Set Apart: Implications of Naming Practices in *Indian Horse*

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Names hold abundant power. What we choose to call people and places can shape both their association to the world and our associations with them. In Richard Wagamese's novel *Indian Horse*, names are treated differently by the Ojibway people and the white people. While there is specific ritual and tradition involved in the naming of Ojibway, the clergy members and treaty men dispense names in a way that shows little insight into the nature of the people and the gifts they possess. This disparity in naming techniques is significant in the scheme of the novel because it is indicative of the dehumanization the First Nations people faced at the hands of the non-native population. This paper will explore the contrast present between the naming practices of the Europeans and the Ojibway as it relates to *Indian Horse*, and show how this is indicative of the sweeping disrespect that First Nations people are shown in the novel.

This contempt is evident as soon as Saul arrives at St. Jerome's Indian Residential School. The children are taken inside, stripped, and washed. Saul mentions that "it felt as though they were trying to remove our skin" (Wagamese 44). The most significant moment happens when Sister Ignacia announces that Lonnie Rabbit's name is unsuitable. To her, because it is not biblical, it is not appropriate. She proclaims: "From now on, you are Aaron Rabbit" (Wagamese 45). When he protests, stating that "Lonnie is [his] dad's name" (Wagamese 45), Sister Ignacia asserts that even Lonnie's association with the term 'father' is to shift, stating that "Your father is the Heavenly Father…Your human father has nothing to offer you anymore" (Wagamese 45.) This name is chosen arbitrarily, with no consideration for Lonnie and the familial tie to his name. This is a major departure from the way Ojibway children traditionally are named. Generally, the elder who named a child had responsibilities to that child, and by agreeing to bestow a name, the 'namer' was taking on responsibilities of a caregiver (Johnson 15). So, this scene is profound in the context of the novel because it is symbolic of the loss of culture and trust the children experience when they enter the school. In traditional Ojibway culture, children were often not formally named until they were about a year of age. Heather Devine explains how a feast would be held and an elder invited to name the child. Offerings were presented to the elder and he would pray to the Creator. After consulting with his "spirit helpers" and singing a "power song" the elder would take the child in his arms and name the child after a character from his visions. Devine goes on to describe how the child would be held by all of the guests at the feast, its name repeated, and well-wishes given for the future. The naming ceremony's significance was in the transfer of spiritual power from elder to child, and these names were not used on a daily basis. Instead, Ojibway nicknames would be given to the children, often based on the child's appearance, personality, or even gender (Devine 229-230). Though these traditions may have weakened or disintegrated with the generations that attended residential schools before Saul and his peers, it is clear in the novel that stories have been passed down.

A second example of arbitrary naming practices happens when treaty men come and have Saul's family sign their names on the register. As the family does not have a surname, they are assigned the name "Indian Horse" merely because there is a horse present when the treaty men are there. Although

the horse is significant and symbolic to the Ojibway people, the treaty men are not aware of this. Ironically, the names bestowed upon them by the treaty men are later mocked by a white man. When Saul and the Manitouwadge Moose hockey team travel to Kapuskasing to play against their first non-reserve team, a man comes in to take their roster sheet. He looks at their names, smiling and says: "You got some pretty weird names here…you're kidding, right?"(Wagamese 123). This could be perceived as a question without malicious or rude intent, yet Saul mentions that "the crowd reacted whenever [the announcer] read out a particularly Indian-sounding name, shouting with jibes and taunts" (Wagamese 124). Saul's last name continues to be ridiculed as he progresses in the world of hockey. While these taunts are commonplace in sports, it is compounded because of his race and status. He is jeered at, and told "you guys gonna need an Indian hearse to get outta here!" (Wagamese 138).

In contrast, the strong oral tradition and naming practices of the Ojibway are clear from the beginning of the novel as well. In describing his lineage, Saul Indian Horse says "We were the people of manitous" (Wagamese 4). There are multiple interpretations of the word "manitou", including "essence", "mystery", "attributes" and "talents" (Johnson 6). These terms are reflective of the way that the Ojibway approach spiritual traditions. They embrace mystery and are not tied to specific definitions. Saul's grandmother describes this to him, saying: "we need mystery… [it] fills us with awe and wonder…we do not seek to unravel this" (Wagamese 65). When Saul describes the names his people have given places, there is always a story behind it, a meaning that speaks to the purpose and sacred nature of the land. Saul speaks of the name that his ancestors had given to the north wind, which is "Keewatin". Saul discusses how "the old ones gave it a name because they believed it was alive, a being like all things" (Wagamese 36). The ritual and history are also prevalent when he describes the Ojibway names given to his ancestors. This is important in the context of the novel because it reflects the respect and dignity that the First Nations show the land and each other as individuals. This is contrasted with the lack of respect and dignity that is afforded them by the non-Natives, which is embodied by their treatment of the Ojibway names. The description of his great-grandfather, Shabogeesick, gives insight into the sacred nature of names in First Nations cultures. Saul describes Shabogeesick as a shaman, a man who spent so much time on the land that "it told him things, spoke to him of mysteries and teaching" (Wagamese 4). Conversely, when the European missionaries come and hear the story of "Manitou Gameeng", they rename it "Gods Lake", in keeping with their Christian beliefs. The presuming nature of this act reflects the discrimination and lack of respect that is ubiquitous in the interactions between the Europeans and First Nations people in this novel.

The disregard shown to the names of the Ojibway people in Indian Horse parallels their overall mistreatment by non-Natives. This is clearly emphasized when Saul arrives at St. Jerome's and Sister Ignacia changes his peer's name, when the treaty men arbitrarily assign Saul's family a surname, and in various instances during Saul's hockey career. These occasions are contrasted by the stories that Saul weaves regarding the meaning of names that are sacred to the Ojibway. While the Europeans sought to assimilate the First Nations people to their culture, the names of many of the places over the course of the novel remain Ojibway. The First Nations' claim on the land is powerful, and the names of many cities, lakes, rivers and towns still bear traditional cultural names. This speaks to the enduring nature of

the culture. As the novel shows, the First Nations people are regaining their voice, despite the most brutal attempts that have been made to silence them.

Works Cited:

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