

years. Aline and her siblings were forcefully removed from their parents and sent to Indian Residential School, or boarding schools as they are known south of the Medicine Line (currently the Canada/US border). Their heartbreaking reunion lasts less than 24-hours and was only possible because Aline gave birth to a son—the pregnancy was because she was raped by a residential school deacon. Their precious time together is spent cleansing and crying in ceremony and carrying out a desperate escape plan. January decides to enlist Aline (then only 16-years old) into the Canadian Air Force because it was safer for Aline to be sent to war than to be sent back to the residential school.² Aline just wants to go (and stay) home and resists her mother’s pleas to enlist. As they wait for the train to take Aline to Montreal, January firmly but lovingly tells her daughter, “You promise me that you won’t look back. For us. You’re not being selfish, my girl. We need you to because you are our tomorrow. [...] There’s gonna come a time, when your life is so perfect and you’ll feel the darkness and it will threaten to take it all away. You don’t let it! You don’t let them win! You be everything that you’re meant to be, nitânis.”³ January’s battle cry and actions exemplify strength, power, and responsible mothering, despite being refused the right to mother her children—which mirrors Aline’s very recent child birthing story. Her son was taken from her immediately after birth to be adopted out. January’s words exude hope for the betterment of the lives of Indigenous Peoples and communities and demonstrate an enduring kinship affiliation that needs to continue.

generations with reciprocity: to be a good relative, we must learn from our ancestors and relatives, nurture our kin and children of today to not replicate "broken Wahkotowin," and work toward better futures and better tomorrows for those yet to be born—as reflected in January's words that open this essay.⁶

Raheja's call is imperative. To centre Indigenous (nationalist) epistemes as theoretical constructs will ensure Indigenous Studies' ongoing vitality, while also highlighting nuance, diversity, and disruption. Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice articulates that anchoring an analysis from an Indigenous (literary) nationalist perspective "doesn't presume that one must be Indigenous or, if Indigenous, affiliated with the community under discussion. A nationalist approach does, however, insist that there's a meaningful interpretive relationship between specific communities on specific lands shaped by specific social, cultural, and political histories" (26). As a Diné Asdzáąn (Navajo woman) who has lived on Cree, Métis, Dene, Blackfoot, Nakoda, Dakota, Saulteaux, and Anishinaabe homelands, my interpretive relationship is rooted in intimate knowledge and experiences with community members, their homelands, ceremonies, and languages. Therefore, it is my responsibility to treat this interpretive analysis thoughtfully, with care and respect. Our lived experiences reflect similar social, cultural, and political histories despite how culturally and linguistically distinct we all are. Wildcat co-authored "Indigenous Relationality" (2023) with Métis political scientist Daniel Voth. They affirm that "Indigenous people have shared understandings of relationships and [...] it is possible to think of relationality at a global level" (476). For



example, kinship responsibilities are transnational and in Diné bizaad (Navajo language), I see parallels with our term for kinship and relationships, which is k'é. Using wâhkôhtowin as an anchoring analytic, I demonstrate how *Bones of Crows* prioritizes the daily tenets of striving to live miyo-pimâtisiwin, a good life of wellness and balance, despite ongoing adversity.⁷ These are foundational teachings for contemporary Dene, Cree, Diné, and other Indigenous Peoples and seeing these images on the big and small screens culminate in a moving and beautiful rendering of restoration, both personal and communal.⁸ Clements' Indigenous film and television aesthetics highlight music, languages, historiography, and resilience, which exemplify her storytelling autonomy to reflect vibrant Indigenous tomorrows by evoking thrivance or "Indigenous ways of being, knowing, and doing" (*thrivance*).

Bones of Crows (hereafter, primarily referenced just as *Bones*) spans over 100-years and across five generations of a Plains Cree family, highlighting Indigenous-centred resistance through heartwarming and heartbreaking lived experiences. Opening with 18th century Cree ancestors and closing with the real-life stories of residential school survivors, it traces and showcases one survivor's story, Aline Spears Whallach, of her childhood on the prairies through adulthood in active military service abroad to her Elderhood as a veteran kôhkom or grandmother.⁹ Aline's life story is grounded in and epitomises wâhkôhtowin and thrivance. Clements' original intention

was to develop a 4-part "limited miniseries," but this evolved into a five-part miniseries and feature film, and she "shot both versions at the same time" (Szkłarski). I focus on the expanded five-part television series, as it includes every shot from the feature-film, yet builds upon existing storylines for greater context. According to Clements, with the television series, "we get to see the stories of [Aline's] sister, the stories of her brother and her kids" (Szkłarski). These transgenerational storylines celebrate the focus of this 10th anniversary special issue.

I first begin with an introduction of the filmmaker and how she deployed wâhkôhtowin to envision and create *Bones*. Clements has never explicitly acknowledged that her process was based on wâhkôhtowin principles (or traditional Dene Laws), but I have identified how her directorial lens and aesthetic reflect what it means to be in right relations, to strive to live a harmonious life amid colonial violence, "lovelessness" (Campbell) and "broken Wahkotowin," and to elevate Indigenous resurgence, restoration, and thriving. Clements incorporates a spiralic plot structure that illuminates the visual technique of temporal jumping. Each episode cuts between flash-forwards and flashbacks, braiding a storyline that mimics orature. For these reasons, I find it imperative to maintain her temporal braid, which honours her visual story. The original teachings of wâhkôhtowin, according to Maria Cambell and Matthew Wildcat necessitates "honoring and respecting" all human relatives, "other than human relatives," (including animals, plants, water, and earth), and that these relationships and kinships enact reciprocity, caretaking, and responsibilities. I focus on



episodes 1, 2, and 5 (in that order and commit to her storyline as closely as possible, diverting only when clarification is needed), as my intervention captures how wâhkôhtowin is broken and restored in specific historical and visual moments. I conclude, as *Bones* does, with centering how reciprocal teachings as wâhkôhtowin endure for the next generations to come.

Marie Clements

Born in Vancouver, British Columbia in 1962, Clements lives on Galiano Island, just off Vancouver Island, and her family hails from Ft. Good Hope, Northwest Territories. Her creative career includes writing, directing, producing, and acting in “film, TV, radio, and live performance” (“Biography”). She studied journalism at Mount Royal College, now Mount Royal University, in Calgary, Alberta and now owns and operates her own production company MCM2, based out of Vancouver. As a playwright, Clements. has published seven plays. She has acted in *Bella Ciao* (2018) and directed a music video called *Ballads Not Bullets: Tom Jackson* (2014). She is an award-winning film and television director and producer, and some of her works include *Lay Down Your Heart* (2022), *Red Snow* (2019), *Looking at Edward Curtis* (2018), *The Road Forward* (2017), and five episodes of *Moosemeat & Marmalade* (2014, six seasons).

Bones of Crows and Bones of Crows: The Series

Bones initially premiered in 2022 as a feature-length, historical-fiction film (Clements calls it a "psychological drama"). One year later, the five-part miniseries was released on the streaming platforms CBC Gem and APTN. The title *Bones of Crows* honours her mother's strength, humour, and resistance:

When her mother was passing away a Catholic priest was doing his rounds in the hospital and asked if he could come in and give her last rites. Her mother pretended to be sleeping and then gave Marie a nod, meaning "Make him go away". She told him politely her mother was resting. He came in the next day, and the next... for several days, it was the same ritual. She would open her eyes when he turned his back, the hospital door open; they would watch him make his way down the long hospital corridor. His black suit. His black shoes on the floor, his black overcoat catching movement. He would stop and poke his head in when he could. Smiling.

On her mother's last day, they were watching him like they did. Her mother looked at him making his way and then at Marie and smiled too; "They are like crows... they always try and get you when you're down." (George 6)¹⁰

Clements' mother refused to be scavenged by the priests and black robes, whom she caricaturizes as crows. "Most corvids, trickster figures in story and myth, are considered messengers. [...] It's the clergy's flapping black wings, writes Clements. 'Beaks and birds' eyes that see everything.' [...] The chilling image of clergy as corvidae is a



powerful trope” (Neilsen Glenn 3). Crows are a powerful trope and appear throughout *Bones* as a reminder of the lived histories of Indigenous Peoples who were preyed upon by cloaked crows (politicians, church leaders, and “the law”), which continue to impact communities. Because intergenerational trauma persists, Clements practiced ethical and responsible filmmaking and implemented Indigenous cultural safety protocols in the creation of *Bones*. “*Bones of Crows* was filmed on the traditional territories of twelve different First Nations. It features over 60 cast members that represent five generations of Indigenous performers” (George 7).¹¹ At each of these locations Clements carried intergenerational teachings of wâhkôhtowin to the set. She told Tom Powers that the crew prioritized and enlisted cultural keepers, medicine people, a smudge trailer, and Elders and counselors. They also had blessings for the land—for each of the homelands they filmed on—and Clements believed the land took care of them, which directly reflects the original meaning of wâhkôhtowin—land is a relative and we have to give back to it. Continuing her conversation with Powers, “I do believe telling the truth is sacred. We're asking performers and literally everybody that worked on it for a very long shoot to bring their best, and not just for themselves as a professional, but for our families and for our ancestors.” Holding kinship tightly and practicing being a good relative was critical, as this is a profoundly moving story.

As Clements' has shared, every Indigenous person in her cast and crew had "at least one family member that went to residential school. I think it's safe to say every single Indigenous person you have or will ever meet in Canada has family that has gone through residential school" or lost someone because of it (Hendrickson).¹² While there have been Indigenous-directed documentaries about residential schools, there has not been a historiographic, multi-generational feature-length (mostly) fiction film about residential schools and its impacts directed by Indigenous creatives—*Bones* responds to this gap in visual storytelling.¹³ All episodes begin and end with a disclosure: "This series is based on actual events of colonial violence and trauma that many Indigenous People have experienced, including the removal of children. Some of these scenes may be upsetting or triggering, particularly for direct or intergenerational survivors of residential schools in the audience. We Honour Your Experience. The National Residential School Crisis Line is 1-866-925-4419 and is available 24 hours a day." This trauma-informed praxis is not unique—Indigenous filmmakers recognize their visual storytelling can be (re-)triggering and harmful, like *Little Bird* (2023) or *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* (2013), so they also include similar disclosures. Because of ongoing settler violence, filmmakers are encouraged to abide by the "On-Screen Protocols & Pathways: A Media Production Guide to Working with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Communities, Cultures, Concepts and Stories" (2019), which proved fundamental to Clements' process.

personal, and communal harm, but by the time we get to the final scenes of the final episode, my tears are cathartic: tears of joy and pride. Maria Campbell's "We Need to Return to The Principles of Wahkotowin" (2007) is a plea to recognize our complicity in breaking wâhkôhtowin:

Some examples we all know well include the incredible poverty and abuse of our children. Family and community members are brutalizing kids every single day of their young lives. Kids have no place to go, nothing to eat, no place to sleep - and we wonder why they are joining gangs. Other examples involve the brutal rapes, disappearances and murders of Aboriginal women. How many Aboriginal men, and in particular, Aboriginal leaders have you heard stand up and say, "This is going to stop!" None. Of course not, it's considered a "women's issue."

Similarly, Cree poet Sky Dancer, Louise Bernice Halfe muses about broken kinship in her poem "wâhkôhtowin - kinship" (2021). She illustrates how families of yore worked with the land and water that offered grains, berries, and fish. "Now," Sky Dancer laments, "they gathered to the clanking of brown bottles, back-road trips to the bootlegger, squabbles and fist fights along that famished road. We, the young, were their inheritors" (22). The inheritors face a present that is daunting: void of kinship, nurturing, food, love, peace, and good models of being a responsible relative. Sky Dancer published another poem in 2021, "wâhkôhtowin - Relationship," where the "illuminated child" *awâsis* offers a contrasting model for wâhkôhtowin: "*awâsis* loved



her time on the land, *ê-pimohtêt* [walking with life in her heart]. [...] shook her makeshift *sîsîkwan* [rattle], and sang to the earth, water, winds, and sun. I just loves her, that *awâsis*" (36-7). Campbell and Halfe do not explicitly connect broken *wâhkôhtowin* to colonial violence and legislation, including residential schools, but they do link potential healing and restoration to a return to *wâhkôhtowin*. If, as Campbell asserts, there has been no (or insufficient) action to restore community and familial *wâhkôhtowin* because it's a "women's issue," then *Bones* is one response. "*Bones of Crows* is the first Indigenous and female-led produced, written, and directed scripted mini-series and feature film about the residential experience in North America" (*Bones of Crows*). *Bones* responds to Maria Campell's recognition that *wâhkôhtowin* has been broken by reflecting a multi-generational story that includes historical accounts, fictional flashbacks, present-day thrivance, contemporary documentary-style testimonials, and forward-looking acts of familial, personal, and communal resurgence.

Episode 1: ᑎᑲ ᐱᑲᑲᑲ ("To Be Starved," timed to morse code)

For vibrant Indigenous tomorrows to flourish, we have to reckon with bleak yesterdays of a damning history, as depicted in the opening scene which is shot in black and white. The focal point of the opening scene is a crow, perched atop a skull. With a slow downward pan, the shot highlights a mountain of bison skulls. This shot's title card

reads "Turtle Crossing, Manitoba 1800s."¹⁷ This is significant as it is a nod to a place where there are "more than 100 potential unmarked graves" (Macyshon). The Brandon Industrial Institute operated there from 1895-1971. A historical picture, taken in 1892 at the Michigan Carbon Works in Rougeville, Michigan is the likely influence of this shot. However, another possibility is the 19th century Plains Cree place name of "oskana kâ-asastêki," which Solomon Ratt translated as "Where the bones are piled," and references the current city of Regina in Saskatchewan, founded in 1882.¹⁸ Whatever the influence for this establishing shot, the historical context of the buffalo genocide and the policy of starvation is critical to understanding the context of the opening scene. "To Be Starved," opens by concentrating on the pile of bison skulls, as starving Indigenous Peoples, from children to Elders walk past it, at the urging of a military sub-agent, named Thomas Trueman Quinn, played by John Tench. Quinn promised rations ("fresh meat, vegetables, and fruit!"). When the weak and starving Indigenous people gather at the shed he is standing in front of, he says: "April Fool's!" This onscreen "joke" made by Quinn (a real-life bully, who in fact withheld food on April 1st, 1885) accurately reflects historical accounts.¹⁹ According to Saulteaux scholar and Indian Residential School (IRS) survivor Blair Stonechild from Muscowpetung First Nation:

The next day, 1 April or 'Big Lie Day,' as the Indians called it, Quinn summoned Big Bear's Band members ... [His son] Imases, [âyimisîs] speaking on behalf of Big Bear, who was out hunting for food for the Band ... asked Quinn to provide rations to the Band. Quinn refused, saying he would have to speak to Big Bear



first. Later that day, Big Bear returned empty-handed from hunting and led a delegation to request rations from Quinn. Big Bear was upset at his refusal. Imases, hoping to win a compromise, suggested that Quinn give the Indians food for a feast as a gift to the Band, and he would not then have to call it rations. Quinn, however, had decided to give them nothing. (Stonechild 161-162)

Due to the lack of food and rations, *Bones* depicts the ancestors seated on the ground, eating handfuls of dry grass, just to sate their hunger. In real life, Thomas Trueman Quinn was shot in the head by a warrior named Wandering Spirit the very next day, on April 2nd, 1885, which commenced the Frog Lake Massacre. Frog Lake, formerly a district of Saskatchewan in the North-West Territories, is currently in the province of Alberta, but we are told the action happens in Manitoba. First Nations and Métis resistance movements spanned geographies throughout the nineteenth century, and *Bones* opens with a powerful scene that is informed by historical narratives and temporalities to highlight the real-life cruel and inhumane treatment doled out by settlers. They did not understand “the doctrine of *wâhkôhtowin* (the laws governing all relations) and *miyo-wîcêhtowin* (the laws concerning good relations)” (Cardinal and Hildebrand 14). When the onscreen Wandering Spirit, played by Gerald Auger (Woodland Cree), shoots Quinn square in the forehead, the expectation of blood spattering is replaced by crows scattering. The gunfire startles hundreds of crows,

perched in a nearby tree to fly away. This image of crows—in lieu of blood—evokes and recentres Indigenous presence over Quinn’s cold-blooded acts and words.

The next scene cuts from black and white to colour, and is set in 1930, when Aline is 7-years-old. The Spears family are whole, loving, playful, at peace, and living a good life on the prairies in their humble cabin. They are singing a Cree-language cover of the 1922 hit “Tain’t Nobody’s Biz-ness If I Do.”²⁰ The family patriarch is Matthew Spears, played by Mi’kmaq actor Glen Gould, and he plays the guitar and harmonica, as the kids jig along. They transition from singing in Cree to the original English lyrics with ease, as they wait for the eldest son to return home with his daily bounty from a hunt of small game—an act of living wâhkôhtowin. This scene highlights a thriving family that is two to three generations from those in the opening scene (where the bison kin were made nearly extinct). Their happiness and joy survived the starvation policy, but the metaphorical crows are not far from disrupting this family’s peace and harmony.

Cut to 1942, Montreal: the camera rests on the post-love making of Aline and Adam Whallach (played by Phillip Forest Lewitski). We learn it is their wedding day. Instead of a honeymoon, Adam is deployed to London. On the train platform as he departs, Aline tells him “I love you” in Cree. He tells her he loves her in Ayajuthem, “the traditional Indigenous language of the northernmost Salish First Nations of the Homalco, Klahoose, Sliammon (Tla’amin) and K’omoks” (“Homalco”). Clements employs scene transitions that jump cut across temporalities to clever effect. The deliberate synchronization of the sound of the train chugging slowly away (in 1942) is



aligned with the measured steps of children marching in a straight line at residential school (in 1932). As Adam's train leaves the train station, Aline recalls another departure: her childhood forced removal from the family home. Time lapses and flashbacks are reflective of Aline's trauma and how these memories and experiences are in her bones.

Jumping back to 1932, while children's diets are being restricted, religious and government officials are feasting around a large table. The 9-year-old Aline is seated at the piano, entertaining the gluttonous white men as she is upheld as a child prodigy for her musical skills. They talk about "324 students being tested on through starvation tactics" and how many children have died, as "disease feeds on poverty conditions." Furthermore, they tout the anti-Indigenous policies of Duncan Campbell Scott (1862-1947) as "visionary," particularly Scott's "Final Solution to the Indian Problem." This scene is based on a letter Scott sent to Indian Agent General Major D. MacKay on April 12, 1910.²¹ Scott wrote: "It is readily acknowledged that Indian children lose their natural resistance to illness by habiting so closely in these schools, and that they die at much higher rates than in their villages. But this alone does not justify a change in the policy of this department, which is geared towards the final solution of the Indian Problem" ("The Charge," n.16, quoting Hall 676). Aline's IRS experiences reflect what many survivors endured. Her strength and persistence of refusal to succumb as victim

to the nation state and to the church demonstrate her innate responsibility as a good relative, as a matriarch of her family and community.

Jumping forward again to 1942, Aline is a disciplined morse code operator. Her fluency in morse code paralleled her Cree language fluency, which was not beaten out of her at IRS. Because of this, she is sought out and reassigned to a highly sensitive, "secret division within the Canadian Air Force" of code talkers. She is sent to the Canadian Military Headquarters in London, where she meets Charlie "Call me Checker" Tomkins (Métis/Cree) from Grand Prairie, Alberta, played by Kindall Charters (Nlaka'pamux First Nation). In reality, Charles Marvin Tomkins was from Grouard, Alberta (about 233 kilometres east of Grand Prairie) and was nicknamed "Chicksees" by his family. Chicksees, which according to his brother Frank, means Checker (Lazarowich). *Bones* reflects Checker's prominent role in developing a Cree language code for the military, and highlights Aline's ability to not only speak Cree, but to read Cree syllabics. As a Cree Code Talker, Aline was sworn to secrecy (as all Cree Coder Talkers were until 1963), and her obedience to maintain this secret put a strain on her marriage. The inclusion of highlighting the role of Cree Code Talkers who are credited for assisting in victory over the Germans in World War Two, demonstrates resiliency and restoration—of mobilizing Indigenous languages as thrivance for those who were able to hold their languages safe, despite the aggressive campaign to disappear them.

ᐱᐱᐱᐱᐱᐱ ("To Be Starved") is an episode that provides historical context of how Indigenous conceptions of relationality were vehemently ruptured. The episode ends



in the Spears' family home; January and Matthew Spears sit at the family dining table. In front of Matthew are papers to sign that waives their rights to their children. Standing above them are two police and Father Jacobs, played by Rémy Girard. January boldly defends her progeny, invoking wâhkôhtowin, "I want my children *home* where they should be. Children need their parents! We-We provide for them! We love them!" But she is cut off by an officer, who hurls the s-word at her, a racial and misogynist slur, who threatens the Spears parents with imprisonment if they do not sign. Matthew Spears signs, and the torment in his face is visceral. January and Michael are starved of their autonomy, authority, and humanity; but worst of all they are starved of parenting and protecting their children—an act of cultural genocide, and a clear illustration of broken wâhkôhtowin. This episode further depicts another tactic of genocide through the starvation policy, which was deployed against numerous Indigenous communities, as illuminated from the opening scene. Starvation was also a technique deployed as a residential school experiment conducted by officials on Indigenous children, which Clements recreates. Starvation is also metaphorical and plays out as lacking nourishment of the heart, mind, and soul, depriving the characters of their Indigeneity. Tying back to wâhkôhtowin, children are "starved" from their kinship networks, community, and future dreams. Aline endured inhumane injustices (including torture and disfigurement at the hands and boots of diabolic nuns and deacons at the IRS) but

moved on to serve her country with pride and grit—she was deprived of her parents, of her siblings and loved ones, punished for speaking Cree and for practicing culture, and starved of her Indigenous livelihood, yet she carried her mother’s words, drenched with wâhkôhtowin and thrivance: “You are our tomorrow. ... You don’t let them win!” (from episode ᐃᐱ ᐱᐱᐱ).

Episode 2: ᐱᐱᐱ ᐱᐱᐱᐱᐱᐱ (“To Be Separated,” timed to the beat of a powwow drum)

Episode two opens in black and white, with a historical re-enactment at the House of Commons, Ottawa, in 1883. This scene features Sir John A. Macdonald, played by Vincent Gale, and Sir Hector Louis Langevin, played by Troy Mundle. Macdonald is touted as the architect of residential schools in Canada, and Langevin is considered one of the “Fathers of Confederation,” and this opening scene highlights their positions that Indigenous children should be separated from their families and communities—rupturing wâhkôhtowin—which will ultimately separate Indigenous Peoples from the land. Macdonald advocates for the implantation of the Davin Report (1879), which he waves in front of all the “old crows” (i.e. the black coated policy makers) as one to apply as a tool of assimilation in Canada, while other crows (men of the religious order, cloaked in their black robes) are perched above in the balcony overlooking the proceedings. Adding legislative separation to starvation culminated in settler power and domination, which worked to unbraid the value and teachings of being a good

rendering of wâhkôhtowin breaking. To witness a mother's profound helplessness and anguish as she cannot stop the removal of her children from their home is heartbreaking. From the perspective of Perseverance, who watches from the back of a vehicle pulling away, her parents and home shrink and she cries out, "nôhtâwiy! nikâwiy!" ("dad! mom!") Clements intimately shows how Indigenous children were turned over to the church, to be "educated" at residential school, whilst educating on political policy and legislation. These are scenes that many in the greater Canadian public have not seen or been taught. As a visual interpretation of such events, *Bones* intervenes because "it is largely what remains unsaid and *unseen* in the mainstream, and in the official archives, that has propelled so much creativity" on the big and small screen (Stewart 166). In 1933, Perseverance Spears is 6 years old and her forceful separation from her parents, home, and homelands shatters her safety and innocence. This episode fluctuates between the separations of the 1930s and the separations of the 1960s, where we witness the violent apprehension of Perseverance's three young children in 1962, Talia (likely aged 3), Tye (approximately aged 2), and Bronson (an infant).

In 1962, Perseverance leads a high-risk lifestyle in Winnipeg, which includes the solicitation of sex and drugs which allude to her lack of responsible parenting and is clearly a breach in wâhkôhtowin teachings. The spiralic storytelling of these two critical moments of separation capture the twin institutions of incarceration (IRS and a federal penitentiary), where Perseverance's freedom was halted, and these scenes draw upon



a viewer's affect. Replicating the synchronization of children's footsteps marching in a single file at IRS, Clements overlays images of the female inmates also marching in line to be processed. The flashbacks also serve to illuminate Perseverance's childhood trauma of separation and at intake when she receives her prison garb, she is told her inmate identification number is J503448, which triggers her to recall the day she arrived at IRS, when a nun issues Perseverance's residential school number, which is 58. For the adult Perseverance, "to be separated" has repeated itself because she is arrested for beating her children's molester with a baseball bat. As she is arrested, she repeats "I never liked it," because her actions conjured memories of all the priests who fucked her as a child. She tells a detective that "bashing in Dwayne's pathetic face," brought her some healing. Perseverance is scheduled to serve an eight-year sentence at the same federal penitentiary where Chiefs Big Bear and Poundmaker were imprisoned in real life in 1885. Upon hearing about the prison's historic legacy from her Dene cell mate Immpy (played by Cree actor Paulina Alexis), Perseverance sarcastically scoffs that now she feels at home—a place she has not been since her familial separation and subsequent IRS incarceration. While Perseverance is serving with good behaviour, her sister Aline visits her. During their time together, Perseverance pleads with Aline to find Talia, Tye, and Bronson who were put up for adoption (and advertised in newspapers, reflecting the real-life AIM "Adopt Indian and

Métis process). In response, Aline signs the Cree syllabics ᐱᐱᐱᐱᐱᐱ ("I promise") onto Perseverance's hand, which brings her to tears as it is yet another reminder of secrets shared (and broken) between the sisters that go back to IRS days.

Aline signs "Promise" in Cree syllabics (ᐱᐱᐱᐱᐱᐱ) three times: lovingly on her sister's palm twice, and later, on her granddaughter Percy's palm.²² The promise also anchors January's words to Aline that commence this essay. When the children are severed from their family, home, and lands, they are also separated from their animal kin, namely a horse named Unteki—who also, according to wâhkôhtowin, experiences the break. In 1933, Aline plots her and her siblings' escape from residential school. Seated in their nightgowns on creaky, iron beds, she tells her sister Perseverance the escape plan—which recognizes Aline's knowledge of the landscape. Perseverance asks Aline to promise that their escape and return to home will be like it was. In reply, Aline takes Perseverance's right hand and signs "Promise" on it. Devastatingly, their plan is threatened when Perseverance gets caught by Father Jacobs and is left behind, while the three other siblings escape. It is winter, the snow is deep and the youngest, Tye, has tuberculosis and is weak. In 1907, Dr. Peter Henderson Bryce found that "roughly one-quarter of all Indigenous children attending residential schools died from tuberculosis" (Hey, Blackstock, and Kirlew 223). Furthermore, Tye's foot gets caught in an animal trap. Wâhkôhtowin clearly underscores how Aline treats her siblings and her non-human relations (privileging spirituality, animals, and the land). She is principled in protocols and is familiar with the land and landscape, despite the deep snow—she



demonstrates her kinship with this space when she leaves her brothers to venture on her own to find her way home. Upon arrival, she does not notice the sign posted on the fence that the property has been seized, so she runs into an empty home calling for her mom, “nikâwiy,” and for her dad, “nôhtâwiy!” As she weeps from no reply, she hears her horse, Unteki, neighing in the barn. Here, it appears that Unteki is calling out to Aline for help, as they have been abandoned: tied up, hungry, and thirsty. Aline runs to Unteki’s side and apologizes profusely. Though the horse may be malnourished and tired, they reciprocate Aline’s kindness and transports her back to where her brothers are stranded. Tragically, Tye dies trapped in the snow, which echoes reports of children who escaped and froze while trying to find their way home from residential schools. Tye’s siblings sing a Cree Burial Song for him on the spot. But soon after, the ominous messenger crows gather in the trees overhead, indicating to Aline that they have been discovered. They are severely punished at IRS. Sister Ruth, a diabolic nun, tortured Aline and stomped on her hand, which resulted in a “childhood injury” (of a broken and disfigured hand) that deprived and starved her from fulfilling her dreams of becoming a concert pianist. Further punishment for the two eldest siblings, Johnnie and Aline, was their separation from one another, and they do not see each other for the next thirty-five years. These decades of separation put a toll on their relationship—there is none, hence no actioning of wâhkôhtowin.

actor Gail Maurice) and Jake (played by Kevin Loring, N'lakapamux from Lytton First Nation). "To Let Go" begins with the caption "Oka Crisis- August 28, 1990," and re-stories the siege at Kanehsatake. Taylor is an attorney and worked as a commissioner for the Royal Commission of Aboriginal Peoples, which was incorporated after the events at Kanehsatake. The episode highlights contemporary cases that have set precedent for the legal decisions of IRS atrocities. To understand the weight of her role as an attorney is to understand the hurdles her ancestors had to jump, given the restrictions of the Indian Act, prior to amendments. Taylor's healing and thrivance are facilitated through her work. Similarly, her brother Jake had to shed (or let go of) his trauma, which he did through Longhouse ceremony with their father's community. Adam's brother, Dr. Tim Whallach, is played by real-life physician / actor Dr. Evan Adams (Tla'amin First Nation). Uncle Tim announces, "One of our sons have come home!" This begins Jake's transformation from traumatized and victimized to healed and whole through ceremony. As his family in the Longhouse sing, "You are never all alone. We are your family," he exhales, releases, and expunges his trauma: flashbacks of his parent's forced separation from their families, of his father's suicide, of his own sexual abuse, and of his auntie Perseverance's violent death. These traumas are embodied as crow feathers, which he regurgitates, and whole crows fly out of his body to the top of the Longhouse. The entire episode is a metaphoric exhale and demonstrates how wâhkôhtowin "encompasses the relationships between people, the animals, the landscape, and the spirit world" (Wambold and Supernant 277). It ends



with Elder Aline, now played by Carla Rae, as she sits on the porch with her granddaughter, Percy (who is mother to two children). While focusing on a long shot of a starry night, Elder Aline shares a story told to her by her mother, evoking wâhkôhtowin, “We’re made from the stars. And that anything is possible because we’re part of the universe that is good.”

Episode 5: ᐃᑕ ᑎᑕᑦ \ (“To Be Here”)

The visual narrative aesthetic of ᐃᑕ ᑎᑕᑦ \ (“To Be Here”) balances and centres truth telling through three braided (spiralic) acts: the epic, multi-generational fictional world of *Bones*, documentary and journalistic reporting, and real-life first-person testimonials.

Clements contrasts and overlaps shots to tell parallel stories and “To Be Here” opens with the ceremonial dressing of Elder Aline Spears contrasted with the separate dressing of Cardinal Thomas Miller. As she gets help putting on her Cree beaded floral wrap-around moccasins, he has help putting on his white clerical collar; as she puts on her fully-beaded belt, he puts on his red fascia (sash); as her fully beaded bandolier bag is draped across one shoulder, his gold pectoral cross is centred around his neck; when she puts on her wedding ring, he puts on his signet ring. These accessories are atop of Aline’s contemporary ribbon dress, and his accessories are atop a black

cassock with red trim. These parallel shots signal equality, yet knowing how much time, labour, materials, and creativity are needed to bead and sew each of Aline's handmade items of her regalia, this instantly elevates her rank and role over the Cardinal. It is a beautifully empowering scene, centering Indigenous fashion and design, some of which are likely passed down from previous generations, honouring kinship. It is 2009 at the Vatican. Aline and the "Canadian" delegation of Indigenous residential school survivors are dripping in their finest attire made from tanned hides, beadwork, featherwork, and ribbonwork to meet with the Pope and his entourage. This mirrors the 2022 real-life event, and outside of the Vatican, *Bones* showcases award-winning APTN Video Journalist Tina House (Métis) covering the event. This non-diegetic broadcast is directly for the viewer and does not air on the character's television in the fictional story, yet the presumption is that it's a global news story. In the finale's first five minutes, Indigenous presence is present, which is how I interpret "To Be Here." We are here.

That news is simulcast points to a shift in narrative: Clements weaves a story of fiction with factual reporting (ostensibly because news journalism is intended to be truthful and unbiased). Back inside the Vatican, the Pope offers an Italian-language apology then opens the floor to the delegation. "To Be Here" demonstrate one's aliveness. Appropriately, Aline steps forward and offers a Cree-language introduction, with her daughter Taylor as translator. Aline then calmly asserts that Cardinal Miller (Head of the Royal Commission on Sexual Abuse), seated to the right of the Pope,



raped her when she was sixteen, resulting in a pregnancy. This is the first time Aline shared this information publicly and with her daughter who was translating. There is a flashback to 1939 when this life shattering moment occurred. Nine months later, she birthed a son who is immediately taken from her. She is starved of parenting and separated from a baby who the nuns say is dead to her. They deny her human right to practice wâhkôhtowin. The crow has been a recurring symbol, one that foretells doom, chaos, and disharmony. After her disclosure to the Pope, the symbolism shifts to white doves, who fly above Aline and her kinship network (including her daughter and the delegation of other residential school survivors). The doves represent freedom and peace and suggest vibrant Indigenous tomorrows. Telling the truth to the Pope elevates Elder Aline's freedom and brings peace, which takes her back to when she was sixteen, postpartum. The scene flashes back to when she reunited with her mother—the day after she gave birth—and they return to the prairies, her homeland. There, her mother leads in a cleansing ceremony where they sing, cry, and let go. This scenario commences this essay, where January firmly commands, "You are our tomorrow." The storyline has come full circle, demonstrating Aline's strength and resilience, and restoring wâhkôhtowin, because she did not pass trauma on to her children or grandchildren. They, and Indigenous generations to come, are our tomorrow.

The shot cuts to the second act in this braided narrative. A documentary film crew is taping Aline's IRS story. Alanis Obomsawin (Abenaki) makes a cameo appearance as a documentary filmmaker, and interviews Aline. Breaking the fourth wall, in a squarely centred, close-up shot, Aline speaks directly to the camera, "I've said all I've come to say. You know everything about me." This allusion to knowing Aline's story reflects her honouring of wâhkôhtowin and began with her ancestors, both human and buffalo-kin, when they survived near extinction, as narrated in the first episode. Human and "buffalo bodies [are] resurgent bodies" (Crosschild, et. al, 8). It becomes clear that the entire series informs Obomsawin's documentary film (though Obomsawin is listed in the credits as "Indigenous Director," and not as herself). In true Obomsawin style, with care and respect, she asks Aline if there is more to her story. After a beat, Aline retrieves a decades-old, folded piece of paper from her purse. After she unfolds it, she reveals "a song that's a map." What looks like a sheet of music is in fact a map. Elder Aline explains, as a child she had to devise a clandestine way to map the geography of the IRS and its adjacent grounds, "the staff are banks of the river, except they're curved. Bass clef is south, treble is north, half notes are trees. Whole notes is where they ... they buried [Tye]. The breath mark is where we thought they buried others." Her creative cartography was pivotal in the discovery of unmarked graves, which was timely. "Just one week before Marie Clements was scheduled to start shooting *Bones of Crows* at the former Kamloops Indian Residential School, news broke that 215 unmarked graves were found at the site. And even though that



tragic discovery could have stopped production entirely, it ended up giving the cast and crew a new sense of purpose and momentum” (Rashotte). The new sense of purpose and momentum was to honour the ancestors of the past generations, through the responsible collaboration of present-day creatives for future descendants. Clements integrates a similar scene, as the documentary film scene cuts to a morgue and research space where there are 560 human remains that were found at the residential school Aline and her siblings attended—which were recovered because of the map she created and protected. Aline’s son Jake is onsite, meeting with Stephen Means, the forensic anthropologist, played by Lorne Cardinal (Cree from Sucker Creek). Means determined that the children’s remains date from 1910 to 1962, and that most were protein deficient, affirming the starvation policy was implemented, while many bones also had questionable bone fractures, suggesting violent deaths. Jake provides a sample of his DNA in hopes of identifying Tye’s remains, and afterwards, he pays his respects at the residential school site and made a tobacco offering to the land and to the waters. The riverbank is shot with an aerial drone and gradually, several orange stake flags come into view—resembling Aline’s map of music notes—marking sites where children’s remains and anomalies have been detected by ground penetrating radar.

ᐱᐱᐱᐱᐱᐱ ("To Be Here") incorporates threads of Aline's family story that have been left unanswered. Aline kept her promise from episode two to Perseverance, to "take care of each other" (Campbell). And with Taylor's help she has found her late sister's adult children, which enacts wâhkôhtowin. This is a romanticized scene, as it is rare that broken Indigenous families are united, but it offers hope. Another thread from episode one is how she met Adam. *Bones* traces Aline Spears' personal journey from heartbreak to heartsong, as the finale culminates in her granddaughter Percy's piano concert. While Percy plays piano in a long, red gown, she sings the bilingual ballad, "You Are My Bones" (written by Clements, Wayne Lavalley, and Jesse Zubot, performed by Siibii, and in collaboration with the Victoria Symphony).²³ Flashbacks—not of trauma, but of peace, harmony, happiness, and freedom—are intercut with the live concert performance, synched with powerful lyrics. Elder Aline remembers riding Unteki on the open prairies alongside her siblings, their unbroken wâhkôhtowin of a happy home life, teaching her granddaughter how to play piano, and her and Adam's love story. These scenes are intercut with the concert and lyrics to beautiful effect. Aline's final lines are, "In our dreams, in your dreams. In our bones, in your bones. This dream can take generations. [...] Make no mistake, we are here." "To Be Here" honours Indigenous past, present, and future generations. Percy sings the final lines of the song: "You are my home. You are my fire. You are my bones." The fictional part of the film fades to black and transitions to a black and white still photo of a residential school, overlaid with a survivor's actual testimony: "I knew it wasn't gonna be a good place."



This third act braids historical black and white photos of residential schools and students, footage from the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), and documentary-style testimonials of residential school survivors, featuring Hazel Squakin, Chief Harvey McLeod, Jo-Anne Gottfriedson, Debbie Delorme, Arnie Narcisse, Chastity Delorme, Barbara McNab-Larson, and Michael Cheena. The inclusion of their identities, voices, and experiences are done with respect and reflect Clements' commitment to being a good relative and privileging the agency of survivors.²⁴ Stewart observes a similar device in *Grizzlies* (2018), "this aural montage, however brief, simulates a sharing circle and ostensibly guides our attention from the protagonist's story to other real-life survivors and experiences" (168). The televisual sharing circle does more than shift focus from Aline, it brings in relatives and community. It is an aesthetic praxis of restoring wâhkôhtowin. In "Miyo-wîcêhtowin," (which means "the laws concerning good relations" in Cree), Elders said that "the circle represents coming together or bringing together of a nation [in] unity under the laws of the Creator" (14). They continue, "a nation united under the laws of the Creator represents a healthy, strong, and stable nation, possessing the capability to nurture, protect, and care for and heal its people" (15). Sharing the first-hand experiences, raw testimonials, and footage from the TRC hearings was a unifying force of restoration.



without naming these internal dynamics, nothing changes. Like *Roots*' intended audience, non-Indigenous viewers of *Bones* are tasked with confronting their own actions (or inactions). Clements said that "if people can feel, if they can have empathy, then there's a potential for change" (Saa and Adchariyavanich). With knowledge and empathy come gap bridging, bridge building, and strengthening relationships. The way I understand kinship, being a good ancestor, guest, relative, parent, partner, and friend, is guided by k'é, which shares commonalities with wâhkôhtowin. Relationships are respectful, reciprocal, and consider the spiritual, more than human, and lands, waters, and skies. Because settler colonists did not recognize Indigenous Peoples as people, there was no expectation that they could enact wâhkôhtowin. They had no understanding of Indigenous-centred wâhkôhtowin. It is not correct to say that settlers broke wâhkôhtowin; however, their politics, greed, and violence were some of the reasons why wâhkôhtowin was fractured among our ancestors (humans, buffalo, the earth) and why we continue to restore and mend broken wâhkôhtowin. It will take more than seven generations, as brokenness is not easily or instantly repairable.

In creating and sharing an epic tale as a television series, viewers learn "the what" of history, policy, and contemporary stories. The difficult work is in the "so what," or the "now what". Clements' response is to centre wâhkôhtowin and elevate Indigenous presence, as existing, living, and thriving in a temporal present, as well as into the

future, demonstrating how visual stories can restore wellness, peace, and harmony in the lives of Indigenous Peoples. Thinking about the role that Indigenous visual media has as powerful and truthful storytelling in the current moment, demonstrates its necessity for restoring relations (or what some may brand "reconciliation"). It is exciting to also look forward, to imagine a future of vibrance and thriving in Indigenous visual storytelling in our professional practice as scholars of Indigenous visual studies.

Ahéhee', I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to the anonymous reviewers whose guidance, suggestions, critique, and close reading has made this a stronger essay.

Notes

¹ Secwépemc means People of the Shuswap, "People of the Land."

² The title card for this scene reflects that this moment takes place on October 4, 1939, which is the same day that Adolf Hitler secretly decreed that genocidal crimes committed by German soldiers and police would be forgiven as they would be granted amnesty.

³ As *Bones of Crows* is a connected film and television series, this scene appears in both the feature-length film and episode five of *The Series*.

⁴ Métis scholar Brenda Macdougall writes, "'wahkootowin' is an ancient term that is still used in northwestern Saskatchewan by both Michif and Cree language speakers—particularly, but not exclusively, in spiritual invocations during ceremonies and during elder teachings about the importance of family—because wahkootowin was (and still is) the foundation for society in the region and an integral part of the Cree way of seeing the world, nehiyaw tahp sinowin. Because Cree was the maternal ancestral language of the Metis community, Cree terminology and concepts of family construction are privileged in this study over francophone, anglophone, and Dene phrases or concepts about family structures, even where similarities in practice may exist." (8)

⁵ Because *Bones of Crows* centres a Plains Cree family and protagonist, I highlight thinkers who are Plains Cree. It is worth noting a Rock Cree worldview of wâhkôhtowin: "The law of relations was set by wîsahkîcâhk [the cultural hero Elder Brother] who



always acknowledged all his relations. In his travels, affecting the universe in many ways, none were more profound than his example of addressing all people, bird, and animals as “nisīmis—my little sibling.” The asinīskāwithiniwak (Rock Cree) followed the law established by wīсахkīcāhk because they acknowledge the extended family system” (Swan 39). Swan translates wīсахkīcāhk as “trickster,” but Innes’ *Elder Brother and the Law of the People* (2013) makes a compelling argument why Elder Brother as a cultural hero is most accurate. After educating on kinship terms, Swan concludes, “It is through the knowledge of the kinship system that children know how to act and behave towards relations” (Swan 40).

⁶ There is ample scholarly discourse on wāhkōhtowin studies across multiple disciplines. I have included the following two recent definitions of wāhkōhtowin because they add deeper understanding. Dawn Wambold and Kisha Supernant write that wāhkōhtowin “guide[s] how relationships are entered into” (277). In an essay that could be interpreted as a direct response to Maria Campbell’s concern about “broken Wahkotowin” (though uncited) Lorri Neilsen Glenn’s “Wahkohtowin: Keeping Things Whole,” poses a question to understand wāhkōhtowin: “what if we erased the notion of Other and thought of the land and creatures moving on it as kin?” She continues, “An understanding of the concept of Wahkohtowin—a Cree word referring to our wholeness, our kinship and interrelatedness— informs the lives of Indigenous people in many parts of the land we know as Canada. This kinship honours the rhythms and movements of those around us in ways less antagonistic and hostile than Western perspectives have invited to date. Honouring land as kin is a cooperative and hospitable stance, a way of being in the world that invites stewardship rather than ownership.” (5)

⁷ *Itwēwina: Plains Cree Dictionary* gives five definitions of miyo-pimātisiswin: 1) good behaviour, good life, 2) exemplary life, 3) Good life, 4) Good way of living, 5) the act of leading an exemplary life. <https://itwewina.altlab.app/search?q=good+life+>.

⁸ I use restoration as it is conveyed in Diné thinking and it comes from the concept of *hózhǫ́* (which means being in balance, harmony, and beauty, culminating in wellness and restoration).

⁹ The character Aline is played by three different actors, depending on age. The child Aline is played by Summer Testawich (Cree), the teen/adult/young senior citizen is played by Grace Dove, and the Elder Aline is played by Carla Rae (Seneca / Mohawk / French).

¹⁰ There are two study guides, both authored by Vicki Lynne George. The “Feature Film Study Guide” is forty pages long and the “5-Part Series Study Guide” is forty-five pages long. This “Director’s Statement” is in both, and this statement appears on the same page in both guides.

¹¹ The twelve First Nations are: Kwikwetlem, Scia’New, and Tseycum, as well as the Nations of Esquimalt, Lekwungen Songhees, Musqueam, Okanagan, Squamish, Tk’emlúps Te Secwepemc, Tla’amin, Tsartlip, and Tsleil-waututh.

¹² See also Balaga and Clements and Philpott.

¹³ Some Indigenous-directed documentary films about residential schools include the Academy Award nominated *Sugarcane* (2024) co-directed by Julian Brave Noisecat (Secwépemc from Canim Lake Band, Tsq’secen), and Emily Kassie (non-Indigenous), *WaaPaaKe (Tomorrow)* by Jules Arita Koostachin (Cree) in 2023, *Returning Home* (2021) by Sean Stiller (Secwépemc from Williams Lake First Nation or T’exelc), *We Can’t Make the Same Mistake Twice* (2016) by Alanis Obomsawin (Abenaki), and *Muffins for Granny* (2007) by Nadia McLaren (Anishinaabe). See Stewart’s “*Truth and Reconciliation Cinema*” for a concentrated study on IRS fiction films—he includes films directed by non-Indigenous filmmakers.

¹⁴ Translations are from *itwêwina: Plains Cree Dictionary*, <https://itwewina.altlab.app/>.

¹⁵ As Clements is Sahtú Dene and Métis, the use of syllabics could signal a nod to Dene syllabics that are rooted in the Cree (and Ojibwe) syllabics. However, in an email reply to me, Clements clarified the film was solely “Cree and Coast Salish (Sliammon) so no Dene.”

¹⁶ They were Ray G. Thunderchild, Richard Thunderchild, Karen Whitecalf, Kimowan Ahenakew, Hazel Ahenakew, Alvina Thunderchild, Fred Thunderchild, Harrison Thunderchild and Bernice Thunderchild. From: https://www.linkedin.com/posts/raygthunderchild_the-cree-reading-crew-for-bones-of-crows-activity-7021492374883229696-fd87.

¹⁷ See Slark for the historical intersection of this place.

¹⁸ The distance from current day Brandon to Regina is about 362 kms. The translation from Ratt comes from: <https://creeliteracy.org/2017/11/06/indigenous-mapping-workshop-2017-supporting-cree-as-a-21st-century-language/>.

¹⁹ “An unhealthy blend of ingredients was being mixed. Many members of Big Bear’s Band, including his son Imases and the War Chief Wandering Spirit, were becoming frustrated with the state of affairs. Compounding the problem was the presence of Indian Agent Quinn, a man known to have been abusive to Indians, and Farm Instructor Delaney, who had been accused of violating Indian women. The government was aware of the unpopularity of these men with the Indians, and had been planning to relocate them” (Stonechild 161).

²⁰ The song was translated to Cree by Randy Morin, and the original is credited to Porter Grainger and Everett Robbins.

²¹ See “Truth Before Reconciliation,” *Corber Consulting: Relationships, Reconciliation, Results*, 29 Sept. 2021, https://corberconsulting.ca/2021/09/29/truth-before-reconciliation/#_ftn1.

²² The syllabics mean “kihci itwêwin,” which is more than “I promise.” The *itwêwina* dictionary says it means: “vow, oath, oath-taking (on the Bible), speaking the truth.”



²³ Beyond the scope of this essay, is the recognition and analysis of the collaboration of the concert performance, featured in the season finale. Clements hand selected the lead performer, Siibii (Angel), who shares that singing with the symphony orchestra was what her kôhkom (grandmother) had dreamed for her, which is directly tied to wâhkôhtowin. See, "The Making of 'You Are My Bones: Behind the Soundtrack for Bones of Crows on CBC, APTN, & SRC,"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cHdDGq1CsK8>.

²⁴ Stewart cites McCracken (2017) whose work is about archival still photos but the sentiment relates to these testimonies: "The act of naming begins the process of individualising the historical record and eliminating the erasure enacted through past archival and government approaches to record keeping (173).

²⁵ For the starvation policy, see Innes' "Historians and Indigenous Genocide in Saskatchewan"; for the buffalo genocide, see Hubbard and Crosschild, et. al.

²⁶ Matt Zoller Seitz writes "Haley and James Lee's screenplay [of *Roots*] indicts white viewers in a meticulous, unrelenting way, showing that the entire nation was complicit in this horror, which ripped indigenous [sic] people from one continent and transplanted them in another, taking away language and religion and ritual and replacing it with the practices of oppressors, then insisting that they graciously accept servitude as a fact of life, or worse, as the manifestation of an alien Christian god's will."

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