Inside, Outside, Inside–Out:
Circles in *Indian Horse*

By Rebecca Regan

In traditional aboriginal culture, circles hold myriad meanings, each serving a specific function. So too do they serve a special purpose as a continuous motif in Richard Wagamese's novel *Indian Horse*. Wagamese uses the recurrent symbol of circles to represent Saul Indian Horse's cyclical journey through his oneness with nature and the rituals of pagan naturalism; the Canadian government's imposed religion, education, and culture that breaks Saul's spirit; and his reclamation of all that was lost in the process, and which is vital to the unity and survival of his culture and soul.

In the beginning, eight-year-old Saul was whole. His identity was deeply rooted and centered inside his clan's circle of sharing, rituals, and pagan tradition; if removed from the land, his people lose who they are: "They say that our cheekbones are cut from those granite ridges … above our homeland … the deep brown of our eyes seeped out of the fecund earth … our long straight hair … from the waving grasses … [and] our feet and hands … like the paws of a bear" (1). Using chemamorphism, the opposite of personification, Saul's people's features are likened to nature to emphasize their infinite connection to the earth. Being polytheistic, holistic, and historically free-spirited peoples, they rely on nature to nourish and heal their spirits as evidenced by Saul's family travelling to Gods Lake seeking strength for Saul's brother's illness. Their traditional ecological knowledge is cycled down through the generations by elders–the living libraries–for navigational, cultural, and survival tools to thrive. Saul's grandmother taught him that Aki, Mother Nature, is a mystery not meant to be understood, and to honor that in life there are no beginnings, endings, or direction (65). One of Saul's gifts from Aki is his ability to see things with clarity which others don't possess, and which was thought to be propagated from

“the eyes of one born to a different plane” (3). His clan’s rituals of the rice gathering and dancing taught boys to be responsible men (28) and served “as [an] offering to the Old Ones” (20). The nature walks brought spiritual guidance from ancestors and Aki. The sharing circles around a central fire provided a sense of community, and the spirit walk served as the continuing journey of the dead (31) who return to their ancestors.

In an old tale of their people, Saul’s great grandfather Shabogeesick emerged from the bushes with a black horse; a messenger with a prophecy of death, great loss, and perilous change (6). This change was the Zhaunagush’s hubristic invasion of the aboriginal’s traditional ways by snatching Saul and his siblings “away as quick as their boats” (10) to a compulsory residential school. In an ironic parallel to Shabogeesick’s enlightening walks, Benjamin walks out of the bush, sick and skeletal (16). It is evident that he was not receiving spiritual guidance in the school in an attempt to assimilate him; rather, he is being beaten, dehumanized, overworked like cattle, and stripped of his spirituality, humanity, language, and knowledge of his clan’s traditional ways. This foreshadows Saul’s journey; in the dead of winter, the moment Saul is torn from his grandmother’s frozen grasp and rushed away to St. Jerome’s Indian Residential School, he is symbolically ripped out of his sacred circle; the last connection he had to the medicine wheel of life.

In the middle of his journey, Saul metaphorically becomes a Chimera: a “fire-breathing beast with a lion’s head, a goat’s body and a serpent’s tail … a gross combination of mismatched parts” (158). Forced so far outside his protective circle, his identity and all that grounded him, he tries to replace any semblance of it. Hockey and alcohol, respectively, come to replace the traditional rituals, community (90), and protection that he yearned for. While at St. Jerome’s Residential School, Saul witnesses and endures daily acts of abuse including rape, suicide,

diseases, and racism (81). Christianity and the residential school are stark contrasts to pagan naturalism in that the former is based on monotheism and forcefully submerges Saul into a world of rigid rules, solitude, silence, and are filled with beginnings and endings. Nature is what keeps the children grounded and whole, while the nuns and priests believe that God should be the one to provide this. The school breaks the sharing circle in that his people cannot communicate traditionally and communally (48) without severe punishment (80). For this reason, it is momentous when a group of children form a circle around the lifeless body of Rebecca Wolf–another young victim of St. Jerome's–in the Indian Yard to sing for her spirit in remembrance (168-69) and solidarity, as well as a protective shield against the nuns and priests. It is at the school that Saul is introduced to hockey by Father Leboutilier who capitalizes on Saul's vulnerability by using hockey as a way to "buy [his] silence" (199). Saul immerses himself in the romanticism of hockey and uses his natural gift of vision to navigate the rink and hone his skills in order to veil himself from the abuse he was suffering at the hands of Father Leboutilier. When he leaves the school for Manitouwadge to play hockey for the Moose, he experiences more racism and resistance from the crowds. Though Saul is a brilliant hockey player, the crowds both acknowledge his skills and condemn him–with every glorious move he makes, he is either "counting coup," "on a raid," "taking scalps," or "the stoic Indian" (163)–in an effort to eclipse his talents. Ironically, the aim of the residential schools is to reform and assimilate the indigenous into Christianity and Canadian culture, to save them from their heathen (47) and savage existence (96); however, the Catholic religious order and the white hockey players and spectators never totally accept the aboriginals. Instead, "[t]hey only [see Indian] faces where white ones should [be]" (132).

Saul heads west and takes up “Indian work” (13)–physically demanding grunt labor jobs–in a forestry logging camp at Nagagami Lake. Where he used to give to nature with tobacco offerings at Gods Lake, he is now taking from and destroying nature. Previously drawing parallels between hockey and nature (67), he now associates the sport with the white men and how they stole the game, the joy and the ritual and community it gave him. Hockey had once been a communal experience through the shared stories that allowed for cultural persistence, the shared hardship and the connection to nature; it is now a way for the white culture to segregate them further by casting them as solely animalistic. The further away he moves from nature, the further he is from himself, his culture, ancestry, freedom, and vision. He gives up the control he so strongly tried to maintain, and begins to fight. From one vice to another, alcohol replaces hockey in his life; it is his new escape and the banter in the bars resembles the lively banter of the locker rooms (180) that reminds him of happier times. Inside one of these bars, Saul encounters Ervin Sift who represents the first white man and instance of religion in the novel that does not impose anything upon, or harm Saul. Instead, Ervin treats him with respect and gives Saul the opportunity to quit drinking and get sober by offering a place to stay and work. After a severe relapse, Saul ends up in the New Dawn Centre for substance abuse recovery. Now that Saul is sober and no longer playing hockey, he is forced to face his past.

In the end, Saul is rejuvenated. In rehab, Saul’s counselor asks him to share his story in the circle of healing to reclaim his people’s lost way of speaking about nature and the life cycle (1); the very thing that his people have lost. In order to do this, he returns to St. Jerome’s. As he arrives, he sees that nature has ironically overrun and reclaimed the school. It is “desolate” (156) and vandalized, strewn with “epithets and damnations” (155). As he begins remembering the horrific traumas he suffered, he returns to Gods Lake to collect himself. It is here that Saul lays

down a tobacco offering as a ritualistic gesture and apology, and receives his last vision. He speaks to his family and ancestors. Shabogeesick tells Saul that he must "learn to carry this place with [him]. This place of beginnings and endings" (205). This represents the uniting of the two opposing forces in his life; the goodness that can come from tragedy. After laying down another tobacco offering, he returns to the Kelly's and breaks the silence about his experiences at the school. As he reunites with the Moose to play hockey, "[b]ehind them were some kids of assorted ages and sizes and behind them were young girls and older women" (221) who join in. This act represents the metaphorical and literal circle of healing and regeneration.

Saul has come full circle. He doesn't unlearn his lessons or revert back to the way he was prior to St. Jerome's; rather, he continues on his journey and carries with him the knowledge and experiences he has endured to make him stronger and he shares his story within the circle of healing and rejuvenation as "[m]any hearts beating together makes us stronger" (2).

Works Cited

Wagamese, Richard. *Indian Horse*. British Columbia: Douglas and McIntyre, 2012. Print.