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Introduction:
A Trickster History of Lacrosse

Nak’azdli Whut’en, Dakelh Keyoh (central British Columbia), June 2011

Nak’albun (Stewart Lake) lies still, the tree-covered mountains mirror off the surface of the lake in tranquility, and the steel blue sky is interrupted by only a few wispy clouds. It’s a hot and dry early summer afternoon, and everything is quiet in town. The tourists at Fort St. James National Historic Site have come and gone, the band office has closed for the weekend, and Our Lady of Good Hope Catholic Church stands empty, peering over the Dakelh Keyoh community as it has done since 1873. In the shadow of the mountains and at the outdoor hockey rink, only a small group of young people, lacrosse sticks in hand, disturb the peace. Wrapping up the Nak’azdli Lacrosse Camp, Allan thanks them for attending: “It’s amazing where something as simple as a lacrosse stick and following your passion can take you. It can lead you to places you never thought possible. There is power in this game, there is power in this stick. I’ve often been taught that it has the power to heal, whether you want to recognize it or not. If I didn’t believe it before, there is no question, I do now. I really appreciate everyone coming out this weekend, and it was an honour to meet all of you.”

Baaga’adôowëwin, “the game of lacrosse” or “playing lacrosse,” is one of the Anishinaabeg Nation’s (specifically Ojibway) words for lacrosse. Alternatively, baaga’adôowe means “she or he plays lacrosse.” The Ojibwe People’s Dictionary (Minneapolis: Department of American Indian Studies at the University of Minnesota), http://ojibwe.lib.umn.edu/main-entry/baaga-adowewin-ni.
Leaving the rink, Allan walks along Highway 27 as it courses through the middle of the reserve, making his way back to the street where his family has lived for generations. Tired from the day but inspired by it, he gazes off in the distance as he turns down the dirt Spruce Road, reflecting on his experience and being back in Nak’azdli. Suddenly, a spiralling wind violently blows in off the lake, causing the trees to sway on either side. The dirt seemingly begins to lift up to mountain-top heights, with the dust swirling all around. Crack! A tree limb snaps clean from its body and crashes to the ground, and the usually calm waters of Nak’albun rage with fury and shatter the sky’s portrait.

All hell seems to be breaking loose, so Allan’s pace quickens, as does his breathing. Leaves and spruce needles rain down like a mid-winter snowstorm, covering the potholes that scar the old dirt road. As quickly as it started – it is over. A few leaves and small branches continue to rattle down as calm is restored. Allan relaxes and stares into the sky, wondering where the blow-up came from and where it all went. Behind him, a small spruce needle floats down from the treetops, uncharacteristically weightless, and lands in one of the few puddles left from last night’s rain. And suddenly, the peace is shattered by a voice from behind.

“Hey, you!”

Stunned by the voice, Allan stumbles over his stick and turns to see who is behind him.

“‘Usdas!” he says. “You scared the hell out of me, what are you doing here? Nothing like making an entrance. I heard you were gone for good, left on the island to never return.”

“I heard you needed help, that someone has been trying to replace me with their trickery.”

“I knew I’d find the answer back here, ‘Usdas, I knew I could find you. Well, the frustration that I’m running into is where to start this story – there are so many layers, twists, and turns?”

“You could start with telling everyone how I met Queen Victoria,” ‘Usdas chimes in, “how I created all the lakes and rivers in Dakelh Keyoh, or even how I brought the game of lacrosse to the West Coast. What about residential schools? Canadians don’t know much about that. Tell them how I invented hockey and used Turtle as a puck at school.” ‘Usdas laughs at the memory. “Or better yet, you should introduce me! That’s a great idea, tell them who I am!”

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Laughing at these overzealous suggestions, Allan says, “I don’t think they’re ready for your tricks – not yet at least.”

“Okay, how about you introduce yourself and how you ended up back home. I’m not sure I even know that story.”

“Well, you know that I’m Dakelh from Nak’azdli Whut’en and of the Lusilyoo Clan, but in many ways, it was the lacrosse stick that brought me back.”

‘Usdas turns to Allan with a puzzled look. “You rode your lacrosse stick from Waterloo to Nak’azdli Whut’en?”

Laughing at ‘Usdas’ confusion, Allan replies, “No, you fool, I took WestJet! But in many ways, it was the lacrosse stick that brought me back here.”

“You know I’m the one that plays tricks, right?”

“I’m not playing tricks. I’ll explain. I was born and raised in Waterloo, Ontario – about an hour and small change outside of Toronto – and I started playing lacrosse when I was ten. It was a summertime alternative to hockey, and some of my friends had already played a year or two before I started playing for the Kitchener-Waterloo Braves.” ‘Usdas chuckles at the name. “Yes, I know, yet another racist depiction of Indigenous peoples as static and ‘uncivilized.’ Mascots and team names are just one of the accepted forms of racialization of Indigenous peoples. Don’t think so? Name another minority or racialized group that serves as a caricature of a professional sports team in North America. I’m not saying that Indigenous peoples are alone in this – hell, we still see blackface, redface, and other more horrific forms of racialization and racialized violence. Fact is, whether the ‘Indian’ portrayals are ‘positive’ or ‘negative,’ they have adverse psychological consequences for Indigenous youth and for relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Sports leagues are full of what are often labelled ‘honorary names’ – especially in lacrosse, where teams are called the Redmen, Mohawks, Tomahawks, Braves, and Chiefs, and hyper-masculine-warrior caricatures and Indian-head mascots remain commonplace.

“But hey! I was an Indigenous youth playing for the Braves and donned feathered logos and hyper-masculine Indian-heads, so it couldn’t be that bad, right?” Allan’s sarcasm spikes. “I used to think I was reclaiming those images, and it felt empowering to do so. ‘I’m taking this back and redfining it for my own purposes,’ I would say.”

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Allan laughs wryly at the tragic thought. “However, as I became aware of the racialization that this was imparting, I began to understand that my individual reclamation didn’t negate the larger social impact that these images had. The intent didn’t negate the effects. They were and remain racist.

“Growing up in Waterloo with a mother from the Dakelh Nation and a non-Indigenous father, I also typically failed the authenticity test of my teammates, the one that Thomas King talks about: ‘Did you grow up on a reserve, do you powwow dance, do you know your language? How’s that free ride on taxes?’ ‘No,’ I would say, ‘didn’t grow up on a reserve – just visited a lot. My mom was looking for a fresh start before I was born and moved east. I don’t dance either, and thanks to my grandmother’s residential school experience I don’t know my language.’ See, after her horrific years at the Lejac Residential School, she refused to teach her children the language because she didn’t want them to go through the same experience. She wanted to protect them. That time in residential school, that horrifically violent state-sanctioned act of attempted extermination, left a devastating legacy in our family, and we’ll struggle with it for generations, but my grandmother always made sure her children were proud of who they were, something that was instilled in me from the beginning. So, sorry, no – I’m two generations removed from a fluent speaker, and I don’t know my language, but I’m acutely aware of it every day. As for the free ride, I’ve yet to see any signs of it. I can tell you about the ticket that my family, community, and nation got toward legislative and state-sanctioned genocide, though. Do you want to hear about that?

“Part of my struggle with my identity as a young teenager was that I wasn’t from an Indigenous community, I was travelling back to one. I’d been going back on my own annually since I was twelve, but my community was on the other side of the continent, and what I knew of Indigenous culture and ceremonies was mostly fragmented bits that I picked up selling crafts with my mom on the summer powwow circuit in Ontario. A little of Hodinöhsö:ni’ here, a little Anishinaabeg there, and the odd Nêhiyawak.”

“A real renaissance Indian,” ‘Usdas jokes. Laughing at the poke, Allan says, “Yeah, I guess so, but a lot of urban Indigenous peoples have similar experiences. I was always vocally proud to be an Indigenous person, whether it was taking pride...
in playing an Indigenous sport or in the face of teachers who were convinced that 'Indians' were just a bunch of drunks, ahistorical, or 'uncivilized.' Anyway, as I mentioned, I took tremendous pride in the fact that I was playing an Indigenous game. From the day I picked up a stick, it was never lost on me that this was ‘our game.’ In the lacrosse circle, it’s common knowledge that lacrosse originated with Indigenous peoples, and I often heard stories of Indigenous role models and great players like Ross and Gaylord Powless.

“Usdas, you like tricks – listen to this one. When I was a kid, I was always told that field lacrosse – that is, the outdoor kind – was a ‘gentleman’s game,’ and we as players would be penalized if we swore. Later, I learned that this dated from an 1860s effort to construct lacrosse as a gendered white middle-class sport for Canadians who were naturalized as gentlemen. I also remember the persistent racism. My teammates ‘jokingly’ called me Chief Little Burnt Face, Chief Running Water, Feather, and so on or would ask me if I felt ‘wronged by the Canadian government,’ insinuating that I wasn’t all that Indigenous, so what could I complain about? As I uncomfortably laughed it off, I too would jokingly call myself names as to not seem too bothered by it.

“At other times, when parents and coaches said they were afraid to go to the reserve because it was a ‘savage and lawless place,’ I again pretended that it didn’t bother me, but I was eternally conscious of it. I can still remember my physical reaction to their comments as if it were yesterday. For this reason, I feared nothing more than going to play in the Hodinohsö:ni’ community of Six Nations, an anxiety still at the forefront of my memory. Anticipating what my teammates and coaches would say made my skin crawl, and they rarely let me down. ‘We can beat these fucking Indians,’ one coach said during a pre-game speech. ‘They’re fucking lazy and undisciplined – oh, sorry, Downey.’ ‘Downey is a good Indian,’ one teammate piped up. I didn’t know it at the time, but these were all part of stereotypical myths created in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries about the ‘lazy and savage Indian.’ For my teammates and coaches, who knew that I was vocally proud to be an Indigenous person, I was ‘their Indian.’ As Philip Deloria explains it, I was unwittingly participating in a theatrical performance where they cast me in the role of the noble savage, whereas our opponents were given the part of the bloodthirsty savage. Over
time, these experiences, spurred by my interest in history and lacrosse, led me to seek out avenues in which I could combine my passions and investigate this entrenched colonialism.”

“I love the story, Allan, but it isn’t very historian-like of you. What does it have to do with your history of Indigenous lacrosse?”

“Patience, ‘Usdas, patience! My point is that I don’t pretend to separate myself from the story I’m telling, as I centre myself in it. And in the end, it is a story. Now, don’t get me wrong; I had a lot of fun playing lacrosse and made a number of lifelong friends, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Today, I also understand that their remarks were as much a reflection of the structure of settler-colonialism as they were offensive personal views. As I continued to play lacrosse in Kitchener-Waterloo, I eventually got the chance to go to the United States on an athletic scholarship. That decision was a turning point in the flourishing of my identity and political consciousness of being Dakelh. Identity” – Allan pauses in thought – “it’s what this book is all about, such a simple but laden word. Such a –.”

“A damn Trickster,” ‘Usdas interrupts.

Allan laughs in agreement. “You got that right. I always had to wrestle with the insecurity of being a proud Indigenous person but not necessarily knowing what it meant to be Dakelh. Though I’d been travelling to Nak’azdli Whut’en since I was twelve and relied on my kinship networks to know who I was and where I came from, I never felt that I completely belonged. I saw myself as an outsider – I was from that place but not ‘of’ that place. My identity as an urban Indigenous person was something I struggled with. After completing my athletic eligibility at school and earning my undergraduate degree, I continued to play lacrosse at the Senior ‘A’ level. Later, I was drafted professionally, and from that series of events I received an e-mail asking me to swing by the council office during my annual trip to Nak’azdli Whut’en. When I showed up, I was shocked that the entire council, Elders from the community, and my extended family – many of whom I’d never met – welcomed me back home with a luncheon. They had been watching me all along, proud that I was ‘one of them.’ Though the process of re-empowering my identity had begun earlier, I continued to travel back each year, not as an outsider, in my mind, but as a member of the nation. I attempted to recover my culture, stories, ceremonies, language, and more importantly my identity as Dakelh from Nak’azdli Whut’en and of the Lusilyoo.
Clan – a process that is ongoing. This book is certainly part of that process. My identity is everything that I am, a part of everything I do, and everything I produce as a historian.”

“So what does this have to do with your historical study of lacrosse?” ‘Usdas asks.

“That’s easy, ‘Usdas; you are me. You and the Trickster-Transformer stories at the beginning of each chapter are me reflecting on my understanding of the questions at hand throughout the history of lacrosse while pointing out the often hysterical” – Allan utters in the most sarcastic of tones – “contradictions within settler-colonialism and Canada’s colonial history. And yet, I’m not interested in stopping there; I’m not interested in simply centering Indigenous history on colonialism or claiming that Indigenous history is ‘Canadian history.’ I want to contribute, in some small way if I can, toward ‘resurgent’ histories of ‘intellectual sovereignty’ that can be used in the re-empowerment of Indigenous communities.9 You remain the Trickster-Transformer that you are, but at times your stories are my Indigenous-self, my non-Indigenous-self, my colonized-self, and my decolonized-self speaking to the audience.”

A GIFT FROM THE CREATOR, that’s where it all began. In Hodinöhsö:ni’ culture, as demonstrated in the Prologue of this book, the game is understood as a gift from the Creator. Although I follow the Hodinöhsö:ni’ in describing the stick-and-ball game as “the Creator’s Game,” my intent is not to insinuate that all Indigenous nations shared the same creation story, epistemological links, and/or qualities of the game. Prior to, and during, European colonization, lacrosse existed from the northeastern shores of the continent in present-day New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Maine among the Mi’kmaq, Peskotomuhkati (Passamaquoddy), and Panawahpskek (Penobscot); in the southeast among the Aniyvwiya (Cherokee), Mvskoke (Muscogee/Creek), Choctaw, and Seminole Nations; down into Mexico following the Kiikaapoi (Kickapoo) displacement and subsequent migration in the 1830s; west to California with the Pomo and Yokuts; up to Washington State and British Columbia among the Coast and Interior Salish nations; and throughout the interior of the continent.10 A French word, “lacrosse” initially appeared in missionary records during the first half of the seventeenth century, which also included non-Indigenous descriptions of the
Popular folklore erroneously states that the game was named after a bishop’s crosier but as Thomas Vennum points out, the name actually stems from the expression “jouer à la cross,” which was a common descriptor for games with a curved stick used in France a century before the term “la crosse” appeared in North America.12

Throughout the continent, Indigenous nations had their own names for the game. For non-Indigenous enthusiasts, the most common Indigenous names are the Anishinaabemowin (specifically, Omâmiwininiwak or Algonquin) Pàgàdowe, the Ojibway-specific Baaga’adowewin or Baaga’a-dowe (commonly appears as Baggataway), and/or the Kanien’kéha word Tewá:rathon.13 Furthermore, there existed various versions, styles of play, and stick types that were grounded in the regional and cultural specificities of Indigenous nations and in relation to their spiritual, medicinal, and social lives. Despite the variations of the stick-and-ball game, there were numerous similarities, including oral traditions that were shared between distant nations. For example, Vennum notes that the oral story “Animals as Star Players” has crossed linguistic and cultural boundaries among Indigenous nations.14 Although there were numerous forms of the stick-and-ball game and associated epistemologies, the Hodinöhsö:ni’ game and stick became the dominant form in Canadian settler communities.15

This book is a history of lacrosse in Indigenous communities from about 1860 – the time at which Canada took over “Indian policy” and lacrosse was appropriated by non-Indigenous enthusiasts – to 1990, with the participation of the Iroquois Nationals in official international competition as representatives of a sovereign nation. Using lacrosse as a lens, The Creator’s Game reveals how the construction, articulation, and activation of nationhood and cultural identities fundamentally informed Indigenous experiences during Canada’s Colonial Age. That is, this book examines the process through which identity is created and articulated – the process by which both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people constructed their shared histories and imagined how they belonged within a larger group, whether that be a community, nation, or confederacy. Focusing largely on Indigenous communities within the colonial borders of Canada, it also evaluates the transformation that occurred in them as they continued to play lacrosse and maintain it as an Indigenous game while responding to external forces as well as internal challenges and conflicts (such as intercommunity tensions and differing views on Indigenous identities and gender roles). Extending well beyond simply documenting a specific sport, this history of lacrosse
shows that the game mirrors larger issues in Indigenous identity formation during Canada's Colonial Age and in relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. To better reflect the relationship between Canada and Indigenous nations, I use the term “Canada's Colonial Age” to identify the period in which the Dominion of Canada, later Canada, took over control of Indian policy from the British Crown and adopted the role of colonizer of Indigenous nations.16

Although this book begins with mention of lacrosse in the 1840s, it focuses mainly on developments during Canada's Colonial Age (1860 to 1990). Of course, the colonial period did not end in 1990, the year with which this book concludes. In many ways, it persists today through shape-shifting forms of colonialism and, as Glen Coulthard reminds us, in the neoliberal politics of “recognition.”17 Canada has yet to reach what academics term a “post-colonial” period. In and of itself, as Linda Tuhwi Smith argues, “post-colonial” insinuates that imperialism and its agent, colonialism, are things of the past, despite evidence to the contrary such as the continuation of the paternalistic Indian Act.18 It obscures the reality that colonialism and colonial legacies persist at the expense of Indigenous self-determination. Education scholar Margaret Kovach makes the point: “Within a Canadian Aboriginal context, this is problematic because the non-Indigenous majority are adept at forgetting this country’s colonial history, thus maintaining its reproduction. While the colonial visage of our ancestors’ time has shifted, the relationship continues.”19 A significant process of decolonization is, first, to acknowledge the reality that Canada had, and still has, a history as an imperial nation that employed settler-colonialism as a structure of dominance and land-dispossession.

The Creator’s Game is one of the first full-length studies of any Indigenous sport in Canadian historiography. It contributes to a growing field of Indigenous and Canadian sport studies and is one of the few academic lacrosse studies in North America. Consequently, it is also the first full-length study to examine lacrosse as it relates to Canadian history, relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, and Indigenous identity formation. Building on recent trends in Indigenous and Canadian historiography, The Creator’s Game also attempts to articulate the history of lacrosse within Indigenous epistemologies by using oral history, interviews, and Indigenous perspectives and epistemologies from Elders, Knowledge Holders, writers, activists, and academics. Although this work is certainly informed by the important field of post-colonial studies, lacrosse from an...
Indigenous perspective is theory, and I place that at the forefront. The oral histories and knowledge, with which the game is in reciprocal relation, are theories built, developed, and articulated – in some cases – since time immemorial by generations of theorists, both human and non-human. I turn to these Knowledge Holders, thinkers, and this game as my theoretical approach. Lacrosse embodies, and fits within, a series of layers of sophistication and complexity that predate and extend beyond the comparatively new field of post-colonial studies.

However, it must be made clear that this work deals with competitive lacrosse, not with lacrosse played for Indigenous ceremonies, in the areas in which the game has consistently remained part of the sporting landscape, including Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver. A major fear of the Indigenous communities that I visited was that I would expose the private and hereditary knowledge of the Longhouse or Potlatch ceremonies and treat it as anthropological data. This was never my intent, and I have tried to follow the oral history and “paper trail” of competitive lacrosse to reveal the intersection of Indigenous identities, the game, and relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Where I included information about the Longhouse – for instance, to explain how lacrosse fits within Hodinöhsö:ni’ identities and epistemologies – I leaned on my project partners and mentors to determine whether the information presented was appropriate. And yet, this book does not limit itself to the history of a sport, because it uses lacrosse to demonstrate how Indigenous peoples formed and reformed their identities. In many ways, it is not a sport history at all.

From the non-Indigenous appropriation of the game during the 1860s, to the barring of Indigenous players from lacrosse in the second half of the nineteenth century, to the use of the game in residential schools, and to the continued institutionalized racism against Indigenous athletes in the 1970s, the history of the game is emblematic of both Canada’s relationship with Indigenous peoples and the structure of settler-colonialism. Lacrosse in itself has historically been a prime example of a “contact zone,” a term coined by Mary Louise Pratt. That is, it has been a social space “where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other.” Much like Mary-Ellen Kelm’s significant work *A Wilder West,* this book uses sport to present the complexity and multiplicity of relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. And yet, beyond offering a historical investigation, *The Creator’s Game* seeks to capture the cultural relativity of lacrosse to Indigenous peoples through a combination of Western academic research,
Indigenous worldviews, and traditional teachings. What makes the game such an intriguing case study is that non-Indigenous people appropriated it as their own and used it to express their national identity even as it remained an integral part of Indigenous societies, cultures, and epistemologies – including their gender relations and spirituality. The story of lacrosse is a potent illustration of how identity is formed and reformed, and of how competing interest groups can claim a source of identity as their own. Furthermore, Indigenous players and communities continued to maintain their historical practices of lacrosse and to assert their self-determination even as they disseminated and embraced the changes that non-Indigenous Canadians introduced into the game. In turn, Indigenous teams played an integral part in the international growth of lacrosse.

_The Creator’s Game_ unfolds through five chapters, each one headed with an introductory story featuring the Dakelh cultural hero and Trickster-Transformer ‘Usdas. Sometimes, ‘Usdas is accompanied by Raven, a prominent figure in Dakelh oral history. The use of the Trickster-Transformer, borrowed from several oral histories based on Indigenous, and specifically Dakelh, epistemologies and recent literary works, is an attempt to better frame Indigenous perspectives and the history of Indigenous athletes’ continued participation in the game. As is typically the case in Indigenous oral history, I cannot separate my study of lacrosse from my own experiences as a lacrosse player, as a storyteller, and most importantly as an Indigenous person. I draw on those reflections quite explicitly throughout, introducing every chapter with a short Trickster-Transformer anecdote. In her seminal _Indigenous Storywork_, Stó:lō Nation member Jo-ann Archibald may have defined the Trickster best. The Stó:lō are south of the Dakelh, and one of their Trickster figures is Coyote:

> Among many First Nations, Coyote and her/his/its many manifestations is considered a Trickster character who has lots to learn and teach while travelling the world. The English word “trickster” is a poor one because it cannot portray the diverse range of ideas that First Nations associate with the Trickster, who sometimes is like a magician, an enchanter, an absurd prankster, or a Shaman, who sometimes is a shape shifter, and who often takes on human characteristics. Trickster is a transformer figure, one whose transformations often use humour, satire, self-mocking, and absurdity to carry good lessons. Other well-known Trickster characters include Raven, Wesakejac, Nanabozó, and...
Glooscap. Trickster often gets into trouble by ignoring cultural rules and practices or by giving sway to the negative aspects of “human-ness,” such as vanity, greed, selfishness, and foolishness. Trickster seems to learn lessons the hard way and sometimes not at all. At the same time, Trickster has the ability to do good things for others and is sometimes like a powerful spiritual being and given much respect.\textsuperscript{24}

Since the chapters in \textit{The Creator’s Game} constantly overlap temporally and thematically, the ‘Usdas stories assist in maintaining a fluid narrative and help introduce several issues while navigating the ambiguities, contradictions, and uncertainties in the historical record. They also undermine the colonial history of the game.

This is not the first time that Trickster-Transformers have appeared in relation to lacrosse. In fact, Coyote, Nanabush (Nanaboozho), Hare, and Glooscap, to name a few, play the game.\textsuperscript{25} Although ‘Usdas was not historically known to be a fan or a participant in Dakelh territory, as I worked my way through this project, there was absolutely no question in my mind that the Trickster-Transformer was ever-present and at play in this history. ‘Usdas, like other Trickster-Transformers, is known for their travels, curiosity, and for frequently operating in mischievous ways while serving as a cultural hero, cautionary tale, and teacher. If I could travel to play lacrosse and write a history of the game, why couldn’t ‘Usdas? ‘Usdas has allowed me to understand and make sense of the colonial history of lacrosse and of the nation-state’s history. Lacrosse has also allowed me to further empower my identity as Dakelh by reconnecting me with our nation’s knowledge systems, stories, and ultimately ‘Usdas while I learned from the epistemologies of other Indigenous nations.

Finally, using the Trickster-Transformer figure also enables me to draw on humour and humility to discuss otherwise difficult topics and issues, such as sports in residential schools. In an attempt to move toward an Indigenous-centred approach, \textit{The Creator’s Game} is not limited to strictly defined academic sources. Without question, the greatest influences on its methodology and storytelling, beyond the oral histories, are Thomas King’s \textit{The Truth about Stories} and \textit{Green Grass, Running Water}, as well as his children’s book \textit{A Coyote Columbus Story}; Leanne Simpson’s \textit{Islands of Decolonial Love} and \textit{Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back}; Richard Wagamese’s \textit{Indian Horse}; and Lee Maracle’s \textit{Celia’s Song}.\textsuperscript{26} These authors are particularly good at merging the practices of oral storytelling and Indigenous epistemologies in

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their literary works. In this book, I have tried to emulate their example to create a more Indigenous-centred historical methodology.

I have also attempted to put into practice Dale Turner’s concept of “word warriors” – that is, the notion of Indigenous scholars listening “to their ‘indigenous philosophers’ while engaging the intellectual and political practices of the dominant culture.”27 Again, as I told ‘Usdas in the beginning, I don’t pretend to separate myself or my identity from the history that I am writing, but I must emphasize that I speak for myself and not my community, nation, or those with whom I worked, and that any mistakes are my own. This is my take on the story. But as Chris Andersen reminds us, history is “a crucial resource in Indigenous claims to peoplehood, as it is for all Indigenous claims, because it challenges dominant colonial national/historical narratives that marginalize or attempt to altogether erase our prior presence.”28 By making use of Indigenous methodologies, philosophies, and worldviews in a Western academic pursuit, I offer blunt sarcastic quips and critiques in demonstrating Canada’s relationship with Indigenous peoples during its Colonial Age, while also attempting to move this history toward a more Indigenous-centred approach. In this endeavour, I have used the original self-identifications of the Indigenous nations as well as Indigenous terminology for lacrosse in my chapter titles. Like the writing of Indigenous history, terminology also needs to be reclaimed.29

The opening chapter of the book examines the use of lacrosse from about 1844 to 1904 as a form of cultural exhibition in which Indigenous athletes performed for non-Indigenous audiences. After the Kanien’kehá:ka (Mohawk) of Kahnawà:ke and Ahkwesáhsne introduced non-Indigenous Montrealers to the game and began competing against them in 1844, non-Indigenous lacrosse enthusiasts quickly appropriated it as their own.30 They used it as an expression of a gendered Canadian nationalism and banned Indigenous players from championship competitions, following the “logic of elimination” that is foundational to settler-colonialism.31 In recent years, several authors have published important examinations of lacrosse and early Canadian nationalism, including Gillian Poulter, Michael A. Robidoux, and Nancy Bouchier. Although these works are a valuable contribution and focus on Canadian nation-building studies, the historiography has yet to focus on the response of Indigenous peoples to these nation-building activities.32 In the very cultural history they helped form, Indigenous peoples and their voices have typically not been heard. The present study will demonstrate the importance of Indigenous peoples, the
“Other,” in this period, while at the same time detailing how they maintained and reformed expressions of their nationhood.

Setting the foundation for Chapter 1 are a number of seminal works that examine Indigenous authenticity, including Authentic Indians by Paige Raibmon and Thomas King’s The Truth about Stories. A unique and critical examination, Raibmon’s work sets out to define what Indigenous peoples and non-Natives saw as authentic Indigenous culture and identities.33 Most non-Natives in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries associated such authenticity with a static former way of life. Anything otherwise was seen as inauthentic. King adds, “In the end, there is no reason for the Indian to be real. The Indian simply has to exist in our imaginations. For to be seen as ‘real,’ for people to ‘imagine’ us as Indians, we must be ‘authentic.’”34 This perception helped fuel the myth of the disappearing Indian, but it also drew thousands of non-Indigenous spectators to lacrosse games in the nineteenth century, and it focused media attention on the matches. As established practices of Indigenous peoples shifted, or were reimagined, to more contemporary ones, as they incorporated newer technologies, expressions, and politics, they themselves became increasingly invisible to settler society. As this chapter demonstrates, such innovations included “playing Indian” while participating in the wage-labour economy and observing the rules introduced by non-Indigenous lacrosse organizations. The notion of what constituted authenticity was not limited to non-Natives; Indigenous communities themselves developed their own ideas of the authentic and selectively played Indian for non-Indigenous audiences.

Philip Deloria’s Playing Indian and Indians in Unexpected Places, which offer critical examinations of both imposed and self-imposed Indigenous identities, lie at the heart of the chapter’s analysis.35 In Playing Indian, Deloria documents the connection between the “authentic Indian” and American identity while also examining the reactions of Indigenous peoples to non-Natives who assumed the role of stereotypical Indians. Through these works, The Creator’s Game examines differing understandings of authenticity in the relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, and documents the “powerful and shifting set of ideas” concerning racialized and cultural identities.36

Throughout its history, lacrosse was reflective of the racialized and colonial spaces established in Canadian society. At times, Indigenous athletes were excluded from domestic and international competition because of their “race,” and yet they formed all-Indigenous games, leagues, championships,
and international – referring to Indigenous nations – competitions. By the late nineteenth century, the game was deemed “civilized enough” and an appropriate performance of whiteness for use in the assimilation programs of residential schools. Elsewhere, Indigenous players and teams competed, representing their clans, communities, nations, with and against non-Indigenous teams while continuing to face discrimination. Chapter 2 explores how lacrosse, and sport more generally, was employed in residential schools between 1880 and 1930, and explains why an Indigenous game was seen as a useful instrument for assimilation. By 1889, lacrosse was so firmly associated with Canadian nationalism that residential schools from Ontario to British Columbia – with the exception of Alberta – used it as part of their efforts to destabilize and eliminate Indigenous cultures and identities. And yet, though Indigenous communities adopted the game after experiencing it at residential schools, its introduction goes well beyond the adaptation and accommodation paradigm that, sport scholar Michael Robidoux points out, so often appears in contemporary Indigenous history.

The story of lacrosse demonstrates that throughout Canadian colonialism not everything Indigenous peoples did existed within the framework of that colonialism. Indigenous peoples continued to exist, act, and reform their identities on their own terms and outside the classifications of adaptation or rejection. For example, as discussed in Chapter 3, members of the Coast Salish Sḵwx̱wú7mesh Nation (Squamish) in present-day North Vancouver, who were introduced to the game in residential schools, re-appropriated it as a Sḵwx̱wú7mesh and Indigenous form, and used it to help restructure their own Indigenous identities. This is a prime example of a Trickster tale: rather than assimilating Indigenous peoples into the dominant society, lacrosse helped Indigenous nations such as the Sḵwx̱wú7mesh to reform their cultural identities.

Throughout, this particular story provides an understanding of Indigenous history within local Indigenous frameworks – using Indigenous epistemologies – and demonstrates how Indigenous understandings of sport do not slot into secularized Western perceptions. In Indigenous worldviews, sport spills over into all spaces and embodies the concept of Indigenous holism. In other words, it is part of the interconnectedness of the spiritual, physical, intellectual, and emotional, informed by the specificities of each nation’s language, culture, ceremonies, and socio-political relations. Although this theme recurs throughout the book, its relation to the Hodinöhso:ni’ Confederacy and communities is most evident in

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Chapters 4 and 5. These demonstrate how, why, and under what conditions Hodinöhsö:ni’ communities and teams re-entered championship lacrosse, asserted their unique identities, and helped competitive lacrosse survive in Canada with the creation of box lacrosse while continuing to face institutional racism.40

For example, Chapter 4 shows how lacrosse organizations contributed toward helping dissolve rivalries among Hodinöhsö:ni’ nations and served as an additional source of Hodinöhsö:ni’ nationhood. It also reveals the complexity and multiplicity of Hodinöhsö:ni’ identities, which transcend the perceived Longhouse and Christian divide. Chapter 5 demonstrates how the Hodinöhsö:ni’ attempted to reclaim the game as an expression of Hodinöhsö:ni’, and more generally Indigenous, nationhood and as an activation of their sovereignty during the 1980s by founding the Iroquois Nationals. The chapter also explores how the Nationals – a team representing the Hodinöhsö:ni’ as a sovereign nation in international competition – constituted a resurgence of Hodinöhsö:ni’ traditionalism in communities that were attempting to counter the continued onslaught of settler-colonialism and how the team attempted to reinfuse the Longhouse epistemology of lacrosse back into Hodinöhsö:ni’ communities and the game itself.

A number of recent works lie at the core of these chapters. For example, this book builds on a definition of nationalism as provided by the Kanien’kehá:ka political scientist Gerald Taiaiake Alfred in Heeding the Voices of Our Ancestors: he describes nationalism as having a stable core with more mobile and fluid peripheral elements that can adapt to changing circumstances.41 This model also led me to incorporate Audra Simpson’s Mohawk Interruptus, John Borrows’s Recovering Canada, Lina Sunseri’s Being Again of One Mind, and the work of John Mohawk, scholarship that comprises just a few of the Indigenous epistemologies, in addition to the partnered Elders and Knowledge Holders, that I have used in my attempt to frame the independence of Indigenous identities and philosophies.42 By incorporating these works, I hope to understand how specific Indigenous communities see their history in relation to non-Indigenous perspectives and to help demonstrate Indigenous understandings of nationhood.

Through its case study approach, this work is methodologically an ethnography – combining documentary and oral records – of lacrosse. However, its dominant source base consists of interviews, Indigenous community-produced texts, archived oral histories, and autobiographies that have been complemented by records in Library and Archives Canada,
the Archives of Ontario, the British Columbia Archives, the Canadian Lacrosse Hall of Fame, the Ontario Lacrosse Hall of Fame, local cultural centres, and city archives. I have also referred to the annual reports of the Canadian Department of Indian Affairs. My intent was to triangulate community stories and oral history, personal stories, and the archival documents, not for validation, but rather to understand how the various forms of evidence spoke to each other.

The use of oral history and community-produced works in various forms is critical to avoid what Onyota’a·ká· (Oneida) Nation member Lina Sunseri explains as a colonized trap of Western research: “To recognize only these historical texts [written works and archives] as valid sources of knowledge is to adhere to a Eurocentric bias within Western academia. The view that only the written text is a ‘good’ source subtly shows the sense of superiority the West has felt over those peoples considered to be Others.”

This book also refers to a number of works and websites from amateur lacrosse historians, autobiographies, Indigenous cultural centres, and major newspapers. Without question, these sources have their limitations. For example, newspaper articles and the annual reports written by non-Natives at the Department of Indian Affairs are fraught with colonial and racist discourse. Nonetheless, they do offer an alternative way of accessing Indigenous voices. And like the amateur lacrosse histories and websites, they aid in tracking teams, players, and promoters, and they provide statistical information regarding league standings and proficient players.

Throughout Canadian history, the popularity of lacrosse has fluctuated dramatically, especially in rural regions. Although the same pattern occurs in Canada’s largest urban centres, consistency has been greater there, and thus the historical record is more complete. As historian David Sampson reminds us, organized sport in its institutionalized form initially developed in urban centres. Because Hodinöhso:ni’ communities within the borders of Canada lie relatively close to Toronto and Montreal (the traditional hotbeds of lacrosse, along with Vancouver), this book tends to concentrate on them, though it discusses other Indigenous nations wherever possible. As mentioned above, non-Natives appropriated the Hodinöhso:ni’-specific stick-and-ball game, and the Hodinöhso:ni’ remained consistent actors in the game’s history.

Interviews constitute the main source material for this book. I conducted twenty-one formal interviews with twelve mentors, over several years, all of whom had a particular expertise in lacrosse history and Indigenous culture.
They included Elders, Hodinöhsö:ni’ Faithkeepers, members of the Lacrosse Hall of Fame, sports broadcasters, and the families of proficient players and founders. Their input was invaluable. Of course, the formal interviews were greatly amplified by other meetings, correspondence, and informal interviews with community members, which were extremely helpful in tracking down important issues, sources, and themes.45 My focus has not been on profiling individual athletes, accomplishments, statistics, rules, equipment, or the “evolution” of the game – topics that may be interesting to historians of lacrosse. Rather, I examine particular themes of race, identity formation, and nationalism to demonstrate how the game has a unique history in Indigenous and Canadian societies, and has never been far from the issues and confrontations in Indigenous-non-Indigenous relations.

From my experience, Indigenous oral tradition is best described by the analogy of a web, which Jo-ann Archibald introduces in *Indigenous Story-work*. In oral history, there are numerous points in the web – stories – that seemingly lead in different directions and rarely follow an immediate path to a central teaching; however, they are fundamental to the structure of the web, serving as its strength, and they stem from a central teaching or a subject that needs further consideration.46 Even beginning to understand the teachings in these powerful oratories requires concentration, patience, and humility. Oral traditions are alive; consisting of a stable core, they are a living, breathing combination of thoughts, experiences, teachings, and traditions that can be personally, regionally, or nationally distinctive and ever changing, being influenced by the elements surrounding them – the storyteller, the listener(s), the environment, current events, history, time, and space.

Within this process, you as a listener, reader, or viewer are an active participant, even if you are not aware of it. This doesn’t mean that you have acquired rightful ownership of this knowledge – it too must be acknowledged and “cited,” and consent to share this knowledge must be given – but it does mean that you have an influence on the way in which the story is being told.47 A story that has nothing to do with you or your life experiences often becomes a source of introspection; we internalize oral history, as I hope you will internalize this story of lacrosse and Indigenous relations in Canada. To avoid detaching the oral history from its web and to provide as much context as possible, I have chosen to let it speak for itself, with little interpretative intrusion; I also use the terms “oral history” and “oral tradition” interchangeably.48 In this book, the oral history and memories of lacrosse...
often appear in lengthy block quotes to invite readers into my discussions with the experts and mentors. The purpose of this is not to criticize the perspective but to engage readers in our conversations and to step into the participants’ viewpoints, memories, or teachings of lacrosse history.

Like oral history, Canadian and American sport histories also inform this book. A key source is Joseph Oxendine’s *American Indian Sports Heritage* ([1988] 1995), which contributed the first comprehensive study of Indigenous peoples in sport while providing a rarely seen Indigenous perspective in the field.49 Not until 2013 did UBC Press publish the first book on Indigenous sport in Canada, a multidisciplinary collection of essays titled *Aboriginal Peoples and Sport in Canada*.50 The time lapse between the two works demonstrates the gap between American and Canadian Indigenous sport studies. However, a number of proficient Canadian studies have appeared as journal articles. For more than two decades, Victoria Paraschak has been a leader in the field, and her studies have dealt with a number of significant issues that had not been raised in the literature, such as the importance of sport in the lives of Indigenous women, the development of all-Indigenous teams and leagues, and comparisons between female participation in all-Indigenous and non-Native sport systems.51 Furthermore, Paraschak’s work shows that Indigenous peoples have used sport as a form of resistance, as a source of continued tradition, and as a manifestation of identity. Similarly, Christine O’Bonsawin, Michael Heine, Janice Forsyth, and Audrey R. Giles have recently contributed a number of critical studies relating to Indigenous sport and recreation.52 Like these scholars, *The Creator’s Game* demonstrates the complexity of multiple intersecting Indigenous identities and gender constructions, and more importantly, how sport has come into conflict with those identifications and constructions, but it does so through a historical lens rather than a sociological one.

This book would not have been possible without the few full-length studies that deal specifically with lacrosse, including Alexander M. Weyand and Milton R. Roberts’s *The Lacrosse Story; Tewaarathon (Lacrosse)*; Michael Zogry’s *Anetso*; Thomas Vennum’s *American Indian Lacrosse*; and Donald M. Fisher’s *Lacrosse: A History of the Game*; the latter three focus predominantly on Indigenous peoples within the United States and are academic studies of the topic. Produced by the North American Indian Traveling College in 1978, *Tewaarathon (Lacrosse)* is a popular history from Ahkwesáhsne and one of the few Indigenous lacrosse histories from a Kanien’kehá:ka perspective that makes use of Indigenous oral history. This was followed by