"Walking Backwards": From Truth to Reconciliation

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> Now we seek to define reconciliation. We must first know the deeper truth however.
>
> — Louise Bernice Halfe, *Burning in This Midnight Dream* (ix)

Although "reconciliation" is a term currently bandied about in a variety of contexts concerning the relationship between Indigenous and settler populations in what today is known as Canada, the controversies inspired by the term as well as the public discourse on reconciliation are especially clear in assessing the history and ongoing impacts of Canada's Indian residential school system (or IRS). Indeed, the widespread use of the term "reconciliation" in Canada today can be linked directly to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada, which listened to and archived the testimonies of more than six thousand IRS survivors and witnesses from 2008 to 2014. Although the TRC was the context in which most settler Canadians first became aware of and invested in reconciliation, the language of reconciliation in the federal government's 1996 *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* demonstrates a longer history of the term and clarifies the ongoing difficulty of reconciliation in Canada today. The introduction to the report, offered by then Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development Jane Stewart, speaks to the findings of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) and includes "a solemn offer of reconciliation" on behalf of the government. Stewart then launches into the "Statement of Reconciliation" through which Indigenous and settler Canadians might "move forward together in a process of renewal." In this section of her address, Stewart acknowledges that the IRS "requires particular attention," and because of the central placement of it in her address, scholars have read it as the first of three official government apologies for the system and established an association between it and reconciliation discourse in Canada. Moreover, Stewart's statement established the framing of reconciliation

in subsequent government responses to the IRS. However, rather than bringing about reconciliation, which the TRC defines as "an ongoing process of establishing and maintaining respectful relationships" (16), like the RCAP, the TRC has largely only exposed the great rifts that continue to divide Canada. In the context of contemporary reconciliation discourse in Canada, Arthur Manuel (Secwepemc) and Grand Chief Ronald Derrickson (Okanagan) point out that the election of Justin Trudeau as prime minister in 2015 offered hope for concrete change; however, in the interim, his government has fallen back into familiar patterns of unsubstantial rhetorical gestures (55-56).

Beyond the toothless rhetoric of politicians, the limitations of the RCAP and TRC are another element of the narrative on reconciliation in Canada that has drawn the attention of scholars and survivors, as Dylan Robinson (Stó:lō) and Keavy Martin have noted (6). For their part, Roland Chrisjohn (Haudenosaunee) and co-authors critically examine the discourse on the IRS in the context of the RCAP and use a shocking comparison to a "Holocaust [that] had never stopped" early in their analysis (17). Throughout *The Circle Game: Shadows and Substance in the Indian Residential School Experience in Canada*, they return to this comparison and pose the question of why the Canadian government's treatment of Indigenous peoples has not been subject to the same scrutiny as in other states known to be committing genocide, including Hitler's Nazi Germany. More recently, Ronald Niezen has argued that the structure of the TRC, and its relationship to the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA), produced significant omissions in the official IRS archives as well as problematic patterns of testimony (54).[1] Niezen goes on to explain that he published *Truth and Indignation: Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission on Indian Residential Schools* in the midst of the TRC hearings to "provide insights into the creation of new narratives of suffering within contested narratives of power" (xiv). In other words, he recognized the opportunity to describe the changing historical narrative on the IRS and to identify those who have influenced the changes. In the preface to the second edition of the book in 2017, Niezen notes that "Truth has an inverse relationship to power" and that "There is an 'us' and 'them' quality to legitimate knowledge," and he admits that recognizing this has led him to reconsider some of the stronger claims that he made in his original publication (xii). Like the second edition of *Truth and*

Indignation, Manuel and Derrickson's *The Reconciliation Manifesto*: *Recovering the Land, Rebuilding the Economy* was aided by hindsight. In both cases, the authors had access to the published findings of the TRC but were also able to assess the responses of the Canadian government and the Canadian settler population to those findings. Unfortunately, the responses were largely the same. As Manuel and Derrickson make clear, despite "Many Canadians want[ing] to see reconciliation between the settlers and Indigenous peoples . . . [r]econciliation has to pass first through truth. And we have not had enough of that from this government or from Canada as a whole" (56).

Although the apparatus of settler Canadian political discourse has proven to be inadequate for the task of producing such change,[2] the image of reconciliation offered by the TRC — "an ongoing process of *establishing* and maintaining respectful relationships" — remains valuable (16; emphasis added). In highlighting the TRC's vision of reconciliation, I do not mean to exclude it from settler Canadian political discourse. However, because the TRC was produced by the work of survivors, their families, and advocates, and was a key outcome of the IRSSA, it has potential that is absent from the government's apologies (Robinson and Martin 5). More specifically, as my emphasis foregrounds, the TRC's vision of reconciliation is not a return to a harmonious (and non-existent) past, and thus it stands in contrast to the vision of political reconciliation implied by Stewart's remark about a "process of renewal."

The TRC's vision approaches what Garneau (Métis) describes as conciliation as opposed to *re*conciliation (35-36).[3] Processes of conciliation, he explains, use a "Nation-to-Nation[s] or person-to-person negotiation" model of dialogue rather than the legalistic process of testifying to the TRC (36). Garneau emphasizes that conciliation recognizes the need for permanent, systemic change rather than stopping with individual blame and punishment (36). The contrast that he develops between conciliation and the TRC also highlights how the reconciliation outlined by the commission remains to be realized. Because of the limitations of the political-legal process that Garneau demonstrates, I apply the TRC's vision of reconciliation through an alternative point of entry: namely, what Renate Eigenbrod has designated "residential school literature" (278). More precisely, I investigate what it means to

establish and maintain respectful relationships between Indigenous peoples and settler Canadians through residential school literature.

My analysis adds to the body of research examining literature and reconciliation that, as Sophie McCall notes, can be categorized as belonging to two camps (57).[4] Residential school literature is not simply aesthetic expression, as several scholars have pointed out, and as Kristina Fagan observes, "the assumption that literature is a text, detached from social responsibilities, seems to be linked to a culture of disclosure in the Western world" ("'Private Stories'" 158). Sam McKegney has similarly argued that literary works that address the IRS are necessarily political, beautifully written though they might be (180). More recently, Robinson and Martin have reiterated this point in "The Body Is a Resonant Chamber" and added that an attentiveness to "the ways in which the TRC proceedings and artworks related to the Indian residential school system . . . are *felt*" is "important because of the potential for embodied experiences to go unrecognized or unconsidered, even as they have enormous influence on our understanding of the world" (2). Whereas an exclusively political discourse can exploit the playfulness of language for evasive purposes, residential school literature uses language *expansively* to allow, in McKegney's words, "Native authors [to] imagine alternative ideological and political horizons for Indigenous communities and individuals, loosening the neo-colonial bonds of non-Native authority and mapping out possible paths to empowerment and healing" as well as engaging the affective dimensions that Robinson and Martin highlight (180). Together, Robinson and Martin's and McKegney's remarks show how Indigenous literature(s), and particularly IRS literature, exceed aesthetic purposes and can make meaningful contributions to forming new relationships in pursuit of reconciliation.

Although there is a wide array of literary responses to the IRS, I will focus on poet Sky Dancer Louise Bernice Halfe's (Cree) 2016 collection *Burning in This Midnight Dream*. Halfe was born in 1953 in Two Hills, Alberta, and grew up on the Saddle Lake Reserve, located in Treaty 6 territory. *Burning in This Midnight Dream* is the most recent of her four original published poetry collections,[5] each of which has garnered much critical acclaim. Most notably, Halfe was named a finalist for the Governor General's Literary Award for *Blue Marrow* in 1998, and more recently she was named Canada's parliamentary poet laureate.

Although Gaertner points out in the introduction to *Sôhkêyihta* that the trauma and silence of the IRS are the grounds from which Halfe's poetic voice emerges, *Burning in This Midnight Dream* forms the centre of my analysis not only because of its content but also because of its context. More specifically, Halfe's collection, published shortly after the conclusion of the TRC in 2015, like the first edition of Niezen's *Truth and Indignation*, is a clear expression of that moment in thinking about the concepts of truth and reconciliation in the IRS context. To emphasize this point, I place *Burning in This Midnight Dream* in dialogue with two poems, "I Lost My Talk" (1988) by Rita Joe (Mi'kmaq) and "At the Mercy of the Sky," by Billy-Ray Belcourt (Cree). By placing Halfe alongside Joe and Belcourt, I contextualize Halfe's poems' reflection of a specific moment of thinking about reconciliation but also demonstrate the diversity of poetic responses to the IRS and how they have changed over time.

A central feature of Halfe's collection is its exploration of her multifaceted relationship with the IRS. First, Halfe is an Indigenous person living within the Canadian nation-state; second, she is the child of IRS survivors; and third, she is an IRS survivor herself, having attended the Blue Quills Residential School in St. Paul, Alberta, from 1960 to 1969 (Gaertner ix). These relationships with the IRS appear throughout Halfe's poetry, which, Gartner explains, is "a conduit for silenced voices" (xvii). Beyond her investment in disseminating the truth of the IRS, Halfe engages settler Canadians, as Michael Rothberg's logic of implication helps to clarify. In *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*, Rothberg argues that the traditional categories of victims and perpetrators, which historians used in thinking through the ethical aftermath of the Holocaust, fail to address subject positions that are not *directly* involved in the victimization of a targeted group but nonetheless receive benefits from their victimization (1). Rothberg coins the term "the implicated subject" to describe this subject position, a designation that applies to settler Canadians. However, the implicated subject is more than a single subject position, and Rothberg uses it to demonstrate how one might simultaneously occupy multiple positions. For example, his own experiences as a descendant of "white Ashkenazi Jewish immigrants," who came to what is now called the United States fleeing from European anti-Semitism, implicates him in both "the foundational crimes of genocide and slavery that had taken

place on the North American continent" and the current American support for the Israeli occupation of Palestine (17, 18).[6] The multipositionality of implication expands "multidirectional memory," a concept that Rothberg developed to avoid a conflict-based or "competitive" and linear concept of memory (4-5). In the Canadian context, it is competitive memory, or what Manuel and Derrickson describe as a history only justifiable using racism, that forms the core of Canada's national identity (76). This competitive model of memory allows settler Canadian society to *present* an image of acceptance, tolerance, and multiculturalism to the international community while *performing* an identity largely synonymous with white, Euro-Christian culture. Warren Cariou (Métis) exemplifies multidirectional memory in "Going to Canada," in which he recounts visiting the Auschwitz death camp but finding himself "going to Canada" (320).[7] Upon arriving at the camp, Cariou notices a building named Canada, so named because "it symbolized wealth" and "was known as a place where inmates were treated more leniently" (323). Cariou's encounter in Auschwitz produces a "disturbing metaphor" in his mind represented by two images of Canada: "[T]he nation, Canada, as a storehouse of vast wealth. But it's stolen wealth. And . . . Canada also as a place of ashes, a place that has been burned — as if to obliterate the traces of what has happened there" (324). The double image that Cariou evokes expresses not only Rothberg's concept of multidirectional memory but also how it might be used to expose the contradictions within the settler Canadian state. However, only when multidirectional memory is paired with the logic of implication is a potential path for new relationships and change made possible.

Multidirectional memory makes clear that the narration of history need not take the competitive form that has hitherto been the norm. Indeed, Halfe remarks in the afterword to *Sôhkêyihta* that the inspiration to write *Blue Marrow* came from her desire to "rewrite history" to incorporate the stories of several women, which speaks to her engagement with such a project of renarrativization (84). By combining renarrativization with attentiveness to the logic of implication and the expansive culpability that it entails, new relationships to the past can be developed, tracing the past into the present and providing a fuller account of the truth, as Manuel and Derrickson demand.

"Aniskōstēw — Connecting": Epistemic Uncertainty and "Walking Backwards"

"Aniskōstēw — Connecting," the first poem in Halfe's *Burning in This Midnight Dream*, opens with the central problematic that her collection addresses. "I cannot say for sure what happened / to my mother and father," the poem begins; "That little story is bigger than I can tell" (2). Halfe's reticence to speak about her parents' experiences in the IRS alludes to the epistemic uncertainty that surrounded the IRS. That uncertainty was an essential characteristic of IRS institutions from their inception and appeared in three interconnected aspects. First, epistemic uncertainty insulated settler Canadians who were outside the system but remained and still remain implicated in its operation. Second, this insulation also isolated the children enrolled in IRS institutions. And third, the epistemic uncertainty carried over into the post-IRS lives of survivors, many of whom find themselves unwilling or unable to speak of their experiences within the IRS.[8] Halfe's work is directed toward addressing this third aspect or what Gaertner describes as the ever-present threat of silence and erasure within the colonial narrative (xi). In his analysis of *Blue Marrow*, for instance, Gaertner demonstrates how Halfe uses the textual space of her work to speak back against colonial silence as well as to demarcate the persistent presence of colonial narratives using encroaching "whitespace" (xv-xvi). Her construction of this textual space demonstrates her investment in exploring the relationship between Indigenous and settler peoples. To identify her more specific response to the IRS, however, it is necessary to develop a fuller picture of epistemic uncertainty and its impact on the discourse on that system.

Chrisjohn and his co-authors speak to the first aspect of epistemic uncertainty by asserting that "the engines of genocide were not feeble, but subtle," in the IRS (72). These "engines," they go on to say, "had to do their jobs while concealing their purposes, not so much from their victims . . . as from their operators. Then as now Canadians maintained a particular image of themselves to themselves" (72). In other words, the IRS produced screens to protect the self-image of settler Canadians both directly and indirectly implicated in the operation of the IRS and provided the former with plausible deniability.[9] In *The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture*, Daniel Francis makes a similar point in arguing that "Indian imagery has affected . . . and continues to shape . . . the myths non-Natives tell themselves about

being Canadians," including the myth of Canada's colonial innocence (22). Moreover, anxiety about the self-image of settler Canadians is not simply a domestic issue, and it was no coincidence that both Stephen Harper's and Justin Trudeau's remarks about Canada's lack of a colonial history (or "baggage") took place while each was speaking before an international audience.

However, as "Aniskōstēw — Connecting" attests, Chrisjohn and co-authors go too far in asserting that the machines of the IRS worked *only* to conceal their purposes from their operators and not their victims, the "students" themselves.[10] This second aspect of the epistemic uncertainty of the IRS exploited the vulnerability and/or shame of the "students" so that those who were abused felt that theirs were exceptional experiences or isolated cases, as Basil Johnston (Ojibway) recalls in the foreword to Sam McKegney's *Magic Weapons: Aboriginal Writers Remaking Community after Residential School*. "For years I had labored under the conviction that I was the only one to be debauched in Spanish Residential School," Johnston explains. "But during the course of meetings of our negotiating team . . . I realized that the sexual degradation of students was far more widespread than I had imagined" (ix-x). Theodore Fontaine (Anishinaabe), in *Broken Circle: The Dark Legacy of Indian Residential Schools*, admits a similar confusion and mentions asking himself whether the things that he was experiencing at the Fort Alexander Residential School were "natural" or not (7, 165). Johnston's disclosure of his abuse and Fontaine's questions demonstrate the degree to which the structures present in the Indian residential schools did in fact conceal from the "students" within them what was happening to them and why.

The third aspect of the epistemic uncertainty of the IRS takes the form of its continued insulation by a veil of silence surrounding survivors who have left the physical confines of the IRS but remain indelibly marked by it. The siege at Oka in 1990 and the resulting RCAP were formative events in disrupting this veil, but it was not until then head of the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs Phil Fontaine's (Ojibway) public disclosure that it was lifted for all of Canada to see.[11] Fontaine's disclosure, as Niezen has argued, marked a dramatic shift in the public historical narrative on the IRS and led to the formation of the TRC and ushered in a new discourse on reconciliation between Indigenous peoples and settler Canadians. Jonathan Dewar (Huron-Wendat) similarly situates

Fontaine's disclosure as a key turning point in the narrative whereby the public silence that had surrounded it was broken (153).

In addition to the three aspects of the epistemic uncertainty of the IRS, the second, explanatory, line of Halfe's "Aniskōstēw — Connecting" — "that little story is bigger than I can tell" — reveals a problem of scale in relation to the IRS (*Burning* 2). Despite her parents' past in the IRS being a "little story," it remains too big for Halfe to tell. The disproportion of the story speaks to a further challenge produced by the epistemic uncertainty of the IRS: namely, that of finding and articulating one's story within the overwhelming and intentionally impenetrable colonial apparatus of the IRS. However, the difficulty of telling one's own story is only compounded by trying to tell a family story. In "Aniskōstēw — Connecting," Halfe paints her family's history in broad strokes from her parents back to her grandparents (nōhkom[12] and nimosōm), and in the remaining poems of the collection she offers brief vignettes of specific family memories. In "Residential School Alumni," for example, Halfe shares how the IRS transmits trauma across generations beginning with her uncle shooting her aunt and how, of their four children, one was left alone while the others died, one fighting in Vietnam, one in a police chase, and the last one in a house fire (11). The way in which *Burning in This Midnight Dream* presents these moments mimics the impacts of the IRS on familial and communal bonds, which, if not severed, are certainly fragmented by the attacks on Indigenous bodies and cultures within the IRS.

Once Halfe has completed the telling of her family history, the narrative of "Aniskōstēw — Connecting" turns to her response to the epistemic uncertainty of the IRS in the form of "walking backwards." Halfe acknowledges that she does not "like walking backwards," a process that requires not only that she move in an uncomfortable and disorienting manner but also that she move beyond "where [her] footsteps began" and into a shared space in the footsteps of her forebears (3). "Walking backwards" is the phrase that Halfe uses to represent the process of coming to tell both her family's story and her own story, and as a poetic image it expresses what Neal McLeod calls "wâhkôtowin" or a "poetics of empathy" (94). More specifically, the image of walking backwards uses embodied language to represent the activity of exploring the troubling past.

Halfe's image of walking backwards operates in contrast to how reconciliation has been discussed by the Canadian state and understood by the settler Canadian public. In her analysis of Robert Arthur Alexie's (Gwich'in) novel *Porcupines and China Dolls*, Keavy Martin articulates a fundamental confusion among settler Canadians regarding efforts at reconciliation. Most pointedly, Martin argues that settler Canadians have confused reconciliation with resolution (52). Beyond the examples from Martin's essay, evidence supporting the ongoing confusion or wilful ignorance of settler Canadian society is clear in Senator Lynn Beyak's posting of racist, inflammatory letters on her government of Canada website that questioned the findings of the TRC and maintained that Canada's assimilationist policies were correct (Barrera). The media coverage of Beyak's decision to post these letters demonstrates not only the degree to which such views remain acceptable in post-TRC Canadian society but also that the IRS remains a public site of contested memory. A recent address to students of the Conservative club at Ryerson University[13] by Erin O'Toole, in which he spoke of how the IRS was founded with good intentions but only later "became a horrible program" (qtd. in Zimonjic and Cullen), emphasizes both the malleability of IRS discourse and how many settler Canadians still misunderstand the tragedy of the IRS. More specifically, the tragedy is associated with the sexual abuse of children rather than the guiding IRS philosophy. This is not to diminish the abuse suffered by children within the IRS, and, as Niezen (29) and Woods (40-41) point out, it was revelations about the sexual abuse of children that exposed the IRS to public scrutiny in the late 1980s. However, both Emily Hazlett (54) and Cheryl Gaver (204) clarify that the experience of trauma in the IRS is not limited to those actually abused. In fact, Gaver argues, this misconception is the primary obstacle in the way of reconciliation (214). Paulette Regan has also emphasized the need for settler Canadians to "unsettle" and "transform the settler" within; especially important among the unsettling activities that she describes is the need to be attentive to "*how* people learn about historical injustices" rather than just "*what* happened" (11). Halfe's poetics offers an alternative means — or another "how" — of engaging with the past and, in its contrast to the political discourse of the TRC, responds to the need for a deeper truth beyond describing "what happened." As demonstrative as Beyak and O'Toole are in showing how the public discourse on the IRS and TRC has taken

its cues from the government, this relationship — and Halfe's response to it — are better understood through an analysis of the rhetoric used in the three official apologies offered by the government.

On 7 January 1998, Jane Stewart spoke to the findings of the RCAP by unveiling *Gathering Strength: Canada's Aboriginal Action Plan*. Her address emphasized that "we cannot look forward without first looking back and coming to terms with the impact of our past actions and attitudes," and to that end she "affirm[ed] the government's commitment to reconciling the past and building a better future together." Her address also established the link between reconciliation and the IRS by acknowledging the role of the government in "the development and administration of the schools," as well as "the tragedy of sexual and physical abuse," but Stewart stopped short of admitting government responsibility and instead apologized to those "who suffered this tragedy at residential schools." This gesture was instrumental in shaping contemporary reconciliation discourse in limiting the wrongdoing in the IRS to instances of abuse and made it simpler to compartmentalize responsibility to a few staff rather than the IRS as a technology of colonial violence. The framing of Stewart's address not only mitigated legal and financial culpability but also maintained the epistemic uncertainty shielding members of the settler Canadian public from recognizing their implication in the IRS. Put simply, her address placed the IRS in a *past* that needs "reconciling" or as a historical obstacle that must be overcome before "a better future together" is possible.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper's apology in 2008 continued to emphasize the relationship between reconciliation and the IRS and, in what Martin describes as a case of "therapeutic amnesia," borrowed its language from Stewart (57). Particularly important among the borrowed language was Harper's description of how "moving towards healing, reconciliation and resolution" is made possible by "a new opportunity to move forward together." Like Stewart, Harper mentioned the past, but both were oriented toward and emphasized the future. Indeed, Harper's limited consideration of the past was what necessitated Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's apology in 2017. The IRS, Harper proclaimed, was composed of "One hundred and thirty-two federally-supported schools [that] were located in every province and territory, *except* Newfoundland, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island" (emphasis added). Like Stewart's address, Harper's apology lim-

ited Canada's responsibilities and maintained epistemic uncertainty through the intentional exclusion of IRS institutions in Newfoundland and Labrador.[14] In his apology to address Harper's exclusion, Trudeau explained that "All Canadians possess the ability to learn from the past and shape the future" and that such actions are "the path to reconciliation" (qtd. in McIntyre). Like the previous two apologies, Trudeau's was future oriented and undertook little examination of the past or present.

Beyond these apologies, the need for critical reflection on the past is reflected by public statements made by both Harper and Trudeau. Speaking to an international delegation at a G20 gathering in Pittsburgh, for example, Harper proudly declared that Canada has "no history of colonialism" despite the apology that he had offered just over a year earlier (qtd. in Ljunggren). Trudeau made a similar remark to students at New York University by explaining that Canada's ability to participate in UN peacekeeping missions was aided by the fact that Canada lacked "some of the baggage that so many other Western countries have — either colonial pasts or perceptions" (qtd. in Tim Fontaine).

These apologies demonstrate how the approach to reconciliation pursued by the government has departed from the reconciliation envisioned by the TRC as well as the models offered by scholars such as Garneau and McLeod. The image of forward motion emphasized by Stewart, Harper, and Trudeau shows that the problematic, political conception of reconciliation is not a partisan issue. In contrast, Halfe's image of walking backwards responds to the limitations of political reconciliation and underscores the uncomfortable, embodied experience necessary to confront the past and to begin to change present realities in Canada. Engagement with Halfe's poetics represents what Robinson and Martin describe as "small, symbolic and everyday actions" that, though potentially "significant" in the aggregate, must not be confused with a complete program of reconciliation (2). Nonetheless, such small steps are important in beginning a new relationship and addressing present inequities.

Halfe emphasizes the collective nature of walking backwards and how telling the story of the IRS is telling several overlapping narratives. It is this collective nature of her telling that makes her poetics a possible site for survivors as well as Indigenous families and communities that have been affected in the wake of the IRS to work through the past and to imagine and produce a more stable present and hopeful

future. However, Halfe's poetics also provides a space in which settler Canadians might consider their implication in the history and legacy of the IRS as well as the systems that continue to oppress Indigenous peoples in Canada and impede a fuller acknowledgement of the truth. One must not conflate these two processes, however, and as Sophie McCall stresses the different understandings that Indigenous and settler peoples bring to reconciliation need not necessarily be conceived of as problematic (60). Divergent approaches to reconciliation, McCall argues, serve to reflect "the differences that continue to manifest themselves — most glaringly in socio-economic disparities between settler and Indigenous populations" (60). In Halfe's poetics, Indigenous readers are confronted by the reality of intergenerational trauma, personal abuse, lateral violence, and ongoing inequitable relationships with the Canadian nation-state and settler Canadians. From settler Canadian readers, in contrast, Halfe's poetics demands recognition of Canada's violent, colonial history and then a moving beyond this knowledge to identify and undercut colonial structures that remain present in Canada.

"Kwēskī — Turn Around": Three Studies in IRS Poetics

Although Halfe engages with reconciliation discourse throughout *Burning in This Midnight Dream*, the image of walking backwards is an especially vivid example. She offers that image as she tells her own story of healing and, in this sharing, makes clear the value of disclosure for readers who might have had similar experiences, but it also produces an unsettling experience for those implicated in the larger story of the IRS.

Despite my emphasis on the importance of collective activity to her poetics, Halfe describes this characteristic as one of the main difficulties in telling her story. The tension between the need for and the difficulty of engaging with others is made clear in "Kwēskī — Turn Around," in which Halfe credits her nimosōm (grandfather) with first orienting her on a path of walking backwards where she moved beyond her own story and into a shared space in the footsteps and stories of her ancestors (*Burning* 31). Her difficult navigation of her story provides a concrete example of the change made possible by walking backwards. Her nimosōm led her from "that disobedient trail" on which she was a "brittle . . . slave" and "a living blackout" (30-31). To reorient her from that trail and onto a path with her ancestors, her nimosōm provided her

with two gifts. First, he gave her "the gift of syllabics, the reading road," a gift that emphasizes the great stakes involved in the process of storytelling that Halfe had first introduced in "Aniskōstēw — Connecting" (31). Corntassel and co-authors similarly describe stories, and haa-huupah[15] in particular, as "an alternative to the Canadian state's vision for reconciliation" and emphasize that stories address features of the IRS left unaddressed by the legal atmosphere of the TRC (139-40). Second, her nimosōm also provided Halfe with "the pipe that *nōhkom* [her grandmother] smoked," and together these gifts help to restore Halfe's connection to her Cree culture through language and ceremony (*Burning* 31). "Kwēskī — Turn Around" exemplifies walking backwards as a process through which one might — with careful guidance, collective action, and attention — reorient oneself toward the past and present. Moreover, though Indigenous ceremonies are unavailable to settlers, language and stories, in certain contexts,[16] can be engaged to develop deeper truths.

Shelley Stigter's analysis of two of Halfe's earlier collections, *Bear Bones and Feathers* (1998) and *Blue Marrow* (2004), shows how Halfe's use of the Cree language guides different groups of readers' interactions with her work. In the context of reconciliation, attention to Halfe's use of Cree and how it has changed from *Bear Bones and Feathers* through to *Burning in This Midnight Dream* demonstrates her commitment to fostering community, growth, and inclusion. Stigter's focus on Halfe's code switching identifies two distinct practices, beginning with instances of "dialectic" that exclude non-Cree speakers from the precise meaning of her work (50). Stigter contrasts instances of exclusionary dialectic with "dialogic" moments that emphasize "the idea of exchange or dialogue between two cultures rather than separation" (50).[17] Although she sees these two moments as opposing one another at different points in Halfe's poetics, I argue that these distinct moments are evocative of Rothberg's multidirectional memory in that they signal two different but not competitive approaches to reading Halfe's work and thus of engaging with the past. In other words, it is not that one is included or excluded from the meaning of Halfe's work because of a familiarity with Cree and/or English language and culture. Instead, her work stages a space in which difference and familiarity are negotiated to produce new relationships.

One must also note that Stigter's reading of *Blue Marrow* draws from the original 1998 publication rather than the 2004 reissue. This is an important consideration in that the reissue of *Blue Marrow* contains a glossary of Cree terms absent from the original book, and Halfe's subsequent works, *Burning in This Midnight Dream* and *Sôhkêyihta*, both contain glossaries. This change in her presentation of the "dialectic" has a marked impact on how settler readers approach her work. Halfe has not translated the Cree but includes it in glossaries at the ends of her books in a gesture that both keeps with her resistance to colonial silence and affords readers the opportunity to become invested in uncovering the meanings of the Cree words and better understanding the contexts in which they are used within her poems. At the same time, readers should not be under the impression that a glossary can supply complete meanings of the Cree terms or even a complete contextual understanding.

The possibilities that inhere within language, as Halfe identifies them in her rescue by her nomosōm, and as Stigter discusses them in Halfe's dialogic link *Burning in This Midnight Dream* to one of the most canonical poetic responses to the IRS, Rita Joe's "I Lost My Talk." Despite this link, "I Lost My Talk," first published in *Song of Eskasoni* in 1988, reflects a very different period in thinking about the IRS than Halfe's works. An examination of the third and fourth stanzas of Joe's poem reveal that it, like "Aniskōstēw — Connecting" in *Burning in This Midnight Dream*, presents both a problematic and a potential response to the experience of the IRS from the perspective of a survivor. "Two ways I talk," Joe explains — referring to both her mother tongue of Mi'kmaq and the colonial language of English that she learned in the IRS — and "Both ways I say, / Your way is more powerful" (114). Her words are disarmingly simple, but they cut sharply to the core of the genocide committed in the IRS.

The poem's final stanza continues this style with Joe offering her hand and saying, "Let me find *my* talk / So *I* can teach *you* about *me*" (114; emphasis added). Written and published prior to both the TRC and the RCAP, Joe's poem is decidedly different in tone from the poems in Halfe's collection. In fact, in the poem's address to settler Canada, Joe's offering her hand, *asking* to find her own talk to educate the peoples who stole her language from her, could be interpreted as unduly desperate. However, this gesture is a key example of what McKegney

describes as Joe's "affirmatism" (106). McKegney understands these lines as "engaging history . . . in the struggle toward empowerment" (107). Although "I Lost My Talk" belongs to a different period of public discourse on the IRS, it nonetheless exerts an important influence on Halfe's later work. Her use of Cree and English throughout her poetry, and in *Burning in This Midnight Dream* in particular, can be read as an indirect citation of and response to the final stanza of Joe's poem. More specifically, Halfe's collection fulfills the final stanza of "I Lost My Talk," in which, thanks to her nomosōm, Halfe has rediscovered her Cree language, and she uses both Cree and English to undertake the expansion of truth on the path to her own healing and the telling of her family's and community's stories. In this way, her poem is invested in the project of reconciliation — understood as the establishment of new relationships — in its address of settler Canadians, whereby *she* can teach *us* about *her* without the narrative being weaponized for assimilative purposes. More specifically, the play of dialectic and dialogic in Halfe's work produces sites of exclusion, inclusion, and exchange that demand more from readers than passive absorption of Indigenous stories and cultures.

In "At the Mercy of the Sky," in his collection *NDN Coping Mechanisms: Notes from the Field*, Billy-Ray Belcourt presents a third iteration of poetic responses to the IRS. The collection was published in 2019, and, at a further remove from the TRC than Halfe's *Burning in This Midnight Dream*, its presentation of the IRS and reconciliation reflects an awareness of the limitations of political reconciliation. Belcourt's poem is pre-empted by a photo labelled "Joussard, AB," and its bright presentation of a cloud-free, blue sky, tall green grasses, and a central white ruin is in contrast to the poem that contextualizes it (20). The first five lines of the poem declare:

> In front of me:
> 1947, a fractured door,
> rotted wooden beams.
> Behind:
> an ancient forest of gone peoples. (21)

Like Halfe's image of walking backwards, these first lines present Belcourt's poetic voice as embodied in the telling of the experience of the IRS legacy. However, whereas Halfe speaks from a moving position,

Belcourt speaks from a static location as he addresses the ruin before him and stands between the colonial institution and the "gone peoples" behind him (21). His positionality within the poem is not only spatial but also temporal in that he is located between a supposedly historical IRS that continues to haunt the present and "gone peoples" who remain present in and through his body and his work. It is because of this twisted space and time that Belcourt describes going to Joussard as a "return to [a] primal scene" and as an "open wound," using language evocative of Freud's description of traumatic experience (21).[18]

Belcourt goes on to describe the impact of such an experience, explaining that "there is something unsayable about [it]" and that "It makes words crumble in my mouth" (21). Like his indirect reference to Freud in the preceding lines, Belcourt's description of the unsayable nature of the IRS links his response to the tradition of literary trauma theory that insists on the unknowable and unsayable nature of traumatic experience.[19] This dimension of Belcourt's poetics provides it with an overwhelming affect but simultaneously undercuts its capacity to deepen the truth of the IRS or to establish new relationships, as do Halfe's and Joe's poetics. In other words, like the discourse of literary trauma theory that it appears to cite, "At the Mercy of the Sky" encounters the aporia produced by conceiving of traumatic experience as unsayable. In response, scholars such as Michael Rothberg have begun to explore the multidirectional nature of trauma and memory, and Kristina Fagan (NunatuKavut) has developed an account of traumatic literature sensitive to the impact of Indigenous cultural practices on the representation of trauma.[20] Throughout *Burning in This Midnight Dream*, Halfe undertakes similar exploratory work.

"Tipiyawēwisīw — Ownership of One's Self": Empathy, Truth, and Reconciliation

In the preface to the 2019 second edition of *This Wound Is a World*, Belcourt explains that "I read and write poetry because it is a time and place to practice radical empathy" (ix). He returns to the idea of empathy in "At the Mercy of the Sky," but there he situates it in a hypothetical settler Canadian memorialization of the IRS at Joussard.

> I can see it now:
> a spectacle during which white politicians crawl

out of the bloody maw of the past,
smiling with the carcasses of words
like "history" and "empathy" hanging from their lips. (22)

Beyond indicating skepticism of government-led reconciliation, Belcourt is signalling two different senses of empathy in his description of the value of poetry as opposed to the terms used by politicians emerging out of the violence of the past, and it is the space between these two senses that reconciliation must address. Richard Wagamese (Ojibway) makes a similar claim in *One Native Life* by explaining that "It's not necessary to bridge gaps between communities. Bridges rust and collapse. If, as a people, we work earnestly to fill those gaps with information, filling it in layer by layer with our truth, the gaps eventually cease to exist" (221). Although his metaphor is moving, it is important to remain vigilant when engaging in such work so that reconciliation does not become a tool for assimilation. The strongest defence against assimilation lies in cultural renewal and resurgence, such as the process that Halfe's nimosōm used to reorient Halfe from her "disobedient trail." In the case of settler Canadians, cultural knowledge does not do *restorative* work; rather, it fills the gaps that Wagamese identified. However, this is not a passive process, and, as Stigter's analysis shows, Halfe's poetry resists passive absorption, as demonstrated by her use of the Cree language.

The construction of a layered truth must not come simply from Indigenous peoples and their cultures; as important as it is for settler Canadians to listen to the voices of Indigenous peoples, settlers must also be active in the building of truth. It is this juncture at which Halfe's poetics and Rothberg's logic of implication intersect. Just as the shared nature of walking backwards goes beyond the experiences of IRS survivors to include settler Canadians learning about, addressing, and building out of the past, so too settler Canadians must build a truth based upon recognition of their present implication in a society constructed out of the dispossession and continued oppression of Indigenous peoples. The confrontation of whitespace and Cree in Halfe's poetry is but one example of a space in which critical self-reflection and the seeds of action might be planted.

The exploration of the past that Halfe's poetics traces is similarly not an easy process. In "Unpacking the Knapsack," Halfe recounts her abuse by several family members and addresses one of the obstacles that hinders survivors from testifying about their IRS experiences: "The sur-

vivor is blamed" (*Burning* 54). "Me," Halfe responds, "I won't wait for my skeleton to be found. / I've told / and my telling's been witnessed / in ceremony" (54). Her reference to a hidden skeleton simultaneously refers to the idiomatic expression of having a skeleton in the closet — something hidden that is dangerous and/or shameful — and to the reality of what the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) has described as an ongoing genocide committed against Indigenous women and girls (5). Earlier in *Burning in This Midnight Dream*, Halfe describes herself as a "brittle . . . slave" and "a living blackout" as she travels between bars hitchhiking before her nimosōm intervenes (30-31). This doubled reference recognizes the vulnerability of Indigenous bodies in settler Canadian society; however, Halfe does not passively accept this and "wait" to be found. Instead, her poetics actively intervenes in this situation through her story.

Halfe draws the skeleton out of the closet and, by inserting a line break between "witnessed" and "in ceremony," produces a doubled notion of witnessing. She appears to be describing her participation in the legalistic TRC, but by using a line break to prolong the stanza she performs, within her poem, the layering of truth that Wagamese notes. Halfe brings the courtroom witnessing familiar to settler readers into proximity to the witnessing made available by cultural ceremonies. Her poetics unfolds this doubled meaning and avoids assimilation in that the line break signals two distinct meanings of witnessing, whereas the experience of reading the poem brings them together in an expression of similarity. This textual openness speaks to what McLeod describes as the importance of "intra-textual dialogue" to Cree poetic consciousness (95). McLeod emphasizes that in the Cree poetic tradition "a narrative can never exhaust its possibilities because there are always new embodiments and interpretative locations" (95). Such openness can be frustrating for settler readers who seek a complete understanding, however, as Daniel Coleman articulates: "To be able to learn from and have our minds transformed by [Indigenous writers'] work, we need to move from a politics of recognition that assumes we already know the value of what we see to a concept that is ubiquitous in Indigenous thinking: a politics of respect" (124).

Halfe does not directly name the process of walking backwards as the path to reconciliation, nor does she guarantee a productive or positive outcome arising out of such a difficult task. Nonetheless, given the

demonstrated insufficiency of the government's discourse in addressing the dire need for reconciliation and change, her poetics provides a model that is political in its collective demands, ethical in its address and acknowledgement of Indigenous community and culture, and efficacious in its demonstrated ability to move her into a deeper exploration of truth and the possibility of reconciliation.

Notes

[1] In "Imaginary Spaces of Conciliation and Reconciliation," David Garneau (Métis) points out that "those removed from their culture, language, and spiritual traditions and those who were indoctrinated by religious residential schools would slide rather easily into the similar confessional narratives of such a Truth and Reconciliation system" (36). He thus provides an alternative and less critical genesis of the appearance of such similar testimonies in the TRC.

[2] Manuel and Derrickson go further and argue that a tripartite structure of dispossession, dependence, and oppression has established and maintained a fundamentally racist settler colonial Canadian nation-state (67-71).

[3] Not only does Garneau do away with the notion of a return to a past relationship, but he also critiques the notion of reconciliation for its resonances with the rituals of Catholicism (35-36). Jeff Corntassel (Cherokee Nation) and his co-authors repeat this argument in their analysis of how questions of land and sovereignty remain unaddressed by the TRC.

[4] McCall points out that the field of "Indigenous literary studies" is largely composed of "critics who argue for Indigenous nationalist positions" and "those who draw on postcolonial theories," though significant "overlapping tensions" exist between these camps as well (57).

[5] *Sôhkêyihta: The Poetry of Sky Dancer Louise Bernice Halfe*, a collection of her work selected and introduced by David Gaertner, was published in 2018 as part of the Laurier Poetry Series, and Halfe contributed a reflective afterword to it.

[6] At the institutional level, one might productively think through Rothberg's logic of implication by considering the establishment and contents of Canada's Museum of Human Rights (CMHR) in Winnipeg. As A. Dirk Moses indicates, the CMHR is an ironically traumatic undertaking given its lack of consideration of Indigenous experiences in the context of Canadian settler colonialism, including the very land upon which it was built (24-25).

[7] Sagkeeng Anishinaabe author Theodore Fontaine makes a similar observation when he recounts visiting Dachau and recognizing the look that he had seen in IRS survivors when he saw photographs of the inmates once imprisoned there (170-71).

[8] There are many survivors, of course, who have bravely chosen to speak out, including those whose texts I cite throughout this essay as well as the six thousand who testified directly to the TRC. Moreover, several other publications — such as *The Survivors Speak* published by the TRC and *Speaking My Truth* published by the Aboriginal Healing Foundation — have presented the stories of those willing to share them. At the same time, however, one must acknowledge, as Garneau does, that there are many reasons that survivors might choose not to speak about the traumatic past, including a mistrust of the official channels of disclosure (34).

[9] These screens continue to exist today, as Cheryl Gaver explains, and the use of such screens has been explored by David Stannard in assessing how the memorialization of the Holocaust, for example, serves as a "screen memory" to isolate settler populations in North America from their own implication, as beneficiaries of settler colonial history, and a neo-colonial present (249-50).

[10] I use scare quotes around the term "students" in the context of the IRS in recognition of the fact that, as Rupert Ross points out, many former "students" "are offended that non-aboriginals would think of them as students in the same way that they think of their own children going to school. They survived forced imprisonment by western culture and governments, and they want the world to understand that" (92).

[11] As important as Fontaine's disclosure was, one must also recognize that the epistemic uncertainty of the IRS was not undone in a day. Sociologist Eric Taylor Woods analyzes three distinct periods of the IRS — "their founding, their closure, and their return to the public sphere as a result of a child abuse scandal" — and traces efforts to speak out against the IRS nearly to its inception (32, 34). However, a lack of "access to power and resources," Woods argues, undercut these early efforts (34). Where he argues that the IRS became less of a public concern to Indigenous activists because of other competing concerns, such as land claims, Corntassel and his co-authors ground their criticisms of the TRC precisely on its lack of recognition of the direct connection between the IRS and land theft (145-49).

[12] I have not italicized words in Indigenous languages beyond maintaining fidelity to direct quotations. My decision is based upon the fact that the practice of italicization is intended to demarcate "foreign" terms, and Indigenous languages, in fact, are foreign only to settler populations as a result of projects of cultural erasure and genocide.

[13] Named after Egerton Ryerson, a Methodist minister and important architect of the public education system in Ontario as well as the IRS.

[14] The justification for this exclusion was that each of the institutions (the Lockwood School in Cartwright, the Makkovik Boarding School, the Nain Boarding School, the St. Anthony Orphanage and Boarding School, and the Yale School in Northwest River) was opened when Newfoundland was a self-governing dominion rather than a Canadian province. The same argument has not been applied to the Mohawk Institute in Brantford, Ontario, which first began boarding students in the 1830s, nearly forty years prior to Canadian Confederation.

[15] Haa-huu-pah, as Corntassel and co-authors explain, is a Nuu-chah-nulth word for "teaching stories or sacred living histories" (137).

[16] Certain stories, for example, are sacred in nature, and thus there are protocols and contexts for their telling that, like Indigenous ceremonies, simply are not available to non-Indigenous peoples.

[17] Stigter's account closely resembles Kimberly Blaeser's (Chippewa) citation of James Zebroski's comments on style. "[T]he linear" is similar to what Stigter calls "dialectic," and both use the term "dialogic" in contrast (37). Beyond the inclusive nature of the dialogic, Blaeser adds that it represents a "mixture of popular and official genres" and voices, and "more important . . . [w]riting in a dialogic style can be a conscious challenge to the linear style which endorses the existing social and political system, and thus [is] a symbolic challenge to that very system" (37).

[18] See, for instance, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings*, in which Freud first posited the psychological rather than the somatic nature of trauma by drawing from dreams suffered by returning veterans of the First World War, or his description of a primal crime in the context of Jewish identity in *Moses and Monotheism*. Later in *NDN Coping Mechanisms*, Belcourt explicitly addresses Freud in a poem entitled "Melancholy's Forms" (62-67).

[19] See, for example, Caruth, and Felman and Laub.

[20] Fagan ("Weesageechak") develops a model of literary trauma that is culturally centred and provides an account of why trauma might remain unspoken in Indigenous communities even if it is speakable.

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