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The Appropriation of Lacrosse:  
Competitive Lacrosse and The Creator's Game

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Race, Ethnicity, and Religion

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According to historian Ryan Hall, many people of European descent wrongly associate the sport of lacrosse with, “elite prep school culture.”<sup>12</sup> Within several Native nations, lacrosse is considered to be “the Creator’s game”.<sup>3</sup> According to the spiritual traditions of these nations, God gave lacrosse to humanity to peacefully settle disputes and prevent the shedding of blood between tribes. As a member of Augustana College’s Women’s Lacrosse team and a religious person, it was unsettling to learn that I am unwittingly participating in the appropriation, whitewashing, and masculinization of North American settlers through my sport and its associations as a recreational and violent game. In this paper, I will first illuminate the appropriation of the sport of lacrosse by North American settlers. Then, with the aid of Tomoko Masuzawa’s argument that the concepts of race and religion are productions of modernity in conversation with David Chidester’s notion of the frontier, I will analyze the transformation of the religious peace-making game into the violent recreational sport of lacrosse. Next, I will discuss its whitewashing and masculinization and demonstrate the past and present disenfranchisement of Indigenous peoples from their religious game. Finally, I will explore the possibility of reconciliation between Indigenous peoples and settlers through the Creator’s game and the generosity of Native tribes.

Prior to being systematically appropriated by European settlers across North America, lacrosse was ceremonial, competitive, and steeped in a rich oral history relating to mythology.<sup>4</sup> Although the mythology surrounding the Creator’s game can vary greatly from tribe to tribe, some commonalities are shared between tribes. The concept of the Creator’s game is grounded in

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<sup>1</sup> Native American lacrosse player and historian Ryan Downey concurs with this statement.

<sup>2</sup> Hall, Ryan. “The Creator’s Game: Lacrosse, Identity, and Indigenous Nationhood by Allan Downey (Review).” *Canadian Journal of History* 54, no. 1-2 (2019): 206

<sup>3</sup> Downey, Allan. *The Creators Game: Lacrosse, Identity, and Indigenous Nationhood*. Vancouver ; Toronto: University of British Columbia Press, 2018. p. 22

<sup>4</sup> Ibid 22

it being the way conflicts are resolved in the Skyland through games as to keep peace and prevent bloodshed.<sup>5</sup> It was gifted to humans by the Creator to settle disputes between clans, bring medicinal healing, and to entertain the Creator and spectators.<sup>6</sup> As non-Indigenous people colonized this game,<sup>7</sup> they lost the meaning behind it, and, according to Downey, inflated the negative aspects of humanness in the sport which include selfishness, vanity, and greed.<sup>8</sup> Instead of understanding these nuanced spiritualities of the game, non-Indigenous people purloined the game, stripping it of its spiritual roots and recasting it into the hyper-masculinized bellicose form it is associated with today. Once the game had been changed to fit European ideals of masculinity, Canada adopted the game as their national sport. Not only was the sport of lacrosse decontextualized from its spiritual purpose within Native tribes, it was then used as a tool to systematically oppress indigenous person by disenfranchising them from participating in competitive leagues for lacrosse.<sup>9</sup>

The appropriation of lacrosse can be understood as one piece of Native American culture that was misunderstood and misrepresented because of the bias of settlers caused by their Eurocentric worldviews. In *The Invention of World Religions*, Tomoko Mazuzawa illuminates the hierarchical nature of so-called major world religions in light of the classifications of the word religion coming from a European context.<sup>10</sup> These definitions of religion persist today and cause many religions including those of Indigenous people to be perceived as savage and insignificant

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<sup>5</sup> Downey, Allan. *The Creator's Game: Lacrosse, Identity, and Indigenous Nationhood*. Vancouver ; Toronto: University of British Columbia Press, 2018. p. 7

<sup>6</sup> Ibid 11

<sup>7</sup> This was done by using the spiritual practice as entertainment, leading to it being transformed into a sport with no religious ties

<sup>8</sup> Ibid 254

<sup>9</sup> Poulter, Gillian. "The Creator's Game: Lacrosse, Identity, and Indigenous Nationhood by Allan Downey (Review)." *The Canadian Historical Review* 100, no. 3 (September 2019): 473–74.

<sup>10</sup> Masuzawa, Tomoko. *The Invention of World Religions: or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*. Chicago, IL: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2007. Pg?

because they do not mold to the Euro-centric ideals and definitions. Because lacrosse was a religious ritual and practice by Native people, these preexisting religious biases changed the way settlers perceived the game. St. Augustine's views shaped many concepts of religion within European traditions, thus impacting the concepts of world religions Mazuzawa discusses. In a section of *Confessions*, Augustine refers to sports as a violent distraction from truly important spiritual matters.<sup>11</sup> The limit of the Euro-centric perspectives on world religions provides some exposition regarding the appropriation of the Creator's Game. European's prioritized Christianity and secularization, so even if they saw lacrosse as spiritual rather than merely a game, they likely did not see the appropriation as the travesty and injustice it is because of their skewed views of what fit the category of important and religious.

As settlers' changed lacrosse from a spiritual ritual to a competitive and violent game, they also destroyed the openness associated with the game by adding boundaries so that the game was contained and better for spectators. These borders are both literal and symbolic for the game of lacrosse. Perhaps using the typically negative ideas of border and frontier along with Indigenous generosity, there is hope for reconciliation of the game of lacrosse and Indigenous people. The Creator's game is meant to be played for entertainment of the creator with no confining out of bounds lines, and many Indigenous people welcome anyone including non-Indigenous people to play.<sup>12</sup> There were no boundaries in the sport and it would often be played across multiple open fields. Problems arose because non-Indigenous people drew boundary lines. The game of lacrosse was confined to boundaries though it had previously been played in open field with no borders, and boundaries were drawn around indigenous people separating their

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<sup>11</sup> Augustine. *Confessions; a New Translation by Henry Chadwick*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. p. 99

<sup>12</sup> Downey, Allan. *The Creators Game: Lacrosse, Identity, and Indigenous Nationhood*. Vancouver ; Toronto: University of British Columbia Press, 2018.

space from the space taken by settlers.<sup>13</sup> Religious studies scholar David Chidester defines a frontier zone as a point of contact rather than a boundary.<sup>14</sup> If the biggest issue with the appropriation of lacrosse surrounds the concept of boundaries, perhaps a frontier zone can offer some relief. Because frontiers are a point of contact, lacrosse can become a frontier between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Frontiers are often negatively understood as always having one group asserting dominance, and historically violence, in a way that forces its ideals and traditions on another, but what if the settlers could embrace that lacrosse is a part of Indigenous culture and use it as a way to help reconcile the years of appropriation. Downey saw a partnership between settlers and Indigenous communities through lacrosse as a way to perceive knowledge that, “has the potential to re-empower Indigenous history on its own terms.”<sup>15</sup> With lacrosse as the frontier, perhaps Indigenous history can regain a little of its power in a way that does not force it to become part of non-Indigenous history but recognizes the positive impact Indigenous people have had on settlers.

As non-Indigenous people colonized the Creator’s Game, they lost the peacemaking and spiritual purpose, which, according to Downey, inflated the negative aspects of humanness in the sport which is categorized by desire for self-gain through image, wealth, and status.<sup>16</sup> The increase in the selfishness, vanity, and greed of the game can be displayed by its shift to being associated with masculinity and violence. When people find out I play lacrosse, they often remark how violent the game is. The idea that in many people’s heads the topic of lacrosse immediately brings with it a connection to violence runs contrary to the original intent of the

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<sup>13</sup> Chidester, David. *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2011. p. 22

<sup>14</sup> Ibid 20

<sup>15</sup> Downey, Allan. *The Creators Game: Lacrosse, Identity, and Indigenous Nationhood*. Vancouver; Toronto: University of British Columbia Press, 2018. p. 256

<sup>16</sup> Ibid 254

game as a way for tribes to maintain peace without the violence associated with wars and battles. Assuming lacrosse to be violent is the opposite of what the Creator's Game was and is for many indigenous people. Additionally, as previously demonstrated through Mazuzawa's analysis of religion, settlers wrongly interpreted the purpose of lacrosse to be recreation or combat. Based on these false assumptions and biases, in colonializing the game they imbued, "it with masculine Victorian-era values of discipline and gentlemanly conduct that they believed would improve" the game.<sup>17</sup> A game that was originally meant to be a spiritual practice, a gift from the creator, and peace now represents masculinity and violence because of the whitewashing of colonizers due to their bias in assuming Native culture to be savage.

During the depression, the popular game of box lacrosse was formed by indigenous people as a way of keeping their ability to play the game alive while they were being systematically discriminated against.<sup>18</sup> At that time in Canadian history, indigenous teams were not allowed to participate in tournaments and leagues for lacrosse.<sup>19</sup> Although now there are not rules and regulations preventing native tribes from forming teams in these leagues, capitalism and the inflation of prices on lacrosse gear still stand as barriers between the Indigenous people and the game taken from them. In accordance with Hall's suggestion that lacrosse is wrongly associated with prep school culture today, the reason for this often lies in the economics.<sup>20</sup> Prep schools are associated with wealth as is the sport of lacrosse. Although it was originally played with objects that could be found and made on Native people's land, now sticks, balls, and

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<sup>17</sup> Hall, Ryan. "The Creator's Game: Lacrosse, Identity, and Indigenous Nationhood by Allan Downey (Review)." *Canadian Journal of History* 54, no. 1-2 (2019): 206

<sup>18</sup> Poulter, Gillian. "The Creator's Game: Lacrosse, Identity, and Indigenous Nationhood by Allan Downey (Review)." *The Canadian Historical Review* 100, no. 3 (September 2019): 473-74.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid* 173

<sup>20</sup> Hall, Ryan. "The Creator's Game: Lacrosse, Identity, and Indigenous Nationhood by Allan Downey (Review)." *Canadian Journal of History* 54, no. 1-2 (2019): 206

protective gear are created in factories and sold by sporting good companies for hundreds of dollars. When I first began playing lacrosse, my parents were surprised to learn that most sticks cost over a hundred dollars and some of the nice ones can cost much more than that. These costs make it more difficult for Indigenous people to be involved in lacrosse leagues as they may not have the money to afford the luxurious equipment required by the leagues. There is no option to use homemade equipment as many mandates require approve gear made my specific companies. Although there are no longer specific rules preventing Indigenous people from playing lacrosse, many are still being kept from the game through the regulations imposed by a capitalistic society.

The disenfranchisement of Indigenous people and appropriation of their spiritual practices associated with the sport of lacrosse one may cause one to wonder if indigenous peoples and settlers may be able to seek reconciliation through playing the Creator's Game. Certainly one game cannot erase decades of wrong doings, but perhaps if settlers can come to terms with the areas in which they have disenfranchised and stolen the game in the past and the ways in which whitewashing and discrimination still exist they can begin to help give back the sacredness of the religious activity. In many native cultures the Creator's Game is viewed as a healing ritual and perhaps it is the same divine healing needed between settlers and indigenous people.<sup>21</sup> Some concepts for further consideration in the potential of the game as a frontier are the boundary lines and meanings behind it. There are boundaries imposed in modern lacrosse to create it to be a scored and viewed game, but that was not the case in the Creator's Game. Could there be an opportunity for modern lacrosse players to engage in this history with the help of the indigenous people in a ceremonial game of boundaryless lacrosse? Or would settlers even be willing to inhabit a humble posture rather than trying to dictate the narrative of the game and

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<sup>21</sup> Hall, Ryan. "The Creator's Game: Lacrosse, Identity, and Indigenous Nationhood by Allan Downey (Review)." *Canadian Journal of History* 54, no. 1-2 (2019): 206

religious underpinnings? These questions and many like them remain unanswered. It is unclear whether the Creator's Game can heal the decades of cultural wrongdoings against indigenous people, but this proposal stokes the remnants of hope for a reorientation of the settler-Indigenous relationship. Even if no game is played for reconciliation, non-indigenous lacrosse players coming to terms with their culpability and ongoing privilege today must wrestle with their colonial identity by better understanding the history of the game, Mazuzawa's ideas of religion, Chidester's analysis of frontier making, and the continued disenfranchisement of indigenous peoples.

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