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RICHARD WAGAMESE – AN OJIBWAY IN ALBERTA

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When he walked into a shabby basement room in Calgary in the fall of 1994, the quality of light vivified. He had the whole audience at that long soiree up on our feet and singing a Susan Aglukark song before he read from his first novel, *Keeper 'n Me*. I had never seen anybody so alive.

Richard Wagamese is an Ojibway writer from Ontario who has lived in and written of Alberta – as well as other parts of Canada. His career to date provides a window into an Alberta that is still invisible, or at least hazy, to most non-Native Albertans and other mainstream readers. Wagamese also writes of his own struggle – and the struggle of many Native people raised in the 1950s and 1960s – with the demons of anomie caused by the shattering effects of the widespread “scoop-up” that saw unbearable percentages, in some reserves “almost a generation” (Johnston, quoted in Bensen 12) of Native children taken from their families of origin and placed in foster and adoptive care, the attempts of the criminal justice system to contain the pathologies, and the ever-beckoning false friends of alcohol and street drugs.

Wagamese is particularly effective at depicting the search for and the at least momentary achievement of balance and healing. Richard Wagamese's career also shows his self-education through intensive reading, personal contact with Aboriginal communities in Alberta, the practice of journalism, and the widespread discussion of Indigenous arts provided by the newspaper *Windspeaker*.

Wagamese began his Alberta working life as a journalist. In 1988, *Windspeaker* was one of several federally funded Native newspapers. Published in Edmonton, it was well established and had a history of winning awards, particularly for some of its feature stories. Wagamese, a self-educated thirty-three-year-old with some experience in Native radio, began contributing a column. As he commented in a 2006 radio interview, these columns, like all his writings, were concerned with introducing non-Natives to the day-to-day lives of the Native neighbours (CBC). Eclectic and comprehensive, *Windspeaker* was an excellent venue for stimulating a writer to consider all facets of Indigenous communities in Alberta, in Canada, and even internationally. Its front page and first few succeeding pages usually dealt with political matters including, during the years Wagamese wrote for the paper, the Manitoba Justice Inquiry, Elijah Harper's successful opposition to the Meech Lake Accord, and the "Oka Crisis." Alberta news included the Lubicon Lake Crees' use of the "Spirit Sings" art exhibition during the 1988 Calgary Winter Olympics to draw attention to their land claims and Peigan Lonefighter opposition to the Oldman Dam in southern Alberta. Wagamese's columns ran in the opinion section, approximately page five, usually under Bill MacKay's political cartoons. *Windspeaker's* long feature articles, on almost every issue of interest – including economic development, education from pre-school up, the lives of successful Native individuals from teenagers to elders, issues involving health, incarceration, childcare, and so on – usually ran after the editorial pages, sometimes before or sometimes in the middle of stories on the arts and extensive coverage of Native rodeo, reserve hockey teams, and other sports. Feature stories often covered well-known Native artists including Jane Ash Poitras and Joane Cardinal-Schubert as well as new and rising artists. The journal gave generous space to reviews of Native books, videos, art exhibitions, theatre, and any other art that came to their attention. Special editions dealt with issues of health, substance abuse rehabilitation, justice concerns, and other large topics of general interest. Sometimes other columnists, including Drew Hayden Taylor, shared Wagamese's space and Taylor gradually took over when Wagamese moved primarily to the *Calgary Herald*.

In March of 1990, the Mulroney government slashed the budgets of Native media organizations, including *Windspeaker*, which immediately cut its weekly production schedule in half, becoming a bi-weekly, laid off some staff members, and began to cultivate other revenue sources. That *Windspeaker* still survives as one of North America's predominant Native newspapers speaks to the strength of its leaders and the excellence of its material. Both before and after the cuts, it was an outstanding venue for an aspiring writer who wanted to cover the daily lives of Native people and especially the ways they were portrayed in the arts. The blend of major national and Alberta stories with the "local colour" of sports and school activities and an active "Letters" section gave (and gives) *Windspeaker* a distinctive power of representation.

Perhaps even more important for an aspiring novelist was *Windspeaker's* focus on the arts. Almost every issue of the paper included serious reviews of everything from children's books to the most harrowing documentaries about suicide or AIDS awareness. For instance on August 11, 1989, after news stories on CSIS investigations of some bands' NATO-like mutual defence pact and the opening of a northern Alberta chopstick factory, *Windspeaker* ran two reviews of art exhibitions, a feature story on Edmonton artist Kim McLain, and a long article by Gary Gee with the headline "Debate over 'Native art' engages art community." Artists explained that they did not want to be stereotyped as "Native" artists – a theme that Joane Cardinal-Schubert in particular has developed – but did want to use images that were significant to them. Artist and curator Gerald McMaster was given the last word, pointing out that Native art had been shaped by more than 10,000 years of history on this land that is now called Canada. While such reviews and discussions are by no means absent in whitestream media, they are, not unreasonably, less dense and less concentrated. Land and the connection to land is one of Wagamese's continuing themes. Certainly he did not need Gerald McMaster to inform him of its significance – he had already devoted a column to the subject on March 17 of the same year – but the quality of the conversation inherent in participating in *Windspeaker* provided an active background for Wagamese's development of his own aesthetic as an Ojibway male writing in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

The success of Wagamese's *Windspeaker* columns attracted the attention of Gillian Steward, managing editor of the *Calgary Herald*, who asked him to contribute a weekly column to the *Herald* (*Terrible Summer* 9). Although some columns appeared in both papers, the *Herald*, with its much larger circulation and daily publication, became the main venue for Wagamese's

columns from August 1989 to May 1992, and the *Herald* columns were the ones that won a National Newspaper Award in 1991 (*Terrible Summer* 10) and were re-published in Wagamese's second book, *The Terrible Summer* (1996). As he described the columns, all are political, some are personal, some are historical, and some are primarily analytical (9). All end with "Eagle Feathers" (a mark of respect or accomplishment) to individuals or organizations Wagamese wishes to recognize for their efforts to improve the lives of Aboriginal people or Native/non-Native relations. "These columns, I believe, represent the essence of the people and make recognizable and valid the lives of people most Canadians have never seen before – their Aboriginal neighbours," wrote Wagamese in his Foreword (*Terrible Summer* 9).

Yet essays, no matter how fresh and personal, do not have the ability of a "story" to awaken an emotional response from a reader, so it is not surprising that Wagamese would turn to the novel as a vehicle for "most Canadians" to recognize and care about the lives of "their Aboriginal neighbours." *Keeper 'n Me* (1994) is a limpid story about a young man, Garnet Raven, who, like Wagamese himself, was taken from his family of origin and lost in foster and adoptive childcare, only to reach adulthood with no sense of identity or origins. Through Garnet's older brother's patient detective work, he reunites with his family. Their small Ojibway reserve, he discovers, is genuinely his home, and he begins to learn from Keeper the healing ways of the Anishinabeg people. This gentle, humorous book is a study in retribalization, primarily for Aboriginal people who have been distanced by generations of residential schools, foster and adoptive practices, and the wholesale attack on North American Aboriginal cultures, but, like all of Wagamese's writings, it is for non-Native readers, too, because, as Wagamese often says, we are all tribal people a few generations back, and we are all in need of healing. (See, for instance, *A Quality of Light* 291.)

While *Keeper 'n Me* is set almost entirely in Ontario, Wagamese's second and most ambitious novel, *A Quality of Light* (1997), moves back and forth between Ontario and Alberta, where the climax takes place. Unlike most other twenty-first century Canadian Native writers, including Thomas King, Eden Robinson, and Richard Van Camp, who have honed their craft at universities and in creative writing programs, Richard Wagamese is essentially self-educated, having left high school long before graduation and having learned to write from libraries, from oral storytelling, and from journalism. His voice is utterly distinctive, and he shows, through the reading habits and experiences of his characters, how he began developing that voice.

Reading is the first requisite, and the books that Wagamese reports himself or his characters reading are primarily polemical, including *Black Elk Speaks* (John G. Neihardt), *A Century of Dishonor* (Helen Hunt Jackson), *The Long Death* (Ralph K. Andrist), *Akwesasne Note[s]* (a newspaper published on the Akwesasne Reserve) *The New Indians* (Stan Steiner),¹ *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (Dee Brown),² *God Is Red* (Vine Deloria, Jr.), *Prisoners [Prison] of Grass* (Howard Adams), *The Diaries of Louis Riel*, Harold Cardinal's [*The Unjust Society*:] *The Tragedy of Canada's Indians*, and other revolutionary books from Mao to the Black Panthers.³ No fiction or poetry or even memoirs or plays appear in the list. While there is not room to look at all these works, *Black Elk Speaks*, the first one mentioned, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, the one the main character and narrator describes as most pivotal and that Wagamese refers to again in *for Joshua*, and *The Unjust Society*, the only book where we are given the author, may show how Wagamese has learned from his readings and how their polemical style shapes his novels.

Black Elk Speaks is a study of one Lakota Holy Man and his immediate family and colleagues, and, like *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, ends with images of destruction and defeat at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, where hundreds of Lakota people, mostly unarmed women and children, were gunned down by the Seventh Cavalry just after Christmas 1890. *Bury My Heart* is a long litany of defeats, beginning with Columbus. Both books come through non-Native American authors, and while Brown keens for the loss of life and freedom of Native Americans and the duplicity of non-Natives, Neihardt, for all his strong sympathy with Black Elk and traditional Lakota ways, writes within the context of a "fortunate fall," whereby the defeat of the Lakotas led to the creation of the American Republic, just as the fall of Troy led to the founding of Rome. Vine Deloria has rightly called *Black Elk Speaks* "the central core of a North American Indian theological canon" (xiv), and it is this quality, rather than the remnants of Manifest Destiny, that Wagamese prizes in the book.

Unlike stories collected by anthropologists, such as Julie Cruikshank's stories of three Yukon elders in *Life Lived Like a Story* or Wendy Wickwire's collection of Harry Robinson's stories in *Write It on Your Heart*, *Black Elk Speaks* is heavily edited by Neihardt, who introduces didactic elements that do not seem to have appeared in the original telling. For many people within an oral culture, such as Annie Ned, Angela Sidney, and Kitty Smith, Cruikshank's storytellers, the story *is* the explanation, something it took Cruikshank some time to understand and that she carefully explains to non-Native readers.

Neihardt, however, writing primarily for a non-Lakota, English-speaking audience, glossed references to the circle, gave the moral of the story of White Buffalo Calf Woman, and explained the significance of courtship traditions, all in Black Elk's voice. *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, like *A Century of Dishonor*, is constructed to point to the moral – that European and American policies toward Indigenous North Americans were genocidal from the point of contact on. It is a litany of massacre, betrayal, and general duplicity – truly an eye-opener, especially for people who have been brought up with images of benevolent little Pilgrims and happy little Indians at some stylized “First Thanksgiving,” or even for Canadians raised with images of benevolent red-coated Mounties protecting Indians from evil American whiskey traders. We can see why *Black Elk* and *Bury My Heart* would incite Wagamese's radical warrior figure, Johnny, to anger, defiance, and finally a symbolic act of simulated terrorism.

Cardinal's *The Unjust Society: The Tragedy of Canada's Indians*, like *Prison of Grass* and *God Is Red*, is no less eye opening but far less apocalyptic. It points out where Canadian Indian policy has gone wrong and shows how destructive and stupid it has been, but it does not dwell on victimhood and ending. Instead of a massacre and people dying in the bloody snow, Cardinal ends with a reiteration of the need for Canada's Indians to organize and for non-Indians to respect Native self-determination (162). While Cardinal decries other Canadians who pity Indians as more of a problem than those who hate or ignore Indians (165), Neihardt and Brown deliberately end with pitiful images. Not surprisingly, Joshua Kane, Wagamese's protagonist, sounds a great deal more like Cardinal than like the white American authors who lead the list of readings. Victimhood deals with content, but in terms of style, particularly in the need to explain the moral of the story, all three of these source books have more in common with each other and with Wagamese's own practice than they do with the oral tales recorded by Cruikshank and Wickwire. Neihardt and Cardinal are particularly willing to tell stories and then to gloss them for both Native and non-Native readers who have no practice in “reading” the story itself as the gloss of the story.

Unlike novelists like Ruby Slipperjack, who do not explain and who expect readers to learn by observation, Wagamese uses the stories as hooks for the lessons he wants to impart. But he is not merely writing from the library books. As someone raised in ignorance of Ojibway traditional ways of learning that privilege observation over explanation, Wagamese sought out explanations, and those are what he provides his readers. Especially in

A Quality of Light, whose narrator is an ordained Christian minister as well as an Ojibway healer, Wagamese presents oral stories as if they were parables, with definite paraphrasable messages. His stories are mostly animal creation stories, not necessarily Ojibway ones, especially as many come from Johnny and are either pan-Indian or vaguely Lakota. Like the rest of the book, they are luminous, unlike the humorously twisted Coyote stories of Thomas King or the omnivorous Nanabush's appearances in Tomson Highway's plays. Yet Johnny's "Indian name," given to him by Joshua when they are both still boys, is Laughing Dog, which certainly suggests Coyote, and Johnny plays several Trickster roles. As a white boy, he shape shifts into an AIM (American Indian Movement) radical, and his hostage-taking with make-believe weapons is a trickster act that, although it does not seem to succeed in unbalancing Canadian society, does unbalance Joshua and enable him to attain a more profound understanding of his own beliefs and values. He is forced out of his comfortable role as Ojibway and pastor and becomes the bridge for healing both non-Native and especially Native people of the wounds of the five hundred years of dishonour inflicted by wounded Europeans who have lost contact with the land. Thus the carefully explicated animal parables are balanced by the unglossed and understated Coyote possibilities inherent in the novel. In addition to retelling oral tales directly, Wagamese alludes to Coyote and the function of the trickster in oral literature.

Wagamese's fabulistic writing and his unabashed references to tribal peoples and the power of the land distance him from more academic writers, such as Eden Robinson or Richard Van Camp, as well as from American Ojibway writers such as Gerald Vizenor and David Treuer. Wagamese uses land as synecdoche for the people. In *A Quality of Light*, his main character, Joshua, thinks,

As I flew over the undulating conversation of Ontario and then the eloquent hush of prairie, I thought about how very much our lives are like the land. The lives of the wounded are scant, stark and remorseless – the barrens almost. While the lives of the saved are lush, arable and gratifying – a heartland. The wounded are nomads, moving like ghosts, incorporeal, ethereal, leaving no sign on the territories they cross.... The saved in their plenty dream of travel, and the wounded in their barrens carry dreams of permanence. (185)

But Wagamese immediately goes on to complicate this either/or scenario with a letter from Joshua's best friend and antagonist, Johnny:

That's what white trash is – a motley collection existing without the life-enhancing benefits of background. No cultural, historical anchor. No rich emotional homeland. Nomads willing to settle anywhere the grass looks greener or else latching on to some scrabbly semblance of order and squatting there, hoping boards and bricks can heal them, flesh them out, give them detail. Life without detail is life without edges, borders, perspective. I hated it. (201, italics in original)

Land here is abstract and exists as words rather than specific images. But it is also the measure of a people. Both boys have been displaced, but Joshua has been saved, both by his adoptive farmer parents' love of the land they till and by his connections with his birth Ojibway people. Johnny remains the displaced European, displaced again by his father's drinking and the broken, wandering life it creates.

Robinson's *Monkey Beach* shows people on the land, berrying, or more characteristically, on the water, fishing for many different creatures in an unselfconscious combination of traditional resource harvesting with contemporary outboards and commercial vessels, but the reader is left to draw the "moral" of the story. In Van Camp's *Lesser Blessed* there are animal fables, all right, but they are literally "Indian" – about the Blue Monkeys of India. The land is the place where the protagonist and his stepfather fail at hunting or where his stepfather miserably dispatches the burned and dying animals left after a forest fire. Gerald Vizenor hails the Trickster in many guises, while David Treuer both uses Trickster and nature images and sees Trickster and nature images as dangerous "short cuts" to Native fiction that can be played effectively even by such arrant racists as "Forest Carter," the KKK leader who wrote the hoax Cherokee memoir *The Education of Little Tree* (lecture). Wagamese, on the other hand, reminds us that many clichés started as wisdom and resuscitates them through his powers of belief and language. Drew Hayden Taylor, who inherited some of Wagamese's duties at *Windpeaker*, can be a similarly didactic writer, as in *Toronto at Dreamer's Rock*, for instance, but he usually uses humour to undercut any lurking sentimentality or clichés. Wagamese relies simply upon his emotional intensity and the power of the stories he tells, a power that is often embedded in the neighbours' lives recorded in his journalism.

The columns he wrote for *Windspeaker* and the *Calgary Herald* gave him the chance to examine and discuss what was happening in Canada's (and Alberta's) Native communities, and some of the material he directly reworks for *A Quality of Light*. For instance, essay 19, "Mole Tale Mines Spiritual Depths" from *The Terrible Summer* establishes the small, almost sightless mole as the most respected of all animals, because mole lives always in contact with earth and "always investigates what he feels" (48) as he hears the steps of the other animals overhead. In the novel Wagamese retells the story in one of Johnny's letters to Joshua, detailing his own spiritual journey. Here, because the mole "was always in contact with Mother Earth," he "possessed great wisdom. And because he had lost the use of his eyes the mole had developed true spiritual insight" (222). The Eagle Feathers in the mole essay Wagamese awards "To all the Indian playwrights, writers, and storytellers keeping those old teachings alive and vibrant" (49). In the novel, he joined their number.

Some of Wagamese's more strictly journalistic pieces also play a part in the novel. For instance, his eulogy of Nelson Small Legs is transformed into a eulogy for Johnny's friend and mentor, Staatz. Both the real Peigan man and the fictional Six Nations character were leaders rooted in traditional life who fought for the rights and dignity of Native peoples in Canada and across North America. Both committed suicide in frustration and despair. Of Nelson Small Legs, Jr., Wagamese writes, "He shot himself through the heart because that's where all the pain was" (*Terrible Summer* 65). Similarly Johnny writes of Staatz, "He'd put a bullet through his heart because that's where all the pain was" (271). Many of the observations and analyses in the journalistic essays are similarly reprised and developed in the novel.

A Quality of Light is currently out of print and seems to be the least appreciated of Wagamese's novels, perhaps because it is the most complex. It tells the tale of two boys, Joshua Kane, born Ojibway, adopted by a particularly admirable and loving farm couple, and grown to be a Christian pastor who has reconnected with an Ojibway community; and Johnny Gebhardt, blue-eyed child of an alcoholic father, who falls in love with the idea of being an Indian, improbably apprentices himself to a militant young Six Nations friend, and, in the present of the book, has staged a hostage-taking at the Harry Hays Canadian government building in Calgary. He tells police he will only negotiate through Joshua. The novel proceeds through Joshua's recollections of their shared boyhoods, Johnny's letters detailing his education as a militant and his scorn at Joshua's non-militant, Christian life choices,

and the present of the hostage crisis. In an epilogue, we see how the crisis has moved Joshua back to the reserve and out of the church.

The lyricism of the book and the initially confusing role reversal of white militant and Ojibway Christian have puzzled some readers, but allow Wagamese to produce a profound effect with a simple story. As we have seen, Wagamese adopts a polemic strategy in his fiction, telling more than he shows and laying out “the moral” of the book as if he were Dee Brown or Harold Cardinal or Vine Deloria rather than following the conventions of oral storytelling or of university creative writing courses. Like Stuart McLean or Garrison Keillor, he creates relationships that are sentimental without tipping over into sentimentality. The first half of the book contains a parable about the failures of the justice system and Canada and the possibilities of restorative justice (see Kaye). The book as a whole is about the ways in which all humans – in even the most “First World” circumstances – are tribal people, in need of songs and stories around the campfire, in need of strong bonds with the earth. Like many other Native writers, such as Maria Campbell, Simon Ortiz, and Leslie Silko, Wagamese sees people of European descent as the most dispossessed because they were the first ones to be disinherited and because they have been brought up to think that they are thus superior to everyone else. Wagamese never discounts the wisdom and land traditions that Amer-Europeans have had, but he is acutely aware of where they are failing. As Joshua tells the policeman who mediates his role as negotiator with Johnny,

History is about dissolution... unless we're willing... to save and preserve the hereditary truths we're born in, we all become the disappeared.... It happened to the white races first and I think that's what colonization... is all about. (241)

Joshua has read *Bury My Heart* and the other books that Johnny has recommended, the books that Wagamese reports himself as reading in *for Joshua*, but unlike Johnny or Wagamese himself, the fictional Joshua Kane does not become a radical or join AIM. Instead, he decides

I would preach *choice*. I would preach about my own disinherited past, my own journey to my identity, the tools of both cultures that I used to get me to my Ojibway-ness, my Indian-ness, and my faith. You don't need to kill or fight to reclaim yourself... (241)

Knowing history, for Joshua, gives one the ability “to avoid recreating its vices in our own worlds” (246). And when he goes inside to negotiate with

Johnny, he discovers that Johnny has learned what he already knew. The weapons and explosives (if not the fear felt by the hostages) are all fake. The hostage taking is based on lies, not force; something that Johnny suggests sounds more than a little like the land taking in Canada (288). Johnny has staged the crisis to get the attention of the politicians and the media and all other Canadians who “won’t listen to politics any more.” Or to “human rights and moral obligation” (290). Johnny is writing – by enacting – a story that people will remember and that will make a point, at least to the people...

...who understand intuitively that surviving isn’t about going back, it’s about learning to pull out the arrows and heal. Everybody needs to heal, Josh. Not just the Indians. (291)

But Johnny’s plans go awry when, through his own accidental but tragic lapse, he is shot and killed by police snipers after the hostages have been released, leaving Joshua alone to read to the television cameras the statement that the two of them have written. Johnny will never get to Germany and Austria to explore his own tribal heritage. Although Wagamese telegraphs the outcome to the attentive reader, anyone caught up in the story is likely to miss it, so Johnny’s death hits us as hard as it does Joshua, who missed the same clue and is therefore complicit with Johnny in the shooting. To calm down, then, and to listen to the message is hard. What Wagamese calls for is a recognition of the facts of Indian North America – massacres, lies, rapes, dispossession on all sides. Like the Truth and Reconciliation process adopted by South Africa, he stipulates a recognition that will then allow for a moving on and healing. Perhaps because *A Quality of Light* has not registered as clearly as some of his other work, in *Dream Wheels* (set in British Columbia) Wagamese drops the call for recognition, and his attractive cast of Native, white, and black characters move directly forward to healing through physical contact with the land, with rodeo bulls, and with an old pickup truck.

Wagamese’s third Alberta book is the haunting memoir *for Joshua: An Ojibway Father Teaches His Son*, written in the form of a letter to his then six-year-old son, from whom he is separated.

Drinking is why we are separated. ...Booze owned me.... I drank out of the fears I’d carried all my life, the fears I could never tell anyone about, the fears that ate away at me constantly, even in the happiest moments of my life, and your mother did the only

thing that she knew to do and that was to take you away where you could be safe. I don't blame her for that. I'm thankful in fact. (7-8)

The book, he says, is an attempt to live up to the responsibility that he felt to his son when he finally sobered up.

In *for Joshua*, Alberta is the site of a private ceremony – that might be named, in popular culture terms, a vision quest – that Wagamese successfully undertakes in the foothills near Calgary, as well as of the teachings and reflections that give value to this four-day interlude. As in *The Terrible Summer* and the other newspaper columns, Alberta shows itself as having a large, diverse, and successful collection of Native communities that work with non-Natives for healing across cultures. It is also very far from Toronto, the place Wagamese associates with his son because that is where they had briefly lived together as part of a family. This distance seems to add clarity, and with the help of a knowledgeable older friend, Richard Wagamese picks a place to perform a ceremony that will return him to his own centre:

There was a hill where I had been going for a month or so to watch sunsets. The hill faced the Rocky Mountains, which were only about twenty miles away. (23)

It reminds him of the cliffs in Ojibway territory and feels “right” to him. He walks to a place with

a small copse of trees where there was an outcropping of rock with a ledge from which I could dangle my feet. The drop from that ledge to the road was more than two hundred feet and I had seen eagles and hawks soar between me and the road below. It's an eerie feeling when you see great birds from above, and eerier still when they make their silent passes against a backdrop of coyote howls from the hoodoos and hills all around you. (24)

For four days, Wagamese stays in this place without food or shelter, and the body of the narrative shifts back and forth between his thoughts on the cliff and his recollections of his life – in foster care, on the streets, as an AIM militant, and as a writer. Like Johnny in *A Quality of Light*, he talks about the books he has read: *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* again and Vine Deloria's *God Is Red* and [*Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (127)]. And he talks about other experiences, including an evening at an improvised youth hostel in Nipigon where young travellers from all over Canada sang songs

and told stories around a campfire, giving him a complex and personalized sense of the people of the country (105–10). Wagamese sees no technicolour visions, but focussing on the rain, a little tree, and other inhabitants of his ledge induces a kind of introspection. He explains to his sponsor, his son, and all his other readers that

...if I want love, security, trust, friendship, and all those good things in life, then I need to give away those things to the people around me. *All* people, all the time. Not just Native people, but all people. (201)

The lesson Wagamese builds from the ceremony is that neighbours of Native people must come to see that Native people are “not angry. We’re sad” (222). Tribal people are haunted by the land and the losses that it represents. Neighbours need to know that “every land claim, treaty negotiation, blockade and court case is born out of... a spiritual hunger, not a physical greed” (223). Native people cannot bring back the past, but

[w]e can recreate the spirit of community we had, of kinship, or relationship to all things, of union with the land, harmony with the universe, balance in living, humility, honesty, truth, and wisdom in all of our dealings with each other. (224)

Between the death of Pauline Johnson in 1913 and the publication of Beatrice Culleton [Masionier]’s *In Search of April Raintree* and Jeannette Armstrong’s *Slash* in the mid 1980s, published fiction and poetry by Indigenous Canadians virtually disappeared. While Alberta in the 1970s displayed great interest in Native characters and situations developed by non-Native writers, including Robert Kroetsch’s *Anna Yellowbird*, W. O. Mitchell’s *Archie Nicotine*, W. P. Kinsella’s *Silas Ermineskin*, and Rudy Wiebe’s *Big Bear* and others, Alberta Native writers were also developing their voices. Harold Cardinal’s *Unjust Society* (1969) we have already mentioned. Maria Campbell’s extraordinary memoir *Halfbreed* (1973) is set partly in Alberta, and her clear voice has been crucial to Canada’s Native literary renaissance. When *Windspeaker* began publication in 1982, Alberta’s distinguished Native arts community was beginning to come into prominence, and *Windspeaker*, as we have seen, promoted the work of such important artists as painter Jane Ash Poitras, internationally known architect Douglas Cardinal, and painter and installation artist Joane Cardinal-Schubert. When Richard Wagamese joined *Windspeaker* in 1988, he was tapping into a vibrant

literary and artistic journal and its surrounding community, a good place to practice his writing and to develop the themes that would occupy his fiction and memoir.

In its deeply political news columns and its endlessly optimistic articles about the arts, education, sports, and other upbeat stories, *Windspeaker* itself was a kind of truth and reconciliation committee, a function that Wagamese builds upon. *A Quality of Light* is a book of healing that overrides any concerns about the Alberta Advantage and the economic boom and bust cycles of an extractive economy that usually define Alberta – especially in the rest of Canada. Wagamese offers all readers the beginning of a dialogue that can encompass the relentless, destructive assault on Indigenous people and culture waged by taking children from their families of origin. It can deal with Red Power and alienation, with the rising rate of incarceration of Native people in Western Canada and the substance abuse that serves as an anodyne for the persistent feeling of being defective that Wagamese describes as coming from the continuing disruption of the foster and adoptive systems, from unthinking racism, and from the fear of being a child in an uncertain world – the condition of being human. While this anomie is not distinctive to Native people, it is particularly pronounced in Native communities for the historical reasons sketched above. Wagamese never asks for pity nor embraces the vanishing and doomed images of *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* or *Black Elk Speaks*. He asks his readers to acknowledge that we are all wounded in a society that takes all of us away from our tribal roots and our life-giving contact with the earth.

Middle-class readers – who are, of course, most readers – may like to complain or feel entitled and hard done by, but they do not have practice in seeing themselves with a “plight,” in the same shoes as Native people. Thus *A Quality of Light*, with its white militant who comes from a dysfunctional and alcoholic family and claims the dispossession of Native people, and its serene and gentle Native protagonist, can be an uncomfortable text to read. And, as is the case with many uncomfortable texts, it challenges and heals readers.

Alberta’s Native heritage is proudly on display in the province, from the Calgary Stampede to Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump to the many little museums of the Peace country and in many local powwows and celebrations of National Aboriginal Day. Joane Cardinal-Schubert is among the artists showcased at the Calgary airport, the Banff Centre supports vital international Indigenous performing arts, and the huge tar sands operation near Fort McMurray provide Indigenous job-training programs and include Indigenous

artists in their beautification projects. Thomas King taught for many years at the University of Lethbridge, Eden Robinson was writer-in-residence at the University of Calgary, while Richard Van Camp hails from just across the border in the Northwest Territories. In the context of this vast cultural wealth, Richard Wagamese's openness, his generosity, his determination to create reconciliation, and the luminosity of his words make him a writer to whom we may always return.

NOTES

1. All mentioned in Light 213.
2. Light 233.
3. Light 242.

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