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# Called to Relationship and Reckoning through Story: Reflections on Reading, Teaching, and Writing about Residential School Literatures

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# Called to Relationship and Reckoning through Story: Reflections on Reading, Teaching, and Writing about Residential School Literatures

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN

MICHELLE COUPAL AND SAM MCKEGNEY

## Position

**M**ICHELLE COUPAL (MC): I am an Algonquin/French scholar of Indigenous literatures, and a member of the Bonnechere Algonquin First Nation. I am a lifelong learner of Indigenous cultures in Canada, particularly my own, and those of the communities whose lands I reside upon as a visitor. I am deeply grateful to live and work in Regina, situated in Treaty 4, on the territories of the Nêhiyawak, Anihšīnāpēk, Dakota, Lakota, Nakoda, and the Michif/Métis.

**Sam McKegney (SM):** I come to the literature from a position of unearned privilege — as a White, cis-male, heterosexual, able-bodied, upper-middle class beneficiary of colonial violence; as one who occupies and “owns” property in Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee territory in what is commonly referred to as Kingston, Ontario; as one whose disproportionate opportunities for success have been fostered by technologies of settler colonialism and the dispossession of Indigenous peoples. The conditions of comfort and privilege that allowed me to study then teach literature at university are a direct inheritance of evangelization, resource extraction, education, dispossession — that is to say, settler colonialism.

I learned about the genocidal enterprise of Indian Residential Schooling through an independent study project in an undergraduate Indigenous history class twenty-five years ago. I was horrified by what I learned, and I was horrified by what I did not yet know — what I hadn’t been taught in my Canadian education. And, as a literary person, I turned to Indigenous authors to try to make sense of the incomprehensible, to survivors like Basil Johnston and Louise Halfe and to others



like Eden Robinson and Richard Van Camp. The horror in their works, while unflinching, was woven together with beauty and agency and resiliency and hope. From that point, I couldn't look away.

### **Called to Relationship and Reckoning with Residential School Literatures**

**SM:** I began my work in this area when residential schooling was becoming part of public knowledge in a way that it hadn't been previously. It was significantly prior to the Apology, prior to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. Canadians were becoming aware of residential school in subtle yet important ways through the disclosures of brave individuals like Phil Fontaine. Those disclosures of abuse forced residential schooling into the public eye, and it was apparent to me how trauma-centred the emergent public discourse became as a result. It seemed to me that critics were taking the historical realities of trauma within residential school, relating those realities to governmental and church transgressions, and making a causal link to dysfunction in Indigenous communities. Which made total sense, because it meant indicting those responsible for this incredible genocidal catastrophe. But, at the same time, it tended to diminish the voices of survivors by focusing only on victimhood. In my mind, literary representations by residential school survivors defiantly refused to conform to that template. They didn't deny the trauma or sugar coat it, but they *never* stopped at victimry. The literature was always forward-looking even as it mobilized the tropes of memoir. I felt it allowed for recognition of government and church culpability, while simultaneously affirming the resilience of Indigenous survivors and their communities who are always resisting, recreating culture, and recreating identity. And that's what ended up being the heart of that project: the desire to make such agency legible. How did your work in the area begin?

**MC:** What I am about to say is by no means to undercut your important and necessary insights about the refusal of survivors to be represented as simply victims of trauma without agency or tremendous strength. But, as you know, I am interested in trauma — its literary representational strategies and the ways in which the trauma story is narrated, including its elisions. I became fascinated by how people tell and don't tell their trauma stories through literature. Some stories are expressly about getting the trauma story out, but there are others, too,



that seem to suggest that some traumas cannot be expressed and cannot be healed. For many writers, magic realism and gothic are languages of trauma because by nature the genres open the boundaries of what is considered real and not real. Traumatic experience is implicated in both what is true and all too real and also what seems unreal and impossible to comprehend. I came to residential school literature interested in how survivors were speaking their stories through their writings. There were many who were explicitly telling their stories to help them in their healing journeys. Therapeutic narratives and drama-therapy are the hallmarks, for example, of the work of Vera Manuel. She embeds a healing narrative — really a healing process and guide — into her plays that is grounded in the idea of the therapeutic value of telling the trauma story to a group of witnesses.

### Fifty Years of Residential School Literature

SM: Do you feel Cherie Dimaline's novel *The Marrow Thieves* is illustrative of how residential school literature has evolved as a genre over the last twenty years?

MC: That's an interesting question. In some ways, yes. *The Marrow Thieves* is in conversation with Indigenous futurisms and survival, which is also to say that the book is in conversation with current trends in Indigenous literatures more broadly (for example, Waubgeshig Rice's *Moon of the Crusted Snow* or Jeff Barnaby's film *Blood Quantum*). *The Marrow Thieves* stands out to me as singular (as far as I know) in the body of work known as residential school literature because it is set in the future. So, yes, the novel implicitly asks us to ponder the notion that the same colonial technologies that created the schools of the past are still part of the present, and future if nothing changes, which perhaps points to new directions in the evolution of the genre. What connects this novel to other writings about residential schools is that they are stories about the schools while also being stories of survival, strength, healing, and reclamation. *The Marrow Thieves*, through the Story and Coming-to Story sections, also shares a testimonial aesthetic that I see in many residential school narratives. The biggest evolution in the literature is surely the pedagogical focus that came with the TRC and the accompanying surge in writing production. There is a new demand for residential school literature because of the Calls to Action of the TRC



that is, while troubling in its consumerism, heartening in the wealth of voices who honour us with their stories.

Earlier works like Jane Willis's *Geniesh* (1973), Alice French's *My name is Masak* (1976), and Basil Johnston's *Indian Schools Days* (1988) record the horrors of the school experiences in more guarded ways than what we see today, which makes sense in terms of the political climate of those times. More testimonial accounts, if you will, begin in the 1990s. Bursts of residential school literature seem to align with important political moments in Canada. For example, Phil Fontaine "stunned the nation" (CBC) in 1990 when he disclosed the sexual abuse he suffered at residential school. This was a watershed moment for this type of disclosure. It was a time when childhood sexual abuse was not part of public discourse (or even private discourse). It was also a time when we began to see thinly disguised autobiographies of residential schooling with a testimonial feel. Examples include Shirley Cheechoo's play, *Path With No Moccasins*, which premiered in 1991; Vera Manuel's *Strength of Indian Women*, which debuted in 1992; and Shirley Sterling's *My Name is Seepeetza*, published in that same year. It's interesting to me that these testimonial-ish works came on the heels of the start of the national conversation about institutional child abuse. Remember that 1989 was the year of the media storm that erupted with the disclosures of severe physical and sexual abuse that boys suffered over decades at the Mount Cashel Orphanage in St. John's, Newfoundland.

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) was released in 1996. That same year, we see the publication of Rita Joe's *Song of Rita Joe*. Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* is published shortly thereafter, in 1998. Following RCAP comes Robert Arthur Alexie's *Porcupines and China Dolls* (2002), which coincides with the Alternative Dispute Resolution process, under which survivors could make claims outside of standard litigation proceedings for physical and sexual abuses suffered at the schools. And then of course in 2006 came the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement and the formation of the TRC. In 2008, Stephen Harper gave his apology. The work of the TRC became a national conversation. Then, boom. The production of residential school literature flourished and continues to do so. We can see a trend in books being written specifically for teachers to use in the classroom in response to the TRC (although the earlier works, such as, say, Sterling's, were also meant to be taught).



**SM:** Two potentially problematic consequences of the post-TRC explosion of residential school literature are compassion fatigue, on the one hand — the ‘Oh is this another residential school book’ response among settler readers — and empathetic identification and performative absolution, on the other. By this, I mean how the first-person narrative style of most of these texts tends to position readers in the experiential space of the residential school student rather than institutional overseers. So the non-Indigenous reader tends to identify not with the purveyors of genocidal power but with those toward whom that power is directed — through reading, we settlers can vicariously be impacted by the kinds of racist abuse and trauma endured by Indigenous characters and then, through the process of empathizing, imagine ourselves as part of the collective mourning of this history rather than complicit in it.

I read Richard Wagamese’s novel *Indian Horse* as a strategic intervention in what Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang call “settler moves to innocence” because it is one of the few texts where the settler reader is encouraged to identify not with the protagonist, but rather with Father Leboutilier who is characterized initially as the story’s lone caring overseer. Many settler Canadians, because we tend to perceive ourselves as caring, justice-oriented, and generally ethical, will read that character and think, ‘Oh, if I were a teacher in residential school, that’s the kind of teacher I’d be, that’s where I see myself reflected in this history.’ By exposing Father Leboutilier at the end of the novel as a sexual predator and the primary source of Saul’s trauma, Wagamese tactically provokes a reckoning for the settler reader: ‘Oh my God, what does this mean in terms of who I am, and how I understand my responsibilities moving forward?’

**MC:** This brings up the question for me of how we actually ought to define residential school literature. What do we mean when we say “residential school literature”?

**SM:** Great question. And a hard one to answer. Jeannette Armstrong called the residential school system “the single most devastating factor in the breakdown of our society, . . . beyond all other mechanisms cleverly fashioned to subjugate, assimilate, and annihilate” (x). In that sense, residential schooling shadows Indigenous literary art in a nearly inescapable way: it permeates and pervades. But if we want to classify residential school literature as a “sub-genre,” what would fit and what would be left behind? Would it be primarily literature about the residential school experience written by survivors? But what then of Dimaline?



What then of works like *Indian Horse* that focus on residential schooling but are written by a survivor of the child welfare system? What would the generic restrictions be? Would it be mainly memoir, or include film, poetry, drama, and dance? How about the deeply personal yet enigmatic poetry of Blue Quills survivor Louise Halfe, which is indebted to personal experience but exceeds the personal into the collective and spiritual? Would a work's focus need to be on residential schooling itself or could residential school occupy a small number of pages while still registering as integral to its artistic intervention?

Rene Meshake's *Injichaag: My Soul in Story* offers an intriguing example of such complexities. Residential schooling seeps into the marrow of the entirety of Meshake's memoir — which is expressed in a mix of poetry, visual art, short stories, and vignettes from the author's life — but the author's residential school experience is written about explicitly in only a single poem in a book of over 300 pages. It remains an absent presence throughout the book, an archive to the attempted suffocation of the author's artistic, Anishinaabe self — yet it's something upon which he refuses to focus. I would argue that the book is unequivocally “residential school literature” because it responds to the attempted suffocation of the author's Anishinaabe worldview by revitalizing that worldview via Meshake's explications of Anishinaabemowin “word bundles.” What Meshake gives us is not a narrative of acculturation but rather bold, creative articulations of artistry and culture reborn.

MC: You have me thinking about the silences in works like George Kenny's *Indians Don't Cry* and in Louise Halfe's *Burning in This Midnight Dream*. Halfe says in the opening poem, “āniskōstēw — connecting,” “I don't like walking backwards” (52), yet “one must walk backwards on footprints / that walked forward / for the story to be told” (68-70). The push and pull between telling and not telling her story continues throughout the collection. Halfe wrote *Burning in This Midnight Dream* in response to the work of the TRC and her own testimony that she gave to that commission. The collection exceeds the bounds of her own residential school experience, as many of the books do, yet she leaves little doubt as to her focus.

Renate Eigenbrod was the first to define residential school literature as a sub-genre of Indigenous literatures. She offers:

Anishnaabe scholar and poet Armand Garnet Ruffo's essay on the history of the early phase of Native literature in Canada informs



my own development of a sub-genre within this field: residential school literature — memoirs, poetry, fiction, and plays that recreate the school experience through the literary imagination and that, like many other differently themed texts written by Indigenous authors, contribute to upholding the continuance of traditions against the discourses of loss and vanishing. (278)

Renate's early and broad definition of residential school literature puts the focus on theme and resistance. I would add to Renate's definition that in addition to recreating the school experience, residential school literature often also recreates the experience of life following the schools and includes, as with Meshake's and Halfe's offerings, creative writing that marks yet refuses and exceeds the tethering grip of those experiences.

### Critical F-Words: Trauma, Healing, Survival

SM: When I was writing *Magic Weapons*, I used the term 'residential school survival narrative' throughout that text, even when I was discussing someone like Inuvialuk writer Anthony Thrasher, who ultimately doesn't survive — he lives beyond his residential school years but is continually beset by colonial dispossession and oppression and perishes on the streets of a southern city. I thought the term was important at that time to stress a forward-looking sensibility among the writers: Survival was not just about the physical survival of the individual residential school inmate but was rather about how the artistic rendering of the experiences of those survivors could foster the survival of cultures and communities that residential school was implemented to destroy. So, I thought 'residential school survival narratives' was integral to the argument I wanted to make then. I'm not so sure of its currency now.

MC: Is it the term survivor that you're struggling with?

SM: Is survival enough? I think there is a sense of being beyond continuance in the contemporary work on residential schooling, and, secondly, I don't think the way the term centres residential schooling is always entirely accurate. I wonder if there are other terms that we might invoke that more accurately represent the complexity of more contemporary writing that includes residential schooling. What about 'narratives of genocidal continuity'? I feel a lot of the more recent work contextualizes residential schooling within a continuum of colonial technologies, infrastructures, and ideologies that persist beyond the



elimination of residential schools. ‘Residential school’ is not discrete and therefore not confined to the past. When I interviewed Basil Johnston, years ago, he stressed that it’s not all about “the residential school system” but rather about the “Indian agency system” (*Masculindians* 47). It’s this system of White authority and control over Indigenous lives that is still very much alive.

Or perhaps, ‘narratives of sovereign futurity.’ I don’t want to overstate it, but I feel like many of the narratives being produced today are defiantly forward-looking, not just in terms of fantasy, speculative fiction, and sci-fi, but in terms of looking toward Indigenous futurities that refuse to centre settler colonialism. Leanne Simpson’s *Islands of Decolonial Love* is radical because it’s able to register the genocidal technologies of settler colonialism while staunchly refusing to entrench those technologies as the foundations against which Indigenous images of the future must react. It is a collection of stories for Indigenous readers that centres Indigenous ways of knowing — in Simpson’s case Anishinaabe intelligence — and it imagines Indigenous futures not as a reaction to settler colonialism but as an expression of that intelligence.

MC: Yes, residential schooling is not discrete nor are its literatures. I’m teaching the course that Jo-Ann Episkew created at the U of Regina in the early 2000s. She called it “Literature of Residential Schools,” and I feel reluctant to change that title. It points to a body of literature arising from the school experience that is about colonialism broadly — absolutely — and, more specifically, the focus is residential schools — in all of their complexity and as part of the larger colonial technologies of genocide.

I do like your neologism, sovereign futurities narratives. We could and maybe should use this for a whole host of Indigenous literatures. Still, we can’t cover up the fact of the schools or the healing journeys they put so many people on. There are a lot of narratives coming out that are straight-up memoirs about the school and post-school experiences, or they are thinly disguised autobiographical novels that are still directly grappling with the legacies and life following the schools. Authors are asserting continuities between past, present, and future. There’s a sovereign person rooting into the future but also shaped by the past. I feel a bit worried that we well-intending scholars might want to euphemize “residential school literature” so that it more directly points beyond the schools. But does that involve an erasure or whitewashing of the import of the schools or what really is a distinct body of literature?



We need to engage with writers on their own terms. For many reasons, including pedagogical ones, I think it's important to flag residential school narratives as such, so that folks are aware that there are all these amazing books coming out by survivors or their family members about the schools. I think the Indigenous Voices Awards, for example, was wise this year to pay attention to at least one writer of these narratives. There are so many. We need to honour them and perhaps give these writers more of the limelight.

As for the term survivor, I hear you. The term is fraught with difficulties. The problem is finding a suitable replacement, one that comes from the "survivors" themselves. Bev Sellars refuses to adopt the descriptor: "Someone said that I am a survivor but I believe I am much more than that. I prefer to claim outright victory in this war against the residential-school experience" (191). The TRC struggled with the term survivor as well. They worried about the word's negative connotations. Over time, though, they embraced it, arguing that a survivor is someone who emerged strong after suffering what Cherie Dimaline refers to as the apocalypse. Labels are always problematic, though. How about "residential school resisters"? I wonder what "survivors" would think of our terms.

**SM:** I worry at times in Indigenous literary scholarship that we risk disavowing the messiness of meaning-making and retreating into author intentionality. To avoid misreading — and thereby disrespecting the author — we at times bypass interpretation altogether and turn to the author for clarification, as opposed to asking what the literary art evokes and how the text's creativity catalyzes understandings of the reader. And this sense of responsibility is heightened, of course, in relation to the literary art of residential school survivors/resisters, which expressly builds from real-life experiences. However, deference comes at a cost if it means glossing over the complex ways in which meaning is generated through the writer, art object, and reader. So, when you are saying that we owe it to these writers to engage with their work "on their own terms," I agree 100%. But I think that sense of responsibility to the writer is expressed most effectively through active engagement with the literature itself. In other words, we register that sense of accountability by engaging with what they've written on its own terms.

**MC:** I completely agree. For me, the line between responsibility to the artist and to the literature is porous. I view residential school narratives, whether fiction or non-fiction, as true stories. We can quibble



about the relativity of the word “truth.” We can confidently say there are differences between fictions and non-fictions. Whatever the form, for me, the writers are giving voice to experiences through story. And there are truths in that. I agree that author intentionality is not something we can really delve into. How can we know? But as you say, if we look at what these narratives evoke, we can attend to our responsibilities to the stories, to the survivors, to Indigenous communities. And we can help our students find ways to show responsibility to these literatures as well.

Perhaps we owe more to the stories that come out of the Indigenous literary community that make their main subject colonial violence, such as residential schooling or MMIWG or lives unhinged by the whole system of colonial violences. We can’t call these stories made up or fictional, even if that’s the Western generic form. They’ve happened over and over again. I think these stories demand something different of us and something more of us. Perhaps we need to approach them with love, although that might not be the right word. But love in its fullest terms — deep compassion, empathy, respect, honesty, and admiration. We need a different kind of critical practice, especially because residential school narratives are being taught in schools. We can’t, as active members in the field of Indigenous literary studies, ignore the genre because it doesn’t fit with our usual methods.

**SM:** A criticism “with love at the centre of its concern” — as Daniel Justice phrases it — is really about demonstrating respect. It may be informed by my own positionality, but I worry about not being attentive to a generic choice made by an Indigenous author. So, for instance, in *Genocidal Love: A Life After Residential School*, Bevann Fox has chosen to present this story as fiction even though it aligns with her own life experiences in a lot of ways. By not registering that generic choice, I wonder if we constrain what she is seeking to do artistically, and not just in terms of aesthetics, but in terms of the ability of art to affect an audience and engender change.

**MC:** I agree that we need to register the author’s generic choice. Bevann Fox says in her author’s note that the novel is the story of her life. She chose fiction to protect the identities of perpetrators and also her partners, and to avoid lawsuits. As a fictionalized story of her life, we have to assume that some parts are true and others are not true or embellished. Characters may be composites rather than real people. I see the story as true because it conveys truths about her experiences, the experience of residential schooling, the legacies, and so on. It’s not



make-believe. I think it's important for us to pay attention to what authors are saying about the books they write. I ask this: if a residential school survivor writes a story about residential school and calls it semi-autobiographical or a story about their lives, do we conform to Western conceptions of genre and say, "it must be viewed as fiction"? Are there no truth claims in these works? Genre bending is, after all, a hallmark of Indigenous writers.

**SM:** We've been talking in relation to authorship, but what about the concerns of the critical community? Leanne Betasamosake Simpson is a theorist who is very cautious of damage-centred research — building instead, in her case, from the foundation of "Nishnaabeg intelligence" and refusing to centre settler colonialism. Eve Tuck and others have been seeking ways of engaging with Indigenous arts that don't foreground trauma or remain bound to an individualist healing ethic. Tuck, in fact, calls for a "moratorium" on "damage-centred research": "a turning of our own backs on narratives that insist that we are ruined, that we are broken, that we are damaged" (424). What do you think is at stake in the tactical avoidance of trauma? And how does that relate to what you see as responsibilities to survivors and their stories?

**MC:** I think that turn that you're talking about was an important critical intervention into discourses that were over-focused on the woundedness of Indigenous peoples. In 1997, Roland Chrisjohn and Sherri Young critiqued the so-called "residential school syndrome," and argued that Indigenous peoples are not sick but rather it's the colonial society that created the residential school system that is sick. The risks are what critics, including you and Simpson, have pointed out — that it's stripping writers of their agency and authority when one is just focused on everything that's damaged. All of that without thinking about the larger colonial structure that still exists. This was a necessary critical intervention. Yet, again, I think we need to pay attention to the stories that the survivors/resistors are telling and the stories of their children and grandchildren. Are they talking about traumas? Are they talking about healing?

Bevann Fox, in *Genocidal Love: A Life After Residential School*, writes extensively about the effects of residential school abuses on adult relationships with men. Her main character, Myrtle, makes the same mistakes over and over again in her adult relationships. The book points directly to residential schooling and the abuses she suffered there as the cause. If we were to strip down the novel to its moments of strength,



resiliency, defiance, humour, success, and looking forward to life ahead, we would take out part of what makes that character the superhuman she is. Not foregrounding traumas that writers are foregrounding can become a way to not talk about trauma, to avoid those difficult discussions. And so, I get the critique you articulate. I agree with the critique. And I think that it is more nuanced and complex than calling substantive engagements with the traumas writers are narrating “damage-centred scholarship.”

Survivors/resistors were recently standing up of their own free will and providing testimonies to the TRC. The critiques that followed decried the anguished testimonies of survivors, noting the sensationalism and harm that this testifying was doing. Testifying to extreme abuse always comes at a cost to the testifier. Bevann Fox writes about that too, and the many times she was retraumatized by the court system and the Independent Assessment Process. Yes, there is a criticism to be made of the process. And we need to remember that those survivors wanted to tell their story. They thought it was important to add it to the historical and public record. Of course, the testimonies were anguished. How do you tell your story of residential schooling without it being anguished? And so for me, the question then is not whether to critique the TRC for gathering those testimonies. The question is what do we do with these testimonies and this anguish? How do we engage with those traumas in ways that support the survivors/resistors and support the futures of Indigenous peoples?

### Teaching Residential School Literature

SM: In terms of my own pedagogy, as a settler, I try to make legible the limits of my knowledge. I want my students to understand that not only am I a settler, but I’m a settler whose knowledge of the world developed in specific places that are not the territories in which I teach, and that I’m a descendent of mainly Irish and German immigrants whose flourishing on Indigenous lands is deeply implicated in colonial processes of dispossession. I can draw a direct line between those processes and the financial stability that, alongside my cis-White-male privilege, curated the opportunities that have allowed me to do the work that I now do. I am always already complicit in settler colonial violence — there is no neutral ground for me. In this way, I seek to encourage non-Indigenous



students to start asking some of these same questions of themselves, if they haven't already.

So, the first assignment in one of my courses is what I call a critical diary of place and positionality. I ask the students to identify a place with which they feel intimately connected, to think about their relationship to that place, and to consider how their thinking about who they are is informed by that relationship. I then ask them to research the Indigenous and colonial histories of that place and to put that knowledge in conversation with their own self-understanding. Lastly, I ask them to look to Indigenous literary art that either emerges from that place or, if that's not possible, from a writer with cultural ties to the Indigenous nations of that territory, and to start thinking about literature as also being a complicated refraction of relational responsibilities. This exercise requires students to think in ways that perhaps they haven't before but then also to see how literature can be part of a process of unlearning and re-learning, which opens up possibilities for other kinds of intellectual and ethical growth — if the students have taken that work seriously.

**MC:** I think our position is really important. Who am I to talk about residential school literature? How do I enter into residential school literature? How do you? How do students? Helping students find an entry point into this body of literature is important and difficult work, whether the student is Indigenous or non-Indigenous. What I have done is to work with the class to first articulate their own ancestry, including their relationship to the lands they are on, and then, through writing and talking exercises, I try to get them to reflect upon that ancestry through their relative and often varying positions of privilege. I try to nurture them to a place of feeling that they can engage with this literature that has been gifted to all of us. I want to enrich their understandings of colonial Canada and their own privilege in relation to that history. Most of my students have been non-Indigenous, so I am speaking about them. Teaching Indigenous students residential school literature requires a different approach. I want my students to get to a place where it's okay to think about these literatures, to talk about them, to act upon what they've learned, to have insights, and to understand that it's a productive thing for us to do as a class in our world today, so that we can try to make a difference. I know this sounds idealistic. What are we without hope for change? How have you nurtured students into relationship with these literatures?



**SM:** Instead of a participation mark in my Indigenous literature classes, I assess “demonstrative commitment,” a term I use for a couple of reasons. The first is that I know that certain students are much less comfortable sharing ideas in class than others, and I want to honour that. Also, in relation to the material we deal with, I think there are very good reasons why students might feel they don’t have the requisite cultural or historical knowledge to comment on it respectfully, and I don’t think such reticence should ill-affect their marks. Secondly, I want to remind the students that, as a settler, what I’m able to share is always limited by my positionality and perspective. As such, they need to take responsibility for supplementing the learning in the classroom by seeking out learning opportunities from Indigenous thinkers on campus and in the wider city. So what I’m asking of the students is that they attend as many Indigenous-centred and decolonizing events as they can and actually bring their experiences of those events back to the classroom, which then becomes part of and enriches our collective knowledge. Pam Palmater was speaking on campus last week, and I want the students to learn from her and consider, for example: How is MMIWG as a genocidal enterprise informed by the heteropatriarchal policies we are critiquing in the classroom? University students have more opportunities to learn from Indigenous public intellectuals right now than ever before — and probably than any other demographic in the country. So, if students aren’t accepting their responsibilities for learning from such people who are sharing the gift of their knowledge, then there’s a serious problem.

**MC:** I have worked with Elders in the classroom to help foster the type of responsibilities you articulate.

**SM:** The ongoing presence of an Elder can indeed create conditions in which transformative learning is possible because students are not just being taught about the literature and the history, they’re being taught accountability for their words and how to be in a respectful relationship. That kind of relationship-building provides a model of, to my mind, transformative pedagogy. However, educational structures and economic conditions make it hard to practice on a broad scale. As curricula are developed somewhat frantically in response to the TRC’s Calls to Action, I worry that Indigenous-themed curricula (as opposed to *Indigenous* pedagogy and knowledge) can potentially stand in for — and even in the way of — relationship-building and deep learning about relationality and what it means to be on Indigenous land. In Ontario,



for example, one of the ways in which school boards have attempted to address the Calls to Action has been by devoting one year of curriculum in English literary studies at the high school level to Indigenous literature. Now, I'm not saying that students being introduced to those amazing writers is negative. However, when it's being done in such a way as to then imagine 'Indigenous content has been taken care of,' we have a serious problem. Indigenous ways of knowing and histories and creative arts need to be braided throughout students' learning experiences to foster deeply integrated knowledge and awareness.

The diverse contexts of our classrooms inform what becomes possible within them. I'm reminded, for example, of an undergraduate who was one of only two Indigenous students in one of my Indigenous literature classes, telling me that she needed to steel herself emotionally for the days on which oral presentations were scheduled because of how much it hurt her to hear privileged settler students reflect abstractly on realities that were the terrain of her existence. I also recall an Indigenous colleague stressing to me years ago that Canadian university classrooms are never safe spaces for Indigenous students. Thus, while the classroom is full of contextual variables that exceed the instructor's complete control, we nonetheless remain responsible for nurturing its culture, for fostering its ethics, and ultimately for tending to the wellbeing of the individuals who make up its community.

**MC:** I think many Indigenous literatures classes are complicated spaces where a lot can go wrong and a lot does go wrong — most certainly when one is teaching a residential school narrative. I taught one class in which half the class was Indigenous, the other half settler. It was difficult for Indigenous students to hear White students prattling about theories and opining the suffering of Indigenous communities. For the first three weeks of classes, the silence of the Indigenous students was thundering. They were choosing silence, because they didn't trust the other students. I assigned one of my favourite books, Robert Arthur Alexie's *Porcupines and China Dolls*. The White students were shocked at the alcoholism and were talking too much about addictions in Indigenous communities. One Indigenous student actually stood up and said, "I don't know what silver spoon you were brought up with, but that's my community and you don't get to be surprised about what happens. It's another Saturday night." These complicated and unsettling cultural bump-ups can actually be productive. The White students learned an important lesson about boundaries and acceptance. The



Indigenous students, through the leadership of this student, were given new permission to voice their concerns.

**SM:** So given this complexity and the minefield that we've just been talking about, what do you imagine informed our dearly departed mentor Jo-Ann Episkenew's calling to create what I believe to have been the first residential school literature course?

**MC:** Jo-Ann was an amazing woman and a pathbreaker in creating that course so many years ago. From my conversations with Jo-Ann, my understanding is that she thought the course was necessary for her students. In the context of the discussion we've been having, it's worth remembering that Jo-Ann was critiqued for focusing too much on the healing aspects of literature in *Taking Back Our Spirits*. As if someone like her needed to be told that Indigenous people are not necessarily wounded and in need of healing. Jo-Ann understood the healing power of the arts. Vera Manuel inspired her in this. Jo-Ann was interested in what literature can do for Indigenous communities. Her theatre projects with Indigenous young people are an example of this. Giving literature a job like healing is a critical no-no, yet here was Jo-Ann working hands-on by way of drama.

And then there's Vera Manuel, who was committed to healing, to helping to heal others, through theatre and poetry. She ran therapy workshops, usually with women (but not always), who suffered colonial abuses of all kinds, not just residential schooling. She would bring women together to write their stories, and then she would take those writings and turn them into plays. Everyone played themselves and would act out their stories together as a form of therapy. These plays are incredible. I think it is an intensely healing enterprise to put the story that brought one to therapy in the first place into words and then act it out to an audience of witnesses. For Vera, healing happens in community with others through acts of storying one's life. Vera, like Jo-Ann and so many other writers, understood the connection between story, identity, and healing.

**SM:** The current trepidation around healing theory emerges, first, because it can be damage-focused and, second, because it can privilege a Western discourse of individualism that imagines healing as contained within the self rather than a collective enterprise that also needs to target settler colonial structures that continue to inflict violence. The healing that you're talking about and that Jo-Ann theorized and facilitated throughout all facets of her life was much more nuanced. It



wasn't an impoverished notion of 'healing thyself.' It always recognized healing not as a destination but as an interwoven, politicized series of processes extending beyond the self. So, when you use the Vera Manuel example of collaborative creation in which people use their own experiences to articulate complex issues of power and implicate their audience in thinking these issues through in a more fulsome way — all of the things that people fear are missing in healing theory are so much part of that process: it's communal, it's political, it's active, it's alive!

MC: Yes, it's all of that and more. You articulated it beautifully. Vera's work is particularly amenable to teaching, in part, precisely because of the embedded invitation to audiences/readers to witness the therapeutic journeys of her characters. I recently organized an event at the University of Regina focused on Vera's most well-known play, *Strength of Indian Women*. I invited my co-editors of the Vera Manuel collection to participate in a live reading of the play. Emalene Manuel and Joanne Arnott came to Regina to be part of the staged reading.

The class taking my residential school literature course was present, as was a kêhtê-aya, and many other interested students and colleagues. The kêhtê-aya began with a prayer and smudging ceremony. We read that play for an hour and a half to an audience who seemed captivated by what they were witnessing. They seemed to understand that they had been called into something very special and that respectful, quiet listening and reflection was what was required of them. Because the play is based on Manuel family stories, the reading of it was intensely personal for Emalene. In one incredibly poignant moment, Emalene, reading the part of Sousette (whose character is based on Emalene's own mother, Marceline Paul), paused in her reading, tears running down her face. The scene of the mother telling her daughter she was sorry that she wasn't more loving, and then telling her for the first time, "I love you," provoked deep emotions in Emalene. This moment (and there were others too) signalled to the audience that this is a real story, a true story, a family story. They really were witnesses to the Manuel stories that day. You could hear a pin drop. At the end of the reading, the kêhtê-aya stood up and sang an honour song for women in Cree. It was beautiful. After the event, I had many people writing to me and saying they felt like they had been called into a relationship with that play and these stories that day. This is precisely what we need more of: transformative pedagogy gathering us together in shared responsibility, animated by



and honouring the voices of Indigenous artists and residential school survivors/resistors.

## Coda

Between the present dialogue's submission to *Studies in Canadian Literature* and its subsequent publication, Canadian society has been jarred by the discovery of unmarked mass graves at multiple residential schools (first at Kamloops Indian Residential School, then at Brandon Indian Residential School, Marieval Indian Residential School in what is now Cowessess First Nation, St. Eugene's Residential School in Cranbrook/Ktunaxa First Nation, and Kuper Island Indian Industrial School). As of our writing of this Coda, the remains of over 1,500 people have been identified through ground-penetrating radar technology. Scores of other Indigenous communities have investigations underway that will undoubtedly yield higher numbers still. We wish to recognize the profundity of the losses and grief for Indigenous families, communities, and nations, and to honour the pain that the discoveries and emergent public discourse has elicited for many of the survivors/resistors to whom this piece is dedicated.

The numbers seem unfathomable. Yet, they align with what critical historians have registered for years, with what Indigenous communities have known for far longer, and with what the TRC Final Report has made unequivocally clear: that residential schools were sites of suffering and death for thousands of Indigenous infants, children, and youth. The TRC Final Report identified 4,100 deaths of Indigenous students recorded at residential schools and 3,200 unrecorded deaths. The Commission also devoted six of its 94 Calls to Action to "Missing Children and Burial Information" (see calls 71 to 76 below). Furthermore, Indigenous authors of residential school literature have for decades shared stories of inmates' deaths due to malnutrition and starvation, unsanitary living conditions, unsafe working environments, untreated illnesses, punishment and abuse, exposure, and murder. In the words of Vera Manuel, these stories air "the unresolved grief of First Nations people," and, as such, they are stories to which "tremendous responsibility is attached" ("Author's Note"). While the discovery of mass graves at residential schools is crushing, horrific, and enraging, it ought not be surprising. Not to those who have been paying attention.



The shock emerging from settler Canadians at this time nonetheless remains important and potentially galvanizing, but it needs to be informed and to be nurtured in decolonial directions. One of us was asked by an interviewer recently whether the Kamloops discovery forces Canadians to face the truth in a way that will lead toward genuine change. While we wish we could say ‘yes,’ settler colonialism remains insidiously effective, as many Indigenous and allied theorists have noted, in its capacity to shape-shift, absorb, and neutralize threats to its reproduction. The Kanehsatake land reclamation of 1990 was supposed to be a sea-change moment. So was Meech Lake. So were RCAP, the TRC, and #IdleNoMore. Yet, what meaningful structural changes in the direction of historical justice, nation-to-nation relations, and land redistribution have we seen? Many settler Canadians are quick to express outrage and sorrow, but slow to register complicity and even slower to relinquish resources and privilege. Many politicians are quick to talk about “reconciliation,” but endorse the rights of industry over the sovereignty of Indigenous nations over their own lands. The truth is there. It’s available. And it has been for quite some time. The question is what we’re willing to do with it — settlers, arrivants and First Nations, Inuit, and Métis.

This is why residential school literature remains so vital. It narrates the truth of this history but doesn’t rest in despair. It refracts experiences of residential schooling’s genocidal machinery — along with critical awareness of the contexts out of which such literature emerges and into which it is unleashed — through imagination and artistry. It mobilizes intimate and cultural knowledge to grapple with the past in the service of envisioning alternative futures. Residential school literature won’t let us forget, and it also holds us accountable for thinking, imagining, and acting differently. As one of us wrote some years ago: Residential school literature honours “the lives and cultures of those who have survived, of those who haven’t, and of those whose words make the survival of others possible” (*Magic Weapons* 182).

### **Calls to Action Related to “Missing Children and Burial Information”**

71. We call upon all chief coroners and provincial vital statistics agencies that have not provided to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada their records on the deaths of Aboriginal children in the care



of residential school authorities to make these documents available to the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation.

72. We call upon the federal government to allocate sufficient resources to the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation to allow it to develop and maintain the National Residential School Student Death Register established by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.

73. We call upon the federal government to work with churches, Aboriginal communities, and former residential school students to establish and maintain an online registry of residential school cemeteries, including, where possible, plot maps showing the location of deceased residential school children.

74. We call upon the federal government to work with the churches and Aboriginal community leaders to inform the families of children who died at residential schools of the child's burial location, and to respond to families' wishes for appropriate commemoration ceremonies and markers, and reburial in home communities where requested.

75. We call upon the federal government to work with provincial, territorial, and municipal governments, churches, Aboriginal communities, former residential school students, and current landowners to develop and implement strategies and procedures for the ongoing identification, documentation, maintenance, commemoration, and protection of residential school cemeteries or other sites at which residential school children were buried. This is to include the provision of appropriate memorial ceremonies and commemorative markers to honour the deceased children.

76. We call upon the parties engaged in the work of documenting, maintaining, commemorating, and protecting residential school cemeteries to adopt strategies in accordance with the following principles:

- i. The Aboriginal community most affected shall lead the development of such strategies.
- ii. Information shall be sought from residential school Survivors and other Knowledge Keepers in the development of such strategies.
- iii. Aboriginal protocols shall be respected before any potentially invasive technical inspection and investigation of a cemetery site.



## NOTES

The preceding dialogue emerged from transcribed recordings of taped conversations between Sam and Michelle about residential school writing, how it has grown as a body of literature over the years, and how it has changed since the publication of Sam's seminal book on the subject, *Magic Weapons* (2007). It became apparent to both scholars/friends in the initial stages of the dialogue that they had differing yet intersecting views of trauma, healing, and survivorship, which yielded productive exchanges that intervene in scholarly discourse in the field. Michelle Coupal gratefully acknowledges that this research was undertaken, in part, thanks to funding from the Canada Research Chairs Program. She and Sam McKegney wish to extend their appreciation and thanks to Kelby Cottenie for his careful edits and helpful suggestions.

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