“White ice, white players,” I said. “You gonna tell me that isn’t the case everywhere? That they don’t think it’s their game wherever a guy goes?”

He took his time answering. “It’s not a perfect country,” he said. “But it is a perfect game.”

Richard Wagamese, *Indian Horse* (149–50)

Through the story of Saul Indian Horse, an Ojibway hockey prodigy who learns the game in residential school and whose potential rise to hockey stardom is hindered by traumatic legacies of personal abuse and the entrenched racism of Canadian hockey culture, Ojibway novelist Richard Wagamese lays bare, in his 2012 novel *Indian Horse*, heinous transgressions conducted in the name of Canadian nationhood. Yet part of what has made the novel such a commercial success in Canada is its fluency with and seamless incorporation of popular cultural tropes about the game—tropes that tend to glorify white settler citizenship, thereby normalizing senses of territorial belonging for white players, fans, and coaches while clouding the history of dispossession of Indigenous lands and the dehumanization of Indigenous peoples through which the Canadian nation state has been forged.
In this essay, we seek to understand and unpack the ambivalence of Wagamese’s portrayal of hockey as both confining and liberating, as both a tool of Canadian nationalism and a means of Indigenous self-expression and resilience. Despite awareness expressed in the novel that hockey has functioned as a tool of settler colonialism in Canada and that it continues to be implicated in nationalist mythologies that normalize white privilege while effacing colonial transgressions, *Indian Horse* conveys such an abiding affection for hockey’s beauty, grace, and artistry that it seems open to the claim articulated in the epigraph above: “But it is a perfect game.” Ultimately, we argue that *Indian Horse* does not tear down popular conceptions of hockey in Canada and offer some radically decolonial alternative in its stead; rather, in order to depict the healing journey at the novel’s core, it tears those representations open in order to expose the traumatic colonial foundations upon which hockey narratives are frequently built and which they often work to conceal.

And herein lies the novel’s decolonial potential: written during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s exploration into the legacy of Indian residential schools, *Indian Horse* adopts the form of both a retrospective retirement narrative, so common to sport literature, and a residential school survivor’s testimony. In the retirement narrative form, much of the story’s overarching pathos emerges from the reader’s recognition that, although he is still a relatively young person at age thirty-three, Saul, the narrator, considers his best self forever confined to the past; the narrative arc conscripts remembrance of past glory and past failure in a struggle to grieve the loss of the elite athletic self and to reconcile with an altered life stage in search of a renewed sense of purpose. In the testimony form, residential school survivors share personal truths about their experiences in order to embolden the public record and disseminate greater knowledge that might form a foundation of understanding upon which various forms of reconciliation—with oneself, one’s family, one’s community, perhaps even one’s oppressors—might become possible. Wagamese weaves these narrative postures together meticulously to speak in a semiotic register that resonates with urgent Indigenous concerns and that is simultaneously capable of leveraging hockey’s popular cultural caché to illuminate ongoing colonial oppression in Canada. In this way, Wagamese’s novel targets both Indigenous and settler audiences, opening up sovereign spaces for Indigenous reflection while struggling to change
the nation by changing how Canadians understand “their” game. Thus, although *Indian Horse* is defiantly not a decolonial novel, we argue in what follows that it performs significant decolonial work by imagining an indigenized apotheosis of hockey that might foster individual healing by elaborating an ethic of community; rather than locating the wounded Indigenous player as the primary site for pursuing positive change, *Indian Horse* concludes with an awareness of the vitality of Indigenous communities as the foundation upon which such individual healing is contingent. The game that readers experience at the novel’s conclusion is thus an indigenized form of hockey that reaffirms the game’s collaborative energies in the cause of Indigenous communal empowerment.¹

INDIGENOUS AMBIVALENCE AND SETTLER BELONGING THROUGH HOCKEY

As the Calgary poet Richard Harrison has argued, hockey is a vehicle through which Canadians “make meaning out of winter” and thereby establish a sense of belonging in the northern landscape (personal communication). Popular discourse celebrating hockey as “Canada’s game” naturalizes the Canadian nation state while valorizing those who participate in it (players, coaches, and spectators) as authentic inhabitants of the “True North” from which the game has supposedly sprung. According to Michael Buma, the central pillars of what he calls “the Canadian hockey myth” are the resilient beliefs (1) that hockey arises naturally from the Canadian landscape, (2) that the game fosters social cohesion and civic virtue, and (3) that the game ultimately offers a synecdoche for Canadian culture (2012, 37). In this way, hockey has functioned as a vehicle for what

¹ As settler scholar Patrick Wolfe argues, “invasion is a structure not an event” (2006, 388) because in settler colonial contexts, the colonizers have not left, they often outnumber the Indigenous inhabitants they have displaced, and they continually work to naturalize and re-entrench logics and institutions that reify the legitimacy of their sense of belonging. We consider “decolonization” an expansive collection of activist practices and ideas that works to destabilize the authority of that structure, mute the expressions of its power, and open up possibilities for alternative ways of being in the world that emerge from Indigenous world views. Because hockey literature tends to obfuscate the horrific realities of settler colonial history and to reify the Canadian nation state, we write from the position that hockey literature is most often a colonial genre.
literary critic Terry Goldie terms “indigenization,” a process through which settlers confront “the impossible necessity of becoming indigenous” (1989, 13): responding to the psychological compulsion to legitimize entitlement to the land, settlers seek to manufacture senses of belonging in the land. As hockey becomes reified as a natural by-product of the Canadian landscape, purveyors of the game promote senses of “Native Canadian” identity among those who play it, in the process erasing—or denying—differential senses of belonging among First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people who may or may not self-identify as “Canadian.” Saul’s narrative in Indian Horse exposes the incongruously exclusionary nature of this process of claiming territory through sport: “The white people thought it was their game. They thought it was their world” (Wagamese 2012, 136).

Ironically, the semiotic capital of indigeneity is often retained in this process of national legitimation via the circulation of language and images that conjure a stereotyped Indigenous-warrior past in team logos, mascots, and names—Warriors, Blackhawks, Braves, Redmen—while ignoring the political persistence of Indigenous nations. It is unsurprising that the first non-Indigenous team against which Saul’s Manitouwadge Moose play is the “Chiefs.” Goldie frames this form of semiotic accumulation as “indigenization by inclusion for the white who, one might say, ‘acquires Indian.’ Note that my word is ‘acquires,’ not ‘becomes.’ . . . The indigene is acquired, the white is not abandoned” (215). In this way, the characteristics associated with (imagined) Indigenous hypermasculinity are absorbed within an almost exclusively white settler arena, thereby advancing the colonial imperative that the future belongs to white settler Canadians and living Indigenous people remain anachronistic. Thus, the imagined relationship between hockey and landscape in Canada has tended to foster a sense of “authentic” belonging for settler and other non-Indigenous Canadians while obfuscating the relationships to land that continue to obtain for Indigenous individuals, communities, and nations. It is hardly surprising, then, that Hockey Night in Canada was a cornerstone of nationalist programming on radio and then television for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation for more than eighty years: the program, now under licence by other networks, continues to enable settler populations—including those who have never set a booted blade upon a frozen pond or lake anywhere in lands claimed by Canada—to
collectively envision and indeed participate in the “imagined community” of the Canadian nation.²

Complicating matters further, hockey was mobilized historically in residential schools as a tool of colonial social engineering designed to encourage Indigenous youth to shed connections with Indigenous cultural values and self-identify as Canadian citizens. Several historical studies have documented (generally male) students playing hockey at residential schools (Milloy 1999, Miller 1996, Johnston 1988, etc.), activities permitted according to the belief that sport fosters civic virtue. As such, the sport is also laden with the historical weight of its use within systemic structures designed to “kill the Indian, and save the man.” In Indian Horse, upon arrival at the residential school, Saul is told, “At St. Jerome’s we work to remove the Indian from our children so that the blessings of the Lord may be evidenced upon them.” Father Quinney continues: “Industry, boys. […] Good, honest work and earnest study. That’s what you’ll do here. That’s what will prepare you for the world” (Wagamese 2012, 47). Hockey and other recreational activities become what Michael Robidoux calls “disciplining device[s]” (2012, 13) within the residential school’s pedagogical arsenal designed to inculcate Eurocentric notions of “industry” among the students.

However, despite the game’s deployment to enforce prescriptive identity formations in young players like Saul, the experiences of Indigenous residential school students playing the game did not always—nor perhaps even regularly—align with the motivations of institutional overseers. At the celebrations for the delivery of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Final Report, chairperson Chief Wilton Littlechild, of the Maskwacîs Cree Nation, explained how playing hockey was imperative to his ability to endure the trauma of his residential school years, an experience corroborated by scores of survivors throughout the TRC’s statement gathering process. The summary of the TRC’s final report states that sport “helped them [students] make it through residential school” (TRCC 2015b, 112), and the final report itself says that “the opportunity to play sports at residential schools made their lives more bearable and gave them a sense of identity, accomplishment, and pride” (TRCC 2015a, 199). Evan Habkirk

² Tellingly, Saul describes Hockey Night in Canada as “the personification of magic” (Wagamese 2012, 59) when he encounters it in Father Leboutilier’s quarters at the residential school. Here, we rely on Benedict Anderson’s theorization of imagined communities (2006).
and Janice Forsyth (2016) write that although these statements are “certainly true,” they worry that this
glosses over the distinct and diverse ways to understand the role and significance of physical activities in these schools. We wonder, for instance, to what extent did school officials, including instructors, missionaries, and government agents, use physical activities to exploit the students for social, political, and economic gain? And how did the students transform the meanings that were attached to these activities to “make it through” these highly oppressive environments, especially since many of the activities were intended to eradicate and replace traditional Aboriginal values and practices?

THE FALSE PROMISE OF INCLUSION

Wagamese’s novel takes as its thematic core the tensions between hockey as a means of achieving momentary emancipation from the carceral space of the residential school and hockey as an activity laden with racist, sexist, and anthropocentric ideological baggage that has served to mask and make possible the abuse of Indigenous youth. Wagamese thus lays bare two significant contradictions that conspire to marginalize Indigenous peoples in Canada: the first pertains to the insidious false promise of assimilation through residential school social engineering, and the second involves the pervasive lie (so often treated as truth within Canadian hockey literature) that hockey is inevitably a vehicle for intercultural inclusion and social harmony. We explore each of these contradictions below.

In 1887, Prime Minister John A. Macdonald explained the motivations behind the Indian Act: “The great aim of our legislation has been to do away with the tribal system and assimilate the Indian people in all respects with the inhabitants of the Dominion as speedily as they are fit for the change” (quoted in Ennamorato 1998, 72). Minister of Indian Affairs Duncan Campbell Scott famously related this assimilative objective to residential school policy, arguing, “I want to get rid of the Indian problem. . . . Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic, and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department” (quoted in Milloy 1999, 46). Beyond signalling the culturally genocidal motivations behind both the Indian Act and residential
schooling, these quotations express strategic goals of absorption and inclusion that residential schools were fundamentally incapable of facilitating because of structural limitations and widespread racism within the broader cultural milieu.

While official rhetoric suggested that residential schooling would place Indigenous students on par with their mainstream Canadian counterparts in order to foster equality, the education they received was so far below that received by mainstream Canadian students as to engender profound disadvantages (even apart from the debilitating traumatic cultural loss, separation from loved ones, and rampant abuse). Most residential school students received formal education for only a fraction of their school day, with the rest taken up by prayer and the manual labour upon which the institutions relied, and the instruction they did receive was commonly delivered by religious staff with no formal pedagogical training. Furthermore, Indigenous students tended to be taught outmoded skills related to domestic work, manual trades, and farming, while most other students across the country experienced a breadth of instruction designed to prepare them for entry into an industrialized Canadian economy (see Milloy 1999, 157-80). When they finally emerged from residential school, Indigenous students needed to compete for jobs within a labour market characterized by racist hiring practices of employers whose views about Indigenous people were influenced by the very cultural biases that undergirded residential school policies in the first place. Thus, the supposed goal of integration and assimilation through social engineering was disingenuous from the very beginning.

In fact, at the same time that the residential school system was expanding to its peak in the 1940s and 50s, Indian Affairs was embarking on a policy of “centralization” on the East Coast designed to relocate Mi’kmaq people from sundry communities and small reserves to two large reserves at Eskasoni and Shubenacadie as a means of ensuring the absence of Indigenous peoples within or around white communities in Nova Scotia. Clearly the goals of assimilation and absorption articulated by Macdonald and Scott ran counter to the segregationist thrust of centralization. Such are the contradictions within the federal government’s treatment of Indigenous peoples over time. As one of us has written elsewhere,

Residential school policy has always been . . . perplexed with its ‘cultural progressivist’ agenda dogged by endemic racism; never
has the political goal of assimilating the Native population, and thereby abolishing their distinct rights, truly contained the social corollary of ignoring ethnic difference and abandoning white perceptions regarding the inferiority of Native blood, nor has it striven to ease the divide between white economic superiority and Indigenous poverty. (McKegney 2017, 115)

This is why policies and practices purportedly designed to engender equality have consistently entrenched difference and exacerbated marginalization. *Indian Horse* demonstrates how the contradictions embedded within public discourse on residential schooling are mirrored by those relating to the social function of hockey in Canadian culture. As mentioned above, hockey is often conceived as a vehicle for manufacturing settler belonging, and Indigenous iconography is often marshalled as inclusive of “indigenization” (Goldie 1989, 13). While Indigenous-inspired images may adorn the fronts of jerseys and teams may adopt Indigenous-themed names, the game’s “proper” player in the popular imaginary remains fundamentally a white settler Canadian. Indigenous iconography in hockey culture therefore constitutes what Anishinaabe writer Gerald Vizenor calls an “inscribed absence” (2009, 3) that stands in for and serves to replace the lived realities of Indigenous peoples; Indigenous emblems are desired, while Indigenous people are not. This is why the landscape of frozen lakes and rivers that is conceptualized as the “True North” and replicated in NHL advertising and beer commercials is one that tends to be portrayed as devoid of Indigenous presence. The irony here, of course, is that while hockey is imagined as a force of social cohesion that works to “indigenize” the nation, Indigenous peoples are either ignored or actively excluded from full participation in the game.

Wagamese’s novel depicts just how anxiously the limits on Indigenous inclusion in Canadian hockey culture have historically been policed. Despite the fact that Saul is repeatedly shown to be the best player in each level at which he plays, he is actively—and often violently—discouraged from feeling as though he fully belongs by white coaches, players, fans, and the media. In one notable example, Saul arrives at the rink to play with the non-Indigenous competitive midget team for which he has scored

---

3 Note, however, that in Goldie’s use of “indigenization,” indigeneity is trapped within the semiotic, as images of indigeneity are mobilized by settlers in the absence of Indigenous people.
a scorching fourteen points in ten games as a thirteen-year-old underager. There, he finds he has been cut from the team because “[t]he parents of other players want their own kids to play.” Seeking clarification, Saul asks, “It’s because I’m Indian, isn’t it?” which Father Leboutilier confirms, before adding, “They think it’s their game” (Wagamese 2012, 91–92). Although Saul had been brought onto the roster to help the team win, such inclusion is tenuous and proves contingent on his not disturbing the game’s—not to mention the team’s—naturalized culture of white entitlement. Even though Saul proves an asset on the scoresheet, his presence troubles the untouchable “rights” of his white teammates to the ice, and he is cut unceremoniously.

White entitlement is enforced even more vehemently when the all-Indigenous Manitouwadge Moose squad enters the non-Indigenous hockey circuit and begins defeating white teams. Unable to simply eliminate the team (as the midget squad had axed Saul), fans engage in acts of performative disavowal designed to mark the bodies of the Indigenous players as other, as out of place, as ultimately disposable: they pelt the Moose players with garbage, slash the tires of their van, and urinate and defecate in their dressing room. When the Moose win an otherwise all-white tournament, anxieties about white ownership of the game are heightened and such performative disavowal takes a violent turn. Stopping at a small-town café en route home from the tournament, the Moose team is confronted by a mob of “working men, big and strong-looking with stern faces,” one of whom declares: “You boys got kinda big for the britches. [...] [Y]ou win a little hockey tournament and then you think you got the right to come in here and eat like white people” (133). Framing the conversation in a juridical vernacular of “rights” that delineates insider and outsider status, the man elaborates racialized distinctions between those who belong—“white people”—and those whose access to the space is provisional and contingent. Because the men’s belief in white superiority has been challenged by the Moose team’s tournament victory, the men prove sadistically eager to reinscribe a colonial hierarchy of white entitlement and Indigenous inferiority onto the bodies of the Moose players, taking each member of the team, with the exception of Saul, out back of the café, where they beat them mercilessly before showering them with spit and urine. The beatings mark the men with signifiers of supposed racialized inferiority, with spit and urine signalling their dehumanization. The use of bodily excretions to shame the players seems tactically concocted to register their disposability in the
service of colonial erasure. Whereas the white men present themselves as entitled to eat at the restaurant, and thereby to be nourished and endure as a community, the Indigenous players are performatively associated with detritus to signal their symbolic elimination in the service of white progress. The Indigenous players become associated with the casualties of modernity as the white future is heralded and the Indians vanish.

Like residential school technologies of discipline, the violence here constitutes a form of social engineering designed to remind the Indigenous men of their “place.” And the brutality of the lesson proves chillingly effective. On the long van ride back to Manitouwadge, one of the victims explains the incident to Saul, stating, “We crossed a line. Their line. They figure they got the right to make us pay for that.” When Saul inquires, “Do they?” his teammate responds: “Sometimes I think so” (136). The effects of this incident and ones like it cast a protracted shadow over the novel. Saul notes that, although they never speak about it, “there were moments when you’d catch another boy’s eye and know that you were both thinking about it. Everything was contained in that glance. All the hurt. All the shame. All the rage. The white people thought it was their game. They thought it was their world” (136).

Returning to a cadence found throughout the novel—that white Canadians think it is “their game”—Wagamese again demonstrates how the belief that hockey is a space of white authority, power, and privilege comes to be leveraged in the often violent naturalization of white entitlement in Canada and thereby in the reification of settler colonialism as an unquestioned norm. Wagamese’s novel thus forces both Indigenous and settler readers to ask certain questions: Is it indeed “their/our game”? Does hockey belong only to white Canadians? And if not, how might exposure of these claims’ falsity be mobilized to trouble the colonial corollary that it is “their world”? 4 In the final section of this essay, we interrogate the

---

4 To reiterate, the ideological collapse between the game itself and the northern territory from which it is imagined “naturally” to have sprung enables white settler participants to marshal hockey in the (re)production of beliefs that they belong in the land they and their ancestors have colonized and that both the land and the game, in turn, belong to them—a self-perpetuating dynamic that undergirds Saul’s repeated lament that white players “think it’s their game” (31). Indian Horse is actively engaged with the destabilization of these persistent beliefs while making use of the very representational inheritance through which they have historically been reified.
resilient affection for the game that is evident in *Indian Horse* and Wagamese’s use of apotheosis to examine hockey’s capacity to participate in the individual and collective transformations necessary to pursue a more just and balanced world.

FROM AMBIVALENCE TO APOTHEOSIS: INDIVIDUAL ACHIEVEMENT AND COMMUNAL RESURGENCE

By the end of the novel, it seems as though Saul’s unshakable faith in hockey as something sacred and incorruptible is criminally naïve. For many readers, the novel’s eventual disclosure that Father Leboutilier had used his power as a coach—along with the secret practices, the private hockey-viewing sessions in the priest’s quarters, and Saul’s vulnerability as an orphaned residential school student desperate for affection—to exploit and sexually abuse the young protagonist would inspire rejection of any romantic vestiges the game might retain. Curiously though, it does not. Rather than turning away from hockey completely while facing the return of his repressed past in the contemporary time frame of the novel’s final section, Saul concedes that hockey was and perhaps still is his salvation: “As long as I could escape into it, I could fly away. Fly away and never have to land on the scorched earth of my boyhood” (199). The declaration sounds remarkably similar to those quoted by Halkirk and Forsyth from the TRC’s *Final Report* (2015).

Hockey, in Saul’s opinion, in spite of itself, retains its ability to lift a man up, an apotheosis rather than a metamorphosis. Whether or not hockey has “an alchemy that transforms ordinary men into great ones” (57), as Saul gushes earlier in the novel, the game continues to present definitive opportunities for individual acts of athletic brilliance that are transformative—even at this late point in the novel; the novel expresses skepticism, however, about whether such individual transformations work in the service of decolonization. Saul had come the closest to his own apotheosis earlier in the novel during his otherworldly performance at the Espanola tournament, during which he seemed to rise above both his teammates and opponents, yet even this transformation had proven incapable of fostering the genuine healing towards which the novel is directed and which ultimately led Saul to the New Dawn Centre, where he began to craft his life narrative.

If hockey is a symbolic playing out of white Canadianness, then the Espanola tournament acts as a collision point between white entitlement
and Indigenous embodied sovereignty. The Moose is the first Indigenous team to participate in the tournament, where all the teams have “a pedigree” and “only the best teams got invited” (137). White teams from cities like North Bay and Owen Sound attempt to subdue Saul’s dazzling skill and speed with physicality, racist verbal assaults, and irritating stick infractions designed to goad him into fighting or taking retaliatory penalties. This style of play bends the rules of gentlemanly decorum and white civility that pervade white Canada’s self-perception as performed through the national winter sport. Saul sits neatly astride both the white teams’ hostility and his teammates’ insistence that he retaliate. Instead of taking the bait and throwing punches, he “stepped out onto the ice and reclaimed the game” (144) with speed, skill, and imagination.

The connection to the game that Saul displays in Espanola transcends time and space, representing the consummation of the clairvoyance he experienced upon being introduced to the game as a young child—an innate sense of the pace and rhythm of hockey that was passed on to him from his ancestors. Saul tells the story of his family:

There are teachers among our people who could determine where a particular moose was, a bear, the exact time the fish would make their spawning runs. My great-grandfather Shabogesick, the original Indian Horse, had that gift. The world spoke to him. It told him where to look. Shabogesick’s gift had been passed on to me. There’s no other explanation for how I was able to see this foreign game so completely right away. (58)

Saul’s invocation of the term “foreign” here is telling, since it registers both a rejection of residential schooling’s assimilative objective of domesticating Indigenous youth within the Canadian nation state and an autonomous intervention in Canadian hockey literature by an Anishinaabe world view in which intergenerational knowledge-sharing and land-based foresight regarding the world’s rhythms are not only possible but necessary to survival.

For Saul, hockey is a sensory experience—one involving foresight and anticipation in a predatory way, like hunting, but also one attuned harmoniously to the natural spiritual energies of the earth and nature. In this way, Saul seems to be divining his mythical and spiritual aptitude for the game from his heritage, which is antithetical to the typical codifications of the game as inherently settler Canadian. Yet, in doing so, Saul relies upon
one of the dominant representations of the Canadian hockey novel: that the game arises naturally from the Canadian landscape and is therefore attuned to the Canadian environment (only in this case, the landscape need not be coded “Canadian” but could as readily be framed “Anishinaabe” or, more generally, “Indigenous”). Nonetheless, the tournament in Espanola becomes a turning point in the novel, as Saul’s initial experience of love for the game, a love that facilitated transcendence, is attacked relentlessly by settler opponents and fans. Their affronts to Saul’s spiritual connection, their repeated assaults to his body, and their dehumanizing racist chants are epistemological strikes to Saul’s spirit and style. In literary terms, hockey played Saul’s way is an act of what Anishinaabe intellectual Gerald Vizenor calls “survivance” or the expression of ongoing, creative, evolutionary/revolutionary Indigenous culture through imagination in prose, plays, and poetry: “Natives, by communal stories, memory, and potentiality create a sense of presence not an inscribed absence” (2009, 3). Saul reaches to the spiritual and practical modes of being of his forbears, but rather than ossifying that knowledge as a fixed, romanticized set of stereotypes—like the “inscribed absence” implied by settler imaginings of an Indigenous hypermasculine past on team logos and in team names—he expresses it anew through what ‘Ōiwi scholar Ty Tengan might call “embodied discursive action” within the “foreign” arena of elite hockey (2008, 17).

The irony of Saul’s success in Espanola is that he earns an invitation to try out with a major junior team out of Toronto, for which he eventually plays. Wagamese’s novel exposes ambivalences within the Canadian culture of the game in which, despite the continual reification and policing of settler entitlement, admiration for exceptional skill occasionally intervenes in the game’s general exclusivity. For example, after receiving first star in the Espanola tournament’s final game, Saul expected “boos to rain down” during his “turn around centre ice,” but instead he was surrounded by “applause and stamping feet [. . .] like thunder rolling around the arena” (Wagamese 2012, 128); in addition, as noted above, Saul was the only

---

5 In Native Men Remade, Tengan describes the “embodied discursive practice,” in which Indigenous “men come to perform and know themselves and their bodies in a new way” (2008, 151). Referring to rituals enacted at an event in Pu‘ukoholā, Hawai‘i, in 1991, Tengan explains that “bodily experience, action, and movement played a fundamental role in the creation of new subjectivities of culture and gender” (87).
player not to be assaulted in the diner after the Espanola victory. Nonetheless, upon his arrival in Toronto, now alone and in the big city, Saul feels the resistance to his presence manifest ever more vociferously. Facing the reality of ongoing Indigenous persistence, white media and audiences prove fanatically invested in returning the living body of Saul Indian Horse to the falsified myths of a colonial past: “The press would not let me be. [. . .] When I made a dash down the ice and brought the crowd to their feet, I was on a raid. If I inadvertently high-sticked someone during a tussle in the corner, I was taking scalps. When I did not react to getting a penalty, I was the stoic Indian” (163). The reinscription of Saul’s hockey actions with stereotypically “Indian” representations is a dual act of erasure—first of Saul’s skills, which are above and beyond those of the average player, and then again of Indigenous presence in the Canadian game. What’s more, Saul is demoralized by the representations, conceding, “I wanted to rise to new heights, be one of the glittering few. But they wouldn’t let me be just a hockey player. I always had to be the Indian” (164).

The individualist myth of apotheosis through hockey, which Saul had learned about “from those books” back at residential school (56), is proven time and again to be inadequate or incomplete for an Indigenous player like Saul. Although he does receive accolades for his transcendent performances on the ice, the dominant, nationalistic culture in which those performances occur actively prevents Saul’s internalization of a sense of belonging, of purpose, and of valued personhood. In other words, while Saul’s hockey skill allows him to be elevated beyond the quotidian crowd of the average player, the persistent racism of the game’s dominant culture ensures that such elevation for the individual Indigenous player does not translate into a resilient apotheosis characterized by healing. Early in the novel, Wagamese prepares readers expertly for this Catch-22 by following Saul’s discovery that hockey had “an alchemy that could transform ordinary men into great ones” with the resonant sentence fragment, “The white glory of the rink” (57). So long as the hockey rink’s “glory” remains forcibly bound to a culture of “white” entitlement steeped in individualism and hypermasculinity—as the “ordinary men” and “great ones” would suggest—the potential for the game to participate in genuine decolonial change remains hampered. Under such circumstances, Saul’s defection from the Toronto Marlboros and his subsequent spiral into alcoholism constitutes a rational response to the corrosive effects of Canadian hockey culture. Saul’s singularity as a
player emerges from the visionary skill set inherited from his Anishinaabe ancestors, enlivened and enacted in the contemporary moment. Yet Saul’s living and evolving cultural knowledge is continually denied and overwritten by settler stereotypes of bygone and backward indigeneity; his unique gifts are obscured within a racialized, nationalistic discourse that works not only to disempower Saul but to further dispossess the Anishinaabe nation and Indigenous peoples more generally. To confront such unjust conditions, Saul cannot reach simply to his own “greatness” but must in fact envisage more community-based solutions.

In rehab for alcoholism at the New Dawn Centre, Saul has a spiritual transformation in the form of a vision of communal regeneration. While out in the bush, he watches the beavers work on their home in unison and is distracted from getting back to the centre before dark; he is forced to camp among “the cedars” on “a flat table of rock” (191). In an interstitial space between “awake or dreaming” (192), Saul is visited by his great-grandfather Shabogeesick, the person from whom he inherited his special hockey skills, and his grandmother, whom he loved more than anyone. The effect of the vision is immediate: Saul needs to return to Manitouwadge and hand his skills down to the next generation. Ultimately, the novel’s depictions of the residential school survivor’s healing journey and the nostalgic elite athlete past his prime fuse together in a triumphant gesture of Anishinaabe survivance expressed through communal agency and solidarity. Returning to skate with his old teammates on the Manitouwadge rink, Saul finds that behind a full line of the “original Moose [. . .] were some kids of assorted ages and sizes and behind them were young girls and older women. Everyone had a hockey stick.” With at least eighteen skaters on the ice—at different life stages, levels of ability, and genders—Saul asks Virgil, his former teammate, confidante, and surrogate brother, “How are we gonna do this? [. . .] I mean with all these people. How are we gonna play the game?” Virgil responds, “Together. . . . Like we shoulda all along” (221).

CONCLUSION: TO TRANSFORM A GAME, NOT AN INDIVIDUAL

Saul Indian Horse was first introduced to the game of hockey through literature within the racist, nationalistic, and assimilative space of the residential school. “From those books,” he declares, “I got the idea that hockey had an alchemy that could transform ordinary men into great ones” (57).
Saul’s journey throughout the novel is structured as a (perhaps doomed) search for such greatness. The novel tracks its protagonist’s development as a seer and a gifted athlete, but the apotheosis that Saul imagines as a child proves consistently unachievable in the context of ongoing colonial power relations configured to ensure his second-class status. The healing arc of the novel as a residential school survival narrative offers other transformative possibilities; however, it too cannot point in the direction of the narrator’s personal well-being until he has broadened the individualist focus on “ordinary men” and “great ones” to encompass the realities of living Indigenous communities.

This is why the novel concludes with Indigenous players of various ages and genders playing “together.” Rather than seeking after his own singular transformation to hockey superstar (or even to healthy and sober individual), Saul needs to recognize that his capacity to become the fullest expression of himself is deeply interdependent with his community’s capacity to transform the game—to disentangle it from the threads of individualism, racism, sexism, and capitalism that together form the web of ideological inheritance from colonial heteropatriarchy.

In this way, Wagamese’s novel has richly decolonizing properties. These properties, however, persist through a deep and abiding love for the game of hockey rather than in opposition to it. But in order for that love to begin to engender positive social change, the racism of hockey culture must be exposed; its implicatedness in violent colonial history must be laid bare; and the ongoing capacity of Indigenous players, fans, coaches, and communities to reimagine the game within the frameworks of their own world views must be recognized and affirmed. These are the lessons gifted to both settler and Indigenous audiences within Wagamese’s forcefully noncolonial—as opposed to decolonial—hockey novel.

WORKS CITED


