argues that in addition to “documenting Indigenous peoples’ reality in a way that promotes empathy and understanding, Indigenous literature also has the ability to shape history, politics, and public policy” (186). These writers and texts do not simply look inward, but extend their imaginative purpose outward to shift the perspectives and understandings of *all* readers, not just Indigenous readers. In this way, Episkenew asserts, Indigenous literatures can change the world, in part because they

[enable] settler readers to relate to Indigenous peoples on an emotional level thereby generating empathy. By reading Indigenous literature, settlers come to understand Indigenous people as fellow human beings. Empathy, in turn, has the potential to create a groundswell of support for social-justice initiatives to improve the lot of Indigenous people. . . . Indigenous literature also changes the world by helping Indigenous people heal from the trauma that colonial policies have caused and by educating settler society and its governments. (190-91)

The healing power of Indigenous literature is thus directed inward as well as outward; to work toward one's own healing without dealing with the source of ongoing wounding is to leave oneself vulnerable to further harm, but to focus only on the source without addressing the impact is to remain in a state of hurt, which can only corrode and spread outward towards others.

Such literature is, in Episkenew's words, “applied,” in that it “serves a socio-pedagogical function as well as an aesthetic one” (193), thus “promoting social justice for Indigenous people” (193). Moreover, drawing in part on the work of Joseph Gold, who advocates “reading fiction as a means of improving mental and emotional health” (13), and in dialogue with scholarship emerging from what was the Association for Bibliotherapy and Applied Literature, now called the Canadian Applied Literature Association (see CALA website), Episkenew argues that there is a moral and ethical imperative in the sharing of stories that create rather than disfigure us.

These are things that literature is good for, and they *are* good things . . . when they happen. As a scholar and teacher of Indigenous literatures, I have been fortunate to see the minds and hearts of readers change as a result of their engagement with Indigenous texts. I am a firm believer in the power of literature to effect change, and I am thoroughly committed to the modest claim that literature can change the world. But such change is not a certainty, and much depends on the special alchemy of receptive reader and accessible writer (and, sometimes, helpful teacher) to provide the necessary conditions for such transformative potential to be fully realized. In many ways, the application of the literature to these important purposes is every bit as important as the content and socio-pedagogical potential of the texts themselves.

*Taking Back Our Spirits* is an engaging work of both scholarly sophistication and ethical challenge, and one that can and should inform the understanding of anyone doing work in this field. Yet Episkenew's provocative assertions about the healing power of Indigenous literatures bring with them particular challenges that made me wonder how she might respond.

For example, while I certainly agree that Indigenous literatures have the potential to effect healing, I wonder if there are texts within this literary body that *do not* heal, or that actively offer harm. Like many medicines—traditional and pharmaceutical alike—many things that serve to heal can also wound or even kill, depending on the patient, the dosage, and the use. I have found nourishment and healing balm in Indigenous texts, but I have also found hurtful works by Indigenous writers that replicate the pathological savages of reactionary settler fantasies, or that select certain groups—mixedbloods, queer folks, women, etc.—as targets for scorn and abuse.

Take Tomson Highway's 1998 novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. Though a brilliant novel in many respects, the ethos of sexuality it presents is both easy and dangerous, for in the representation of gay dancer and rough-trade sex seeker Gabriel Okimasis (and, to a different degree, his repressed brother Jeremiah), the novel insists on the inextricable association of pedophilia and assault with either twisted and exploitative homosexual desire or excruciating self-hatred, repression, and denial. Though wrapped in lush prose and evocative imagery, the message is ultimately indistinguishable from that of gay-baiting bigots and reactionaries who falsely conflate the two. There is no room in the novel for gay desire that is not deeply condemnatory and compromised by abusive relations. Whatever its auto/biographical inspiration, this is, to my mind, a failure of the book, and one that is far too easy a shortcut for a writer of Highway's calibre. Taken in isolation, this wounding power



of the book might not be a significant issue, but the book is part of a network of literary meaning-making, and in that context, the characters in Highway's novel join a long and inglorious line of toxic queers in Indigenous literature.

I am not asking for cardboard saints and all happy, smiling characters without problems or difficulties; I am not expecting characters to always come from positions and perspectives devoid of pain and wounding. But I *do* want depth, diversity, and counter-narratives to the too-familiar toxic queers that dominate so much of our literary offerings. We deserve to have literature that is as richly textured and complex as our real lives, and frankly, there are many queer Indigenous folks who are hungering to see healthy, sexually precocious, and emotionally rich queer Indigenous characters in fiction.

Just as our hopes, loves, dreams, and inclusive ideals can inform our imaginations, so too can our unresolved anxieties, our fears, and our narrow hatreds corrode our imaginative possibilities. So I wonder how Episkenew would respond to the question of "What do we do with the harm/wounding performed or facilitated by some works by Indigenous writers? Would she suggest that we still teach/study/share them? What is the role of 'application' here? If *all* works offer some measure of healing, does this mean that *any* work by an Indigenous writer makes a contribution to the continuity of the people, even if it is problematic (racist, sexist, homophobic, etc.)?" If this is the case, healing is a more complicated idea than simple recovery from harm or injury, taking on an almost epistemological significance. This seems a topic worthy of further discussion, and certainly something that I would have liked to have seen featured a bit more prominently in the book.

Further on that point, I wonder about the dangers of looking to literature for individual, community, and generational healing, not because it does not work but because it *does*. Emotional trauma can often erupt like an infected pustule; sometimes that can be a cleansing experience, but it can also simply spread the infection wider. I am wary of asking too much of the literature, especially in a classroom environment where people come from various life experiences and are not always prepared or willing to engage one another with care and sensitivity. In such contexts, the opening up of emotional wounds can actually be counter to the purpose of healing and can add another layer of trauma to the wounded individual. Literature teachers are not counsellors or therapists; for all that we might be empathetic, we are not generally trained to provide the necessary assistance for people in search of healing. If we begin with the stated objective of finding healing through the literature, are we prepared to deal with the traumas that will inevitably arise? If we are not, we run

the risk of simply adding more burdens to those seeking respite; if we have been insistent that this literature is healing, and by our ignorance left students to come away even more wounded, then we may have inadvertently deepened their sense of self-blame and despair. This is not an argument against the applied value of literature to provide the possibilities of healing, but it is a cautionary note about the ethical obligations that accompany such work.

Finally, I wonder if it might be useful to distinguish between the imperatives of healing and *justice* in Indigenous writing, because they are not necessarily the same thing. While they may cross trajectories at certain points, they are also distinctive in their purposes and effects, and necessarily so. A work—such as Annharte Baker’s “Bear Piss Water” and “Me Tonto Along,” or Randy Lundy’s “20th Street after Dark”—might be invaluable in the cause of justice, but not offer much in the way of applied healing. Similarly, Marie Clements’ surrealist play *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*, which takes as its focus the murders of women in Vancouver’s “Skid Row,” is much more a story about uncovering the past and giving voice to the silenced than it is about the healing of the murdered characters; although healing may be a side effect, it is not a necessary precondition or the driving impulse for seeking acknowledgement of wrongdoing.

Taken further, a writer might rightly be quite angry and wounding in her or his work, and not be at all interested in being healed, but rather with being *heard*, and in so doing serving the cause of justice. And, sadly, there are some who are so damaged that they will never find healing in this lifetime. They, too, deserve and demand to be heard, to give witness to the world, and to challenge us to prevent the suffering they experienced from continuing for others. The distinction between healing and justice seems to me to be vitally important, and it offers a complementary understanding of the value that applied literature can bring to our lives.

These questions and extrapolations bring me back to my initial query: what is literature good for? In considering *Taking Back Our Spirits*, I might presumptuously posit that Episkenew’s possible answer would be that literature is good for many things, but none perhaps more precious than to help us imagine otherwise, to help us realize in our lived realities the very best hopes and dreams of our imagined lives, to provide a transformative vision of *possibility*. Such work is dangerous and difficult, but all liberating transformations are. And if literature can help us in that struggle, then it is good for very much indeed.

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## What Stories Do: A Response to Episkenew

Kristina Fagan Bidwell (*NunatuKavut*)

**T**he title of Episkenew's *Taking Back Our Spirits*, as a verb-based phrase, emphasizes the working assumption that this book makes about stories: Episkenew believes that stories *do* things. They not only reflect reality; they create it. And in her subtitle—*Indigenous Literature, Public Policy, and Healing*—she points to the particular aspects of reality in which she is interested. Her book reveals the ways in which Canadian “Indian” policies have been based in a pervasive story: “The myth [of white superiority underpinning] the colonization of the Americas is truly a dangerous story, which continues to have disastrous effects on the health and well-being of Indigenous people” (2-3). But she also argues that Indigenous literature can function as a “counterstory” (2) to this oppressive myth, thereby acting as a “medicine” for Indigenous communities and helping to heal the wounds caused by colonial policies.

In studying the social functions of stories, Episkenew is taking an approach to literature significantly different from the usual one within the discipline of English. We all know that stories can change our lives, but this transformative effect is not something we often talk about in academic settings. In English, there is a widespread assumption, strongly influenced by New Criticism, that the object of study ought to be the text itself, and not the responses and motivations of its author and its reader. And, while New Criticism has to some extent fallen from grace, literary critics are still primarily focused on what a text *means* rather than what it *does*. The text is something that we may read, listen to, or watch, study, analyze, or evaluate, but it is rarely seen as having direct and concrete consequences.

Episkenew, in contrast, argues convincingly that stories matter deeply because “we *are* our stories” (13); it is through storytelling that we give meaning to the facts of our lives. With this focus on the social functions of stories, she is moving towards an approach to literature that is grounded in Indigenous approaches to storytelling. The literary critical view of stories as “texts” is profoundly different from how stories are traditionally treated in Indigenous communities. In these communities, the assumption is widely shared that stories are social actions. As Thomas King puts it in *The*

*Truth about Stories*, Indigenous traditional stories are “public stories,” told in a social context with social consequences, both good and bad. Stories may help and heal, but storytellers must also avoid telling stories that are inappropriate or even dangerous.

Indeed, if we *are* our stories, then the stories are surely every bit as complex as the people who make them. In this response to *Taking Back Our Spirits*, I wish to honour the important move that Episkenew has made in reading Indigenous literature in terms of its social functions. I believe that this ground-breaking book points to an approach to Indigenous literature that has the potential to make literary criticism much more positive and meaningful for Indigenous people. But I also wish to explore the limits of the story that is told in this book. In telling a story, whether it be personal, collective, or scholarly, part of the process is necessarily leaving things out. Episkenew, for instance, points to what has been “taken away” from Indigenous people through colonial policies. But I want to ask, what has not been taken away? Or, to put it differently, what have we held on to? Similarly, she explores how stories can heal. But what about the stories that do not heal? And what if healing sometimes means not telling a story?

*Taking Back Our Spirits* tells us a story about colonialism and anti-colonial resistance. In a clear and grounded voice, the early chapters of the book lay out the roots and practices of colonialism in Canada, particularly as it has been enacted through policy. I look forward to using this book in my classes, where many students lack a background in the history of colonialism in Canada, and therefore perceive many of the situations described in Aboriginal texts as somehow “natural.” For example, I have taught Ian Ross’ *fare Wel*, a play about a failed effort at self-government, and have had many students read it as being about the inherent impossibility of Indigenous self-governance. However, Episkenew offers an alternative, historically grounded reading; she shows how exactly the “colonial regime set out to destroy Indigenous governance,” replacing working systems and traditional leaders with imposed band councils (178). This play, she shows, presents the challenges involved in self-governing today and the need to find models that are not based on colonial structures and beliefs. She clearly shows what has been “taken away” from the Partridge Crop community by the destruction of traditional systems of governance. This kind of grounding of the works in their historical context is exactly what is needed to combat the negative generalizations that are at the heart of racist stereotypes.

But this is not just a book about what has been done to Indigenous

people. Rather, this is a book about how Indigenous literature can act as a powerful counterforce to destructive public policies. Episkenew points out that stories are the basis of our personal identity, but that we can also change the stories we tell about ourselves. We each construct what she calls a “personal myth . . . to bring together the different parts of ourselves and our lives into a purposeful and convincing whole” (15). In addition, we create and carry collective myths, such as the story that Métis people tell themselves about what it means to be Métis. When we encounter other people’s stories, whether oral or written, they can then interact, sometimes in powerful ways, with our own personal and collective myths. Episkenew’s chosen texts are ones with which Indigenous people have had powerful interactions, either through national readership, as with *Halfbreed* and *In Search of April Raintree*; in the classroom, as with *Keeper’n Me*; in Indigenous conferences, as with *The Strength of Indian Women*; or in particular communities, as with community theatre projects. She explores how these works of literature can interact with readers’ myths, strengthening or challenging them. Through this process, she argues, Indigenous literature can have a transformative effect on the myths of both Indigenous people and settlers in Canada: “Contemporary Indigenous literature serves two transformative functions— healing Indigenous people and advancing social justice in settler society— both components in the process of decolonization” (15).

In revealing the ways that Indigenous literature responds to and critiques Canadian policies, Episkenew is participating in what Daniel Heath Justice has elsewhere called the “decolonization imperative” (“Go Away” 150). As she so carefully shows, great harm has been done to Indigenous people in what is now called Canada—physically, emotionally, and spiritually. The myths and effects of colonization are still powerful in this country, and we have an ethical imperative to combat them. Yet, as Justice has also pointed out, this imperative “is not the root of indigenous people and self-determining sovereignty” (152). He argues that it would be an error to see the lives and stories of Indigenous people as primarily shaped by colonization and decolonization, and cites an unpublished manuscript by Amanda Cobb: “Tribal sovereignty existed before colonization and does . . . exist after colonization. Sovereignty is *the going on* of life—the living” (qtd. in Justice 152, italics hers). If we focus too much on colonization, we risk ignoring the ways in which Indigenous people have *gone on*, even in the face of great challenges. The continuity of Indigenous people is what I am thinking of when I ask the question: What has not been taken away?

In the panel on *Taking Back Our Spirits*, I described a conversation that I had with a Cree friend in Saskatoon. Upon hearing the title of *Taking Back Our Spirits*, she commented, “But our spirits were never taken away.” In thinking about this comment, I wondered how Episkenew is using the word *spirit*. Although she does not explicitly define the term in her book, she appears to be using it not to refer to specific spiritual beings or practices, but rather, as Duran and Duran use the word *soul*: “The core essence is the fabric of the soul and it is from this essence that mythology, dreams, and culture emerge” (qtd. in Episkenew 8). She also writes that stories themselves are spirit, living things with the power to change people (15). If then by spirit we mean the essence of ourselves, our desire to live and to be happy, our sense of peoplehood, our connections, our stories—then I would argue that our spirits have not been taken away. I do not say this to deny or minimize the way, as Episkenew points out in her piece here, that Canadian policies “were consciously designed to attack our spirituality by attacking our relationships with self, with others, and with our environment,” and that this attack did indeed do terrible damage. Some individuals have unquestionably been destroyed by the effects of colonialism. But collectively, as *Indigenous peoples*, we have also gone on, living in our families and communities, telling our stories, insisting on our rights and responsibilities as the Indigenous peoples of this land. We, and our spirits, have carried on.

This continuity of Indigenous peoples is perhaps obscured by the fact that, while *Taking Back Our Spirits* describes colonial policies throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the first Indigenous work that it looks at is Maria Campbell’s 1973 *Halfbreed*. While acknowledging that Maria Campbell was not the first Indigenous person to publish a work of literature, Episkenew does not mention any earlier writers or storytellers (76). Yet, even if we look only at written texts in Saskatchewan, before Maria Campbell, we have Edward Ahenakew (1885-1961), who wrote down the stories of Chief Thunderchild and was also a journalist, poet, and novelist; James Settee (1841-1883) who wrote vividly descriptive journals and short stories; Charles Pratt (1851-1884), a Cree missionary who kept extensive journals; and Joseph Dion (1888-1960), who wrote down many Cree traditional stories and histories. Many other Indigenous people from coast to coast also continued to write through the darkest days of colonialism. And, of course, many, many oral storytellers continued, in the face of oppression, to pass on their people’s stories. These were the people who kept our stories and spirits alive, through some very difficult times. By describing the

“colonial story” of the nineteenth and early-mid-twentieth centuries without also discussing the Indigenous storytellers in that time, we risk losing sight of what was not taken away.

In fact, despite her book's title, Episkenew's *Taking Back Our Spirits* refers more often to the spirits of Indigenous people as “wounded” rather than “taken away.” She draws on Duran and Duran's concept of the “soul wound,” the damage that colonialism has done to Indigenous peoples' sense of self and self-worth. *Taking Back Our Spirits* hypothesizes that Indigenous literature can help to heal this wound: “Reading contemporary Indigenous literature enables Indigenous readers, and audience members of theatrical productions, ‘to make sense of the text’ of their lives” (16). The book's readings are based on this hypothesis. But, as Episkenew points out, it would be valuable to have studies that document, in practice, the way that stories, whether in the form of literature, theatre, or film, can affect Indigenous peoples' thoughts and lives; when we observe how stories function in an actual social context, the results are often unexpected by the professional literary critic and likely other highly educated readers, too. Janice Radway, for example, reports in *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* her discovery that the ways that women read romance novels are quite different, and more complex, than the ways that she had hypothesized they would. In the case of Indigenous literature, might there be cases in which the healing hypothesis is not confirmed? Might some works by Indigenous writers not be healing?

Episkenew does cite Terry Tafoya, who says that “stories are a type of medicine and can be healing or poisonous depending on the dosage or type” (13). But she then goes on to argue that “poisonous stories” come only from colonial discourse. But surely Indigenous people can tell poisonous stories too, as folklorist Barre Toelken discovered in his extensive study of Navajo Coyote tales. He spent thirteen years analyzing the ways in which Coyote stories functioned in the Navajo community, looking in particular at the ways that they reinforce Navajo values and are used to literally heal sickness. Finally, after he had presented the results of his research at a community gathering, one of his Navajo friends told him that he was taking grave risks by delving so deeply into these stories. The reason was that these traditional stories could also be used in witchcraft to cause illness or death. Literary stories can similarly be limiting or hurtful, or they can be read in ways that cause harm. In the panel, both Daniel Heath Justice and I brought up the example of Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. In teaching that novel,



I have found that some Indigenous students find it hopeful and affirming, while others find it deeply hurtful, and have explicitly said that they do not think that it is a healing text. If we are to examine the social functions of texts, we need to try to understand such contradictory responses.

In *Taking Back Our Spirits*, the readings of the individual texts do in fact acknowledge that the texts are not uniformly positive in their effect. Episkenew does point out the potential of texts to limit, rather than expand, our understanding of “the text of our lives.” For example, she points out the way in which Campbell’s *Halfbreed* legitimizes the colonial division between “Status Indians” and “Halfbreeds” by “construct[ing] a personal myth in which [Campbell] attempts to persuade herself that the Métis are superior” (82). Often, however, the complexity arises out of what a text *does not* say. And these areas of silence seem to create a critical dilemma within *Taking Back Our Spirits*. For example, Episkenew points out that *In Search of April Raintree* does not give us a clear understanding of why Cheryl commits suicide, commenting that “Cheryl’s rapid descent is perplexing for readers” (125). Similarly, she points out the ways in which *Indian School Days* does not reveal anything about Basil Johnston’s relationship with his family, adding, “That he is so reticent about his immediate family is perplexing” (103). She also comments on how, in *Keeper ’n Me*, Wagamese “remarkably” (145) creates family members that are oddly one-dimensional and how, in *For Joshua*, he is “uncharacteristically silent about his birth family” (144).

Because *Taking Back Our Spirits* views storytelling as inherently healing, it is unable to fully account for these areas of textual silence as anything other than a sign of unhealthy repression. For instance, in the case of Wagamese, Episkenew argues that his silence about his family is a sign that he is “unable to face the whole truth of his past” (145). This view is in keeping with the book’s overall view of silence as harmful: “Silence leads to isolation, causing many Indigenous people to suppress their feelings, believing that they are alone in their experiences and responses” (16). And in describing the responses of an all-Aboriginal audience to Ross’ *fare Wel*, Episkenew cites a review that states, “There were moments when the audience watched in ineffable silence” (185). Yet, perhaps, seen from another perspective, silence is not necessarily ineffable.

There are many Indigenous teachings about the importance of sometimes not telling a story. In Indigenous traditions, the telling of stories is often governed by protocols about what kinds of stories can be told under what



circumstances. Pueblo scholar Paula Gunn Allen explains that she was raised with these kinds of restraints around communication:

Among the Pueblos, a person is expected to know no more than is necessary, sufficient and congruent with their spiritual and social place. One does not tell or inquire about matters that do not directly concern one. I was raised to understand that “street smart” around Laguna meant respecting privacy and modesty, and that to step beyond the bounds of the respected propriety was to put myself and others at risk. (379-80)

In such cultural contexts, where speaking is seen as risky, not speaking can become the preferred response to an uncomfortable situation, a response that may be responsible for the stereotype of the stoic and silent Indian. Pomo-Miwok writer Greg Sarris says that this is “the Indian’s best weapon”: “Be an Indian, cut yourself off with silence any way you can. Don’t talk” (81). Of course, such silence can be easily misinterpreted, as Rupert Ross learned when working as a Crown Attorney in Northern communities. Ross recounts how he regularly confronted silence among Aboriginal witnesses, many of whom were unwilling to testify in court, even against people who had done them wrong. The accused also often refused to speak of the crime, and their psychiatric assessments, Ross recalls, almost invariably read something like, “in denial, unresponsive, undemonstrative, uncooperative” (33). These assessments, however, Ross came to realize, revealed more about cultural differences in communicative practices than they did about the accused individual. Both the accuser and the accused were part of a culture that discouraged the open discussion of painful events, while the culture of the court and the psychologist’s office valued disclosure. Helen Hoy similarly has contemplated whether “discursive reticence” (64) in Indigenous literature may be “not only a withholding before an appropriating white gaze . . . but also the enactment of an alternative metaphysics” (80).

I offer these brief thoughts on silence to suggest that there may be ways of looking at the literary decision *not* to tell a particular story as healthy. For instance, might the decision not to speak about one’s immediate family in one’s work, as we see in Johnston and Wagamese, be a way of maintaining privacy, showing respect, or protecting oneself and others from pain? Of course, in some contexts, the act of revealing one’s pain can be essential. And stories often focus such dilemmas on sites of tension and contradiction. *Taking Back Our Spirits* moves us towards thinking about how stories live, how they can change our lives and even change our world. But as we make this move, we should keep in mind the power of the “social lives of stories,”

as Julie Cruikshank writes, to “destabilize commonsense categories, to promote non-confrontational ways of re-evaluating hegemonic concepts, to encourage dialogue rather than monologue” (154). I believe that stories often disrupt our “commonsense” understandings of concepts, including concepts like colonialism and healing. But I also believe that this healthy disruption occurs through the process of dialogue, of thinking about and talking about stories. I would like to thank Episkew for opening up a whole new area of dialogue for readers of Indigenous literature with *Taking Back Our Spirits*. And I am also thankful for the opportunity to be part of the dialogue that this forum represents.



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## Indigenizing Author Meets Critics: Collaborative Indigenous Literary Scholarship

*Jo-Ann Episkenew (Métis)*

**M**y first response when asked to participate in the CACLALS/ABAL Author Meets Critics event was fear. Although we tell our students that we “critique” rather than “criticize,” a history of academic warfare and wounding with words combine to haunt the word “critic.” Although feminist and minority scholars have done much to add humanity—that is to say, an emotional aspect—to scholarly practices, the prospect of being judged unfavourably by three esteemed colleagues, in public, in front of my peers was still terrifying. Not surprisingly, when I walked to the front of the room, my legs felt, as my Glaswegian grandmother would have said, “like two stalks of stewed rhubarb.” What surprised me more was that my colleagues, the critics, were also exhibiting the physical manifestations of stress. The critics seemed even more frightened than I. Apparently the ghosts of the word “critic” haunted them as well. Their collective discomfort confirmed my belief that language does, indeed, have the power to effect change in the material world.

Upon reflection, I have come to think that the “Author Meets Critics” panel process is antithetical to Indigenous intellectual and social traditions. Indigenous people, for millennia, lived in mutually dependent societies that relied for their survival on the maintenance of harmonious relationships. Harmony was supported by social conventions that prevented conflict by discouraging direct communications. Remnants of this practice continue today. My husband tells me that, when he was a child on the Standing Buffalo Dakota reserve, it was not the practice to speak directly to one’s mother- and father-in-law. When communication was required, a third party was recruited to deliver the message. Likewise, it was not the practice to issue direct orders. For example, when the wood box was empty, my father-in-law, Paul Whiteman, would call his son, point to the wood box, and mention that it would be cold that night. He would never say, “Go cut wood.” The child had a choice of what to do next. By communicating indirectly, Indigenous people respected the autonomy of the individual while avoiding conflict

and preserving relationships. Having said that, traditional Cree or other Indigenous relations were not always idyllic, and I am not merely setting up a simple binary of “good Indigenous” vs. “bad Eurocentric” traditions. Kristina Fagan’s study of Indigenous humour effectively reveals how humour is a form of indirect communication that Indigenous people often use to coerce and even bully people into behaving in ways not of their choosing.

That three of the four members of the Author Meets Critics panel were Indigenous people is notable. I suspect that much of our discomfort stemmed from the direct communication and direct criticism inherent in a process grounded in Eurocentric ideology. However, I think that the organizers of the Author Meets Critics panel set the stage so that we would, consciously or unconsciously, follow Len Findlay’s advice and “indigenize” the experience, not by sitting in a circle (even more frightening!) or by speaking indirectly, but by adding a degree of holism into our very personal exploration of Indigenous and settler relationships. As a multi-national, multi-generational, and multicultural panel, we embody the very issues that we critique. This was not merely an intellectual exercise, because we live these issues. I want to thank Deanna Reder and Susan Gingell for organizing such a respectful dialogue. I also want to thank my critics, not merely for their kind words, but even more so for their respectful yet thought-provoking challenges. I am painfully aware that the solutions to the issues facing Indigenous people will come from communities working together, not from any one individual. Mine is just one voice in a larger conversation.

Kristina Fagan challenged my choice of title *Taking Back Our Spirits*. She reported that one of her students had objected to the title, arguing that Indigenous people have never lost their spirits. I had no answer for her at the time and am embarrassed to say that I abdicated responsibility completely by crediting David Carr of the University of Manitoba Press with the creation of the title. It is true that David suggested the title, but I accepted his suggestion so I must take responsibility for it. Likewise, I take responsibility for its implications and, therefore, must respectfully disagree with Kristina’s student. Let me explain.

Even though, for most of my life, I felt as if I completely understood what the expression “wounded spirit” meant, the definition of the term “spirituality” eluded me. I am neither a mystic nor a religious person. I needed a definition of spirituality that could function for me in the “real world.” I am eternally grateful to my friend and colleague Daniel Coleman for providing such a definition. He defines spirituality as relational: “spirituality is the way we live

out our relationships with our environment and with other people, as well as with our secret selves” (9). This is a definition I can apply to my life because it explains both my past and my present, and it draws my attention to the importance of relationships. It is also a definition that is germane to Canada’s colonial policies and their effects on Indigenous peoples’ relationships as spirituality. Using Coleman’s definition, it is clear that these policies were consciously designed to attack spirituality by attacking our relationships with self, with others, and with our environment. Not surprisingly, the resulting historical trauma is almost always made manifest in damaged relationships.

Despite Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s claim to the contrary (qtd. in Wherry), Canada does, indeed, have a colonial past. As I mention in *Taking Back Our Spirits*, Canada is the Johnny-come-lately nation state that, in 1867, imposed itself, its structures, and its ideology on the Indigenous people of this land. Sounds like colonialism to me. The Canadian government created policies to address “the Indian problem” by forcing assimilation, and assimilation required, firstly, a breach in those avenues of cultural transmission, specifically our relationships. Residential school policies, for example, which Allison Hargreaves rightly identifies as “the primary site of colonial injury,” were consciously designed to separate Indigenous children from the influence of their families. Importantly, relationships with family were not the only relationships that this policy damaged—also under attack were the students’ relationship with self. In order for students to assimilate willingly, they had to be convinced that every aspect of the settler/invasers’ way of life was superior to theirs. Conversely, the students had to be convinced of their peoples’ inherent inferiority. Although the residential schools have closed, the attitudinal foundation of the policy continues. The bloodthirsty savages mentioned in curricula of old have been replaced with trite descriptors such as “a proud and independent people,”<sup>8</sup> presumably an improvement. For the most part, however, Indigenous people, our history, our cultures, and our contributions are rarely mentioned outside of Native Studies classrooms. Educational institutions are more concerned with “trying to create a culture on campus in which aboriginal students [feel] comfortable” (Mason) as if they were merely guests in the invader-settler educational institutions.<sup>9</sup>

Successors to the residential school policy are the provincial child welfare policies that continue to attack Indigenous peoples’ spirits again by attacking relationships. More Indigenous children are in the care of provincial ministries of social services today than there were children in the residential

schools at the height of their operations (Trocmé, Knoke, and Blackstock 579). Provincial child welfare policies, like those of their nineteenth-century predecessors, “imagine” the white bourgeois nuclear family—“civilized man (the father as patriarch), bourgeois woman (the mother as commodity consumer), Oedipal son, and dutiful daughter”—as “the ideal family” (Emberley 6). Emberley explains how

[d]uring the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, European imperial powers enlisted various disciplines of knowledge in order to justify and assert their right to govern “colonized peoples.” The duality of savagery and civilization shaped English ideas about indigenous cultures as essentially ones that existed in a savage infantile state in need of the governing rationality of more advanced and enlightened bourgeois society. (8)

Although social work education is steeped in the rhetoric of social justice, the Indigenous families that fall under the gaze of child welfare authorities are typically the most powerless in our society, families headed by poor Indigenous women. Child welfare policies damage and, indeed, sever relationships within Indigenous communities by separating Indigenous children from their families. Likewise, child welfare policies injure Indigenous peoples’ relationships with self by continually positioning poor Indigenous families, typically headed by women, and implicitly their children, as inferior to the invader-settler ideal.

Other attacks on Indigenous peoples’ relationships include the policies that govern Indigenous peoples’ identity. These have been so successful in driving a wedge between the First Nations and their Métis relatives that animosity has become normalized in Indigenous communities. My deceased mother-in-law, Amelia Episkenew, would quote Chief Ben Pasqua, last hereditary chief of Pasqua First Nation and signatory to Treaty Four, who expressed concern for the fate of the Métis at the time of the treaty negotiations and predicted that there would come a time when we forgot to treat each other as if we were related. That time is today.

In addition to colonial policies are the practices of the colonial bureaucracy, again designed to wound spirits by damaging relationships. The chiefs and counsellors who deal daily with the autocratic bureaucracy of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada tell stories of soul-destroying policies that thwart their attempts at self-determination and sow the seeds of division within First Nations communities. The cumulative effect of colonial policies and oppressive colonial bureaucratic practices are the social divisions and violence that are commonplace in Indigenous communities. In a study that

is the outcome of community-based research with Aboriginal women to examine cultural identity and wellness, Alex Wilson quotes a participant who describes the problem of lateral violence in our communities:

We're guilty of lateral violence. We're not happy for someone's success—we're jealous! That stems from our historical treatment—now we're doing it to each other, as Aboriginal people. The Metis against First Nations, First Nations against each other, family against family. Lateral violence is like a disease among our people. We treat each other so badly, yet we should be grateful for their successes because they're making pathways for us. (18)

Recently, the File Hills Qu'Appelle Tribal Council Health Services, one of my community research partners, identified lateral violence as one of the greatest health issues facing the eleven First Nations it represents. Indeed, my home institution, the First Nations University of Canada, has been all but destroyed, not by corruption or fraud as the media would like people to believe, but by lateral violence that began with one First Nations politician who could not tolerate the success of the institution. By implementing policies that attack Indigenous peoples' relationships with self, others, and the environment, the invader-settler governments have, in effect, damaged Indigenous peoples' spirits and, I would argue, metaphorically stolen those spirits away. Using in the title of the book words ascribed to Louis Riel, I suggest that it is time that we take them back by repairing our relationships.

Please, permit me a moment to digress and mention a policy direction recently touted as the latest solution that Canadian colonial policymakers are proposing to solve the eternal "Indian problem," another poorly conceptualized and poorly researched policy direction that constitutes yet another attack on Indigenous peoples' spirits. Conservative politicians are now proposing that reserve land be privatized to enable individuals to own and sell the land that is currently owned by Her Majesty the Queen but reserved for "status Indians" as a collective.<sup>10</sup> Although the new Conservative government has plans to emulate many policies of the United States government, they have not done their homework. They need only to look at the Dawes Act of 1887 and its outcomes. That Act was designed to destroy Native American nations by refusing to deal on a nation-to-nation basis and, instead, dealing with individual Natives. The US government saw this as a step in readying Natives for American citizenship. Individual Natives were allotted tracts of reservation land, which they could sell if they so chose. Given that all were poor and many starving, they did just that. They sold the land. The result was disastrous, and today large tracts of reservation

lands are owned privately by white people. Given that most status Indians living on Canadian reserves are poor, they would likely sell their land if the Canadian Government were to implement a similar policy. The result for Indigenous peoples would be even more disastrous because such a policy would, in effect, drive a stake through the very heart of Indigenous cultures, communal life, and communal ownership—again, relationships. Yet Conservative politicians and their supporters speak as if this is an inevitable step in the social evolution of Indigenous people and the only solution to social and economic problems. But if collective ownership is untenable in today's world, why do Hutterite colonies thrive economically and socially? And, why do Conservative politicians not try to dismantle them? Perhaps the reason is that Hutterites do not file land claims.

But, I digress. Let me address some of the specific challenges from my critics.

Allison Hargreaves asks, “But what if the surface acknowledgement of this legacy is in some cases *integral* to its deepest disavowal? What if the empathetic response of settler subjects is at times less a means of owning ‘guilt’ or responsibility, than of assuaging it?” She goes on to argue “that further distinction might productively be made between a liberal individualist model of empathy that surreptitiously shores up rather than transcends asymmetrical social relations, and those rarer forms of critical empathy through which anti-colonial solidarity in ‘social justice initiatives’ and policy critique might be pursued.” I agree. Yet, I think my age influences my notions of progress. I was a child in the 1950s before there was a Canadian Bill of Rights and before any provincial human rights legislation was enacted. My elementary and secondary school teachers would have been fully within their rights to attribute my rebelliousness to my Métis identity. I was taught that Halfbreeds were inherently untrustworthy, and prone to treasonous behaviour and mental instability. Having grown up in that era, my bar for progress may be significantly lower than Allison's. When white students arrive in my classroom espousing knowledge of structures of privilege and their complicity in the oppression of Indigenous people, I see progress, even though I know that we must continue questioning and challenging.

Both Daniel Heath Justice and Kristina Fagan raise the issue of works by Indigenous writers that do not heal. Daniel asks, “[W]hat do we do with them? Do we still teach/study/share them? What is the role of ‘application’ here?” Again, I agree. In the same way that lateral violence is a hugely damaging factor in our communities, so are some works by Indigenous authors. Indigenous authors are not immune to internalized racism, sexism,



and homophobia, and there are some works that I just do not teach because the potential to hurt is too great. There are others that I teach with great caution, such as Ian Ross' *fareWel* and Robert Arthur Alexie's *Porcupines and China Dolls*. Both of these are, I believe, incredibly important works of literature; however, there is the possibility of things going very badly and the works ultimately reinforcing negative stereotypes at the very least and further traumatizing Indigenous students at worst. This situation speaks to the need to develop a compassionate, decolonizing pedagogy.

Daniel states that, "Literature teachers are not counsellors or therapists; for all that we might be empathetic, we are not generally trained to provide the necessary assistance for people in search of healing." I disagree with both the statement and the perceived need for professionalizing our relationships as human beings.<sup>11</sup> Several years ago, I attended a workshop on teaching effectiveness with James McNinch, now the Dean of Education at the University of Regina. James presented us with higher education research showing that our ability to attend to our students' affective needs has a direct effect on their academic outcomes. When teaching difficult texts, such as Ross' and Alexie's, attending to all of the students' affective needs is particularly important because reading these texts could well be traumatic. For Indigenous students, the occasion of reading these works may be the first time they really understand the extent that Canada has oppressed our people. If we are effective, our non-Indigenous students will come to realize that, although they may have never committed an act of personal racism, they benefit daily because of racist colonial policies, and they cannot extract themselves from continuing to benefit from structural and systemic racism. We must find ways to attend to our students' inevitable suffering when they understand these hard truths. If, through fear of their strong emotional responses, we avoid our students' pain, the results could be catastrophic: Indigenous students might never want to read another work of Indigenous literature or ever again study their history, and non-Indigenous students might leave feeling resentful for "being made to feel" guilty. I want students to leave my classroom as allies who accept the harsh truths but are ready to fight the good fight together. It is, therefore, my responsibility to develop a decolonizing pedagogy based on teaching the whole student—intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, and yes, even physically.<sup>12</sup> Granted, there are times when a student may be so wounded that he or she might need professional help, but I've found these times to be rare, and the wounding usually pre-exists their arrival in my classroom. Literature teachers should not fear emotions in the classroom. Most of us

love literature because of the feelings that it evokes. We are humanists, and to be human is not only to think, but also to feel.

Finally, and the most difficult criticism to which I must respond, is Kristina's comment that

[t]hese close readings are sensitive and complex, but they are not fully taken into account in the book's overarching theory of healing. How can stories that are somehow limited, unrealistic, or present a somehow problematic vision of Aboriginal communities be healing? Perhaps they become healing through the process of thinking about them, discussing them, and coming to a critical understanding of why the text works the way it does. *Taking Back Our Spirits* does engage in this process of critical understanding, but it does not attempt to conceptualize how to deal with a wide range of readers' responses. (see Fagan's article above)

Kristina is correct, and I realize that the theory of healing that I construct is most effective in a classroom where I can implement a decolonizing pedagogy that supports students in "thinking about [the texts], discussing them, and coming to a critical understanding of why the text works the way it does." I do not take into account the response of readers who read in solitude without a community to help them process their response. This is both a limitation of my theory and of literature as an aid to healing. Worse yet, I can do nothing to change this situation other than acknowledge it. Perhaps this is why my research focus has shifted to applied theatre, an inherently communal endeavour.

Once again I must thank my critics for inspiring me to think, to re-examine my position, and to develop my ideas. I think of you as kindred spirits who walk the same path. By sharing in these conversations, we have become a community, and as a community, we support healing for Indigenous people and a cure from the ills of colonialism. Kinanâskomitinawaw.

#### NOTES

- 1 The conferences were that of the Society for the Social Studies of Science in 2003 and the Conference on South Asia in 2004.
- 2 Forums to date have appeared on J. Edward Chamberlin's *If This Is Your Land, Where are Your Stories?* in the online journal *Postcolonial Text* 3.2 (2006); Daniel Coleman's *White Civility* in the *International Journal of Canadian Studies/Revue internationale des études canadiennes* 38 (2008): 183-242; and on Julia Emberley's *Defamiliarizing the Aboriginal in Topia: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* 23-24 (2010): 388-428.
- 3 While Thomas King's *The Truth about Stories* is frequently cited by literary critics, it is in fact a print published version of the Massey Lectures rather than being conceived as a monograph of literary criticism.

- 4 We borrow the term “narrative repair” from professor of bioethics Hilde Lindemann Nelson in her book *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair*.
- 5 For a critical historicization of Aboriginal redress as predating Canada’s “so-called reconciliatory present” (Henderson and Wakeham 8), please see Jennifer Henderson and Pauline Wakeham’s introduction to their 2009 *English Studies in Canada (ESC)* issue on *First Peoples and the Culture of Redress in Canada*, “Colonial Reckoning, National Reconciliation?: Aboriginal Peoples and the Culture of Redress in Canada.” For a discussion of the government of Canada’s June 2008 apology to students of residential schools, and of the rhetoric of truth and reconciliation in particular, see Roland Chrisjohn and Tanya Wasacase’s contribution to the Aboriginal Healing Foundation’s 2009 publication, *Response, Responsibility, and Renewal: Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Journey*.
- 6 In her “Afterword” to Jennifer Henderson and Pauline Wakeham’s *ESC* issue on Aboriginal redress, Episkenew asserts: “Yes, there is a need for the survivors of residential schools to speak their truth and have Canadians acknowledge and affirm that truth. Yet, the residential schools were only one element of Canada’s colonial policies” (198). Similarly, Gregory Younging, Jonathan Dewar, and Mike DeGagné remark in the Epilogue to the Aboriginal Healing Foundation’s *Response, Responsibility, and Renewal: Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Journey* that reconciliation cannot be “about residential schools alone; this long history did not exist in a vacuum and cannot be addressed as if it did” (341).
- 7 Though largely US-focused in its analysis, Gerald Graff’s *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* is an essential text in understanding the disciplinary genealogy of literary studies in North America. In *Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University*, William Clark offers a broader perspective on the internecine power struggles between various disciplines in the academy, including the upstart discipline of literature (as distinct from linguistics).
- 8 I once reviewed a Social Studies textbook for the Alberta Department of Education. The four pages devoted to Indigenous people made such claims. In my marginal comments, I asked, “As opposed to those people who are not proud and independent? Who are those people?”
- 9 Thanks, Tom MacIntosh.
- 10 The Honourable Andrew Scheer, Member of Parliament for Regina-Qu’Appelle, the constituency in which I live, explained the plan to me at a meet-the-candidates debate. He had never heard about the Dawes Act and was nonplussed when I explained that the outcomes had been so destructive that the allotment process had to be repealed in 1934.
- 11 See Danika Overmars’ article for a warning about pathologizing Indigenous peoples’ emotional responses to historical trauma.
- 12 I’ve incorporated a physical aspect into my classrooms by using theatre techniques adapted from Augusto Boal’s “rainbow of desire” (2003) for teaching character analysis in literature.

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