

The Resurrection of “Charlie” Wenjack

Shortly after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) released its final report in December 2015, now-deceased Canadian musician Gord Downie of The Tragically Hip released his phenomenally successful solo album and graphic novel *Secret Path* in commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the tragic death of twelve-year-old Chanie (“Charlie”) Wenjack. Wenjack, of the Marten Falls Ojibwe First Nation in Northern Ontario, died in an attempt to escape from the Cecilia Jeffrey Indian Residential School in Kenora, Ontario, in 1966. He was trying to return to his father, who worked in a mine near Ogoki Post, and, wearing only a windbreaker, walked for more than three days before he died of exposure by the CNR railway tracks, seven hundred kilometres from home. This same tragedy inspired numerous artistic efforts coinciding with the release of the TRC’s final report, including music by A Tribe Called Red and the short film “SNIP” by Métis filmmaker Terril Calder. Controversial writer Joseph Boyden created three works based on Wenjack’s story: the novella *Wenjack*, the Royal Winnipeg Ballet’s *Going Home Star*, and a “Heritage Minute” funded by the Canadian government.

The TRC report condemned Canada for its attempt to eliminate Indigenous cultures and assimilate Indigenous peoples. “The establishment and operation of residential schools,” the report reads, “were a central element of this policy, which can best be described as ‘cultural genocide’” (Truth 7). The release of the report and the years of testimony that preceded it contributed to a desire among many Canadians for change, and the resurrection of Wenjack’s story is testament to that desire. What the various treatments of the story reveal, however, are two very distinct approaches

to change; the first foregrounds the Canadian nation, while the second highlights Indigenous sovereignty as the only real avenue for change. Beginning with an analysis of versions authored by Joseph Boyden and Gord Downie and moving on to an analysis of Indigenous versions by Willie Dunn and Lee Maracle, this article demonstrates that these conflicting priorities have obvious implications for the reconciliation process, and complicate desires for a new national narrative.

Wenjack's story first appeared in print one year after his death, in 1967—the year, ironically, of Canada's Centennial celebrations. *Maclean's* reporter Ian Adams wrote a feature on Wenjack detailing his escape and subsequent death. He had written an article two years earlier that was critical of the Kenora region's treatment of Indigenous peoples, presenting clear examples of segregation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations, and detailing attacks on Indigenous teenagers by gangs of white men and women. The complicity of society at large demonstrates the widespread mistreatment of Indigenous peoples. In writing the article, Adams interviewed townspeople who knew of the mistreatment of the children housed in the Cecilia Jeffrey residential school, but who did nothing about it. They describe the children as frequently running away, and when they were caught and brought back, being “locked in a room with just a mattress on the floor, left only their underclothes, and put on a bread-and-milk diet” (Adams, “The Indians” 4). A past employee of the school had seen an eleven-year-old child treated this way, and had also seen “a pair of teenage Indian girls humiliated by being made to come down and eat in the dining room half dressed only in their underwear” (4). When Adams questioned the school's principal at the time, S. T. Robinson, about this treatment, Robinson admitted, “Well, I've been forced to use this punishment at times” (qtd. in Adams, “The Indians” 4). Given these revelations, Wenjack's death should have come as no surprise to the townspeople in the Kenora region; nevertheless, they did their best to discredit Adams, calling him a disillusioned “‘cub reporter’ allied with a known Aboriginal ‘political activist’ who had written the article ‘to create sensationalism’” (Milloy 288). Adams was also reprimanded by *Maclean's* after the publication of his Chanie Wenjack story, and was no longer permitted to publish in the magazine. John Milloy reports that whistleblowers were routinely fired for reporting on the schools, citing the 1960 example of one woman who, after complaining of poor conditions, abusive treatment, and inadequate diet at the residential school where she worked in BC, “was fired by the principal on the charge of ‘not being loyal to the school’” (288).

Runaways at institutions like Cecilia Jeffrey became so common that in 1971 the federal government's Department of Indian Affairs suggested implementing survival training for the children attending residential schools (Milloy 287). The tragic irony of this directive is inescapable, since it was the schools themselves and the children's separation from their families that made the children want to run away. Running away, in fact, became a powerful example of organized resistance: in May 1953, all thirty-two boys attending a residential school in Saskatchewan ran away together following "disciplinary action," and in 1963, twelve children ran away together from a school in Fort Frances, Ontario (Milloy 285). Bruce Hodgins and Milloy write: "Hundreds of kids ran away from such schools; most were recaptured. A few were successful, but probably more died in the attempt. These deaths were the ultimate resistance" (223). There are certainly different ways of viewing the escapes. On the one hand, the deaths could be interpreted as tragic defeat, but on the other hand, viewing the deaths as the "ultimate resistance" serves to empower rather than victimize the children.

The spirit of resistance demonstrated by the children inspired the first creative treatment of Chanie Wenjack's story, by Métis and Mi'kmaq folksinger Willie Dunn. After Adams' article, the story lay dormant for four years until 1971 when Dunn recorded the song "Charlie Wenjack" on his first single. The song became a staple in Indigenous communities: Anishinaabe musician ShoShona Kish, of the band Digging Roots, says of Wenjack, "I feel like I've always known this story. It's probably because of the song that Willie Dunn wrote about him. I grew up with his music. The stories he told were part of my education, musically, socially, culturally" (qtd. in Kinos-Goodin). Kish's description of the story is testament to its mythic status in Indigenous communities¹—she describes it as an integral part of her cultural development, and one that recognizes the enduring resistance of Indigenous communities. The circulation of this communal Indigenous story was reinforced by Stó:lō writer, activist, and feminist Lee Maracle's short story "Charlie" written in 1976, five years after Dunn recorded his song. Following traditional protocol, Maracle asked Dunn for permission to re-invent his song in story (Maracle, Personal interview). Despite the wide circulation within Indigenous communities of the Indigenous versions, however, it is Adams' 1967 article that Downie and Boyden cite as the inspiration for their versions of Wenjack's story, which is telling of the cultural divide that exists between Indigenous and settler artists and audiences in Canada. The fact that settler audiences had no prior knowledge of the story also demonstrates either the

very successful attempts of the Canadian government to hide the atrocities resulting from colonization, or the public's wilful ignorance of such events.

The versions of the Wenjack story authored by Boyden and Downie promote a distinctly Canadian subjectivity, which separates them from the stories by Dunn and Maracle. Both Boyden and Downie undeniably promote change and recognition of the tragedy of residential schools, but their narratives are removed from the communal Indigenous tellings, and never reference Dunn and Maracle. The audiences Boyden and Downie address are primarily non-Indigenous, and unaware of previous versions of the story. While Dunn and Maracle celebrate Indigenous sovereignty by adding their voices to Indigenous communities' stories, the goal of the settler artists telling Wenjack's story is removed from such communities, and promotes a stronger *Canada*. As Downie notes in his artist's statement,

Chanie Wenjack haunts us. His story is Canada's story. We are not the country we think we are. History will be re-written. All of the Residential Schools will be pulled apart and studied. The next hundred years are going to be painful and unsettling as we meet Chanie Wenjack and thousands like him—as we find out about ourselves, about all of us—and when we do, we can truly call ourselves “Canada.” (Downie, “Statement”)

The repetition of “Canada” is telling in Downie's comments in that it stresses Canadian rather than Indigenous sovereignty. There is also an element of ownership and belonging implied in “Canada's story” and “call[ing] ourselves ‘Canada,’” which suggests that the story is more about healing and reconciliation for Canadians than it is for Indigenous peoples. Of all Canadians, Downie, made famous by his role as frontman for what the BBC describes as “the most Canadian band in the world” (Smith), was well positioned to promote this message to a Canadian audience. The Tragically Hip appeared on a Canadian postage stamp in 2013, and their songs include lyrics about hockey, history, geography, writers, Bobcaygeon, Toronto, Jacques Cartier, and the CBC. By including lyrics about residential schools in his roster of Canadian songs, Downie popularizes the story for Canadian audiences, educating Canada about its genocidal history. This, along with initiatives like the “Heritage Moment” written and narrated by Joseph Boyden, have put Chanie Wenjack's story back into the Canadian national spotlight at a moment when Canadians, particularly after the release of the final report of the TRC, are arguably more willing to hear about their hidden history.

Downie and Boyden share a desire for change in Canada, and use the Wenjack story as a vehicle, but while they reference each other continually, they make

no reference to Maracle at all, and very little, if any, to Dunn. Kktunaxa scholar Angela Semple comments on what she signals as the danger of reducing Indigenous experience of residential schools to only one story, and also on the perception of Downie's story of Wenjack as the only story. She writes,

rather than being, as the screen says before the novel's animation goes up 'the story of Chanie Wenjack,' [Downie's work] is merely one version of one story of not only Chanie, but of generations of residential school students. And therein lies my main issue with Downie's project. We—individually, as nations, as Indigenous peoples, are so much more than one story.

Where did the communal story reflected in the works of Dunn and Maracle go—the works Kish describes as “always there,” and always a part of her “education, musically, socially, culturally”? The story, not new for Indigenous communities, is clearly new for Canadians—so much so that Joseph Boyden, when asked why he chose to tell the story of Wenjack over that of another child, wrote in an article in *Maclean's*, “Chanie chose me” (“I Believe”). Boyden does not acknowledge that if Chanie did choose him, he wasn't the first. In ignoring other tellings, intentionally or not, Boyden interrupts the communal Indigenous telling and returns instead to the settler community that originally broke the story with his statement that it was Ian Adams' article that moved him to commemorate Wenjack with his novella. Boyden takes the story and frames it for a non-Indigenous audience with the goal of moving them emotionally as the story moved him.

Boyden and Downie, both Canadian icons, were well equipped to bring the story to Canadians, but their inability to acknowledge Dunn and Maracle is troubling. If unintentional, it signals a lack of involvement in Indigenous community, and if intentional, it risks being culturally appropriative. Boyden, in fact, avoids taking responsibility for choosing the material, insisting on numerous occasions that the story chose him. In an interview for *Publishers Weekly* he reiterates that Chanie's “voice channel[led] through [him]” and explains in the same article that “a second voice came to him—that of the Manitou, the spirits of the forest” (Williams). This statement is disconcerting coming from a man whose claims of Indigenous ancestry have been discredited, which leads us to see his statement claiming that he had communication with Manitou as an appropriative gesture aimed at legitimizing his project. He similarly failed to address concerns from people who feared that the focus on the Wenjack story reduced the vast experience of residential schools to only one story, stating “All I can say is this: I believe that Chanie Wenjack chose me, and not me him” (Boyden, “I Believe”). It

is also worth noting that Jeff Lemire, the established illustrator of the *Secret Path* graphic novel, went on to publish another graphic novel, *Roughneck*, which tells the story of an Indigenous hockey player. His success with *Secret Path* seems to have given him more licence to tell Indigenous stories. In this instance, giving voice to Chanie Wenjack does not seem to have opened up space for Indigenous artists, but rather for Lemire himself.

In spite of these criticisms, these artists have undeniably reached a wide audience, and this is a crucial element of the reconciliation process. Indigenous audiences know all too well about residential schools, and do not need to be educated; Canadians do. What the disconnection between Dunn's and Maracle's early works on Wenjack and those by Downie and Boyden demonstrates, however, is that dialogue and cultural/creative exchange between Indigenous peoples and Canadians is lacking. "The time for a national reckoning has arrived," Boyden writes ("I Believe"). He describes how he was haunted by the image of "this little boy just trying to get home" and decided he had to do something about it. His editor suggested he write a novella in commemoration, and shortly thereafter, *Wenjack* (2016) was published. One of the most startling differences between Boyden's version and those of Dunn and Maracle is his very strategic use of first person to tell the story. In so doing, he reduces the distance between the readers and the protagonist, forcing them to confront the painful consequences of residential schools head on. His goal is to move his readers to action, and he makes this clear when he writes in "I Believe that Chanie Wenjack Chose Me" that

[t]he Truth and Reconciliation Commission has collected the names of thousands of children who perished while in these schools and never returned home. The TRC fears the number may be as high as 30,000. . . . Perhaps sit down one day soon and begin to read the names of the children the TRC has collected so far. Whisper them, shout them, absorb them. Just don't let them be forgotten. Think of them as your own children. (18)

Considering the residential school experience from the perspective of a child provides an emotional gateway for readers, since a child's innocence and vulnerability immediately elicit empathy, and this is what makes the novella so powerful for the Canadian audience. Yet it is also troubling; Boyden's attempt to narrow the space between settler self and Indigenous Other makes the novella appropriative and at times overly reliant on pathos.

Drawing on work by linguist Lisa Philips Valentine, Anishinaabe scholar Brian McInnes describes the act of telling another's story according to protocol as a "taking on of words" rather than a "taking on of voices" (106).

Boyden ignores this protocol, however, when he chooses to narrate the novella in first person and opens with Chanie, who asks: “Do you remember? I remember, me” (1). Here the use of first and second person immediately implicate the readers in the story, and they are reminded of their responsibility to remember. The affective experience is heightened by the author’s decision to highlight Chanie’s innocence and vulnerability rather than his agency and ingenuity. Boyden chooses to try to replicate Anishinaabemowin speech patterns and colloquialisms in English, and the result is an infantilization of Charlie, who repeats phrases such as “ever far, that,” and “ever cold”: “I can tell which nijjii, which friend, ran away from the school this week by the long red marks on his back. Ever a lot of red marks. Ever a lot of friends who ran away this week” (3). Chanie’s innocence is further highlighted in lines such as “I don’t know what I did, me” (26), and “I can feel they are no longer mad at me for what I don’t know I did. I think they don’t know, too” (28). His innocence in Boyden’s version conforms to narrative conventions of childhood innocence and helplessness, and reinforces the stereotype of Indigenous peoples as innocent, helpless children, which serves to justify paternalism on the part of the state, and here in particular to create pathos. Boyden arguably portrays Chanie this way not out of malice, but rather to achieve the desired reaction from his readers: an affective response that will, he hopes, drive them to act. Downie uses the same tactics in his song “I Will Not Be Struck,” when he describes Chanie’s fear of the wilderness: “Enter the wilderness, and we only have ourselves”; and in “Haunt Them” when he describes Chanie as “waiting for something to come along and eat [him]” (Downie and Lemire). These songs heed closely to the kind of “garrison mentality” theorized by Northrop Frye and other nationalist critics like Margaret Atwood who adopted his thematics, for whom fear of the wilderness became one of the defining characteristics of Canadian settler literature. As such, Downie’s songs about Wenjack are more reflective of settler tropes than Indigenous emotional responses.

According to Australian media studies scholar Anna Gibbs, affect amplifies the “weak” drives. Drawing on seminal work on affect by Silvan Tomkins, Gibbs writes, “affects are the primary human motivational system, amplifying the drives and lending them urgency, since the drives on their own are relatively weak motivators” (336). This sense of urgency helps illuminate the potential of a text like Boyden’s *Wenjack* to move Canadians through its creation of pathos, a reaction engendered by affective responses. There is a fine line, however, between pathos and pathologizing, which can

mean the difference between action and inaction. Playing on its readers' affective responses, Boyden's novella portrays Wenjack as "broken," and the Indigenous community he encounters as unable to help him. When Chanie seeks shelter with his friends' uncle, Boyden writes, "The uncle doesn't understand this young boy. . . . He fears the boy carries a burden that will kill him. And the uncle doesn't want this curse passed on to his family" (52). He tells his wife, "Your job is to send the stranger away. . . . Someone broke something in him. We don't have tools to fix it. Send him back to the school" (54). In Adams' version of the story, the uncle sends Chanie away because he doesn't have enough food to feed him, and this is the way Maracle also presents it. In Boyden's version, however, Chanie is pathologized and depicted as beyond repair, which removes any sense of agency or hope from his character. This, in turn, erases Indigenous subjectivity. The implication is that the imposition of colonialism is irreparable. Roger Simon problematizes this kind of representation within the context of reconciliation:

[T]here is the danger that inter-generational Aboriginal life will be reduced to images of a problem-ridden, broken existence serving to confirm stereotypes offered as explanations for the marginalization of native populations. . . . Furthermore, this mis-recognition risks reducing the political to the therapeutic so that restorative justice is defined solely within support for personal healing from the wounds of colonialism. (132)

Portrayals of Indigenous people as damaged, as we see in Boyden's text, ultimately remove their agency, and trap them in stereotyped representations of dysfunction. As Simon states, this can result in superficial attempts to heal wounds rather than the systemic change necessary to promote Indigenous resurgence.

Perhaps recognizing the danger of disempowering Chanie completely, Boyden adds a note in the afterword to the novella. "Chanie," he writes, "for me and a number of others, has become a symbol not just of this tragedy but of the resilience of our First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people" (102). He is clearly aware of the danger of removing his subject's agency, which makes one narrative choice in particular startlingly problematic. Boyden chooses to recount a rape scene between Chanie and a minister from the boy's own point of view. In doing so, he covers ground that Dunn and Maracle choose not to in their versions. Boyden's decision to narrate rape in the first person mimics testimony, and arguably appropriates and in doing so undermines the experience of residential school survivors. Authors using the *voice* of survivors and victims of violence take great risks. Nowhere is this better demonstrated recently than in the 2018 example of settler/Mi'kmaq poet

Shannon Webb-Campbell, who chose to narrate a poem on missing and murdered Indigenous women in first person in her book *Who Took My Sister?*, using the voice of one of the victims of rape and murder. After the family of victim Loretta Saunders expressed their dismay at the graphic portrayal of their family member's violent death in Webb-Campbell's book, its publisher Book*hug removed it from public sale.

If we argue that Boyden crosses the line, especially given the controversy over his own identity, how do we approach rock musician Gord Downie's immensely successful telling of Wenjack's story, *Secret Path*? Downie and Lemire deploy many of the same affective strategies as Boyden in order to move their audience. In so doing, however, they also risk over-reliance on pathos, which can also backfire by victimizing Indigenous peoples and disempowering them, or by overloading listeners so that they stop listening or "split" themselves off, as Simon puts it. Over-reliance on pathos and victimization, Simon argues, "increases the likelihood of a dissociative splitting off in which listening accords no need to take on a sense of responsibility for a social future that would include those whose stories one is listening to" (132). Audiences become either oversaturated or desensitized, and this prevents them from acting. Like Boyden, Downie uses the first person to narrate his songs in the album, and in fact played the role of Chanie Wenjack in his final concert, pacing back and forth across the stage as though following the tracks toward his death. While this elicited tremendous affective responses from the audience, it also treaded dangerously close to appropriation, and risked offending the families and communities of other survivors. It also risked engendering the splitting off that Simon refers to, something evidenced by the *Toronto Star* columnist who reviewed Downie's final concert:

Secret Path's union of music and visuals is powerful enough when you're listening to the record, yet having Lemire's stark, two-colour drawings brought [to] life in front of you while Downie gradually crumpled to the stage in emulations of Wenjack's fate during the second side's slow, certain march towards the end . . . was almost too much to bear. Then "Here, Here and Here" came around . . . and it really was too much to bear. (Rayner)

Artists tread a fine line in representations of tragedy, and overdoing it can push tragedy into the realm of excess, where it becomes spectacle and loses sight of the dignity of the human lives involved.

At Downie's *Secret Path* concert, Lemire's graphics were projected onto the screen above and behind the stage where Downie performed. The

drawings showed Chanie with a permanently wide-eyed innocence about him that, in effect, elicited an affective response, all the more because it was a visual representation that was larger than life and thus immediate. He was also consistently portrayed meekly wrapping his arms around his thin, bent body. The impact of the visual is something Gibbs addresses in her discussion of the media's use of affect: "What is co-opted by the media is primarily affect, and . . . the media function as amplifiers and modulators of affect which is transmitted by the human face and voice, and also by music and other forms of sound, and also by the image" (338). The combination of image, movement, and music is thus a powerful formula—Downie's dramatic and haunting music and lyrics in *Secret Path* compound the visual effect with lines such as "I am the stranger / You can't see me," and "Enter the wilderness / And we only have ourselves." Downie sings, "I am soaked / To the skin / There's never been / A colder rain than this one I'm in," and this, along with the knowledge that Downie was dying of cancer at the time, had the potential to affect a very significant portion of Canadians. Downie's influence was further experienced by the 11.7 million (roughly one third of the Canadian population) who watched The Tragically Hip's final concert on television or listened to it on the radio in Canada, according to the CBC. An article in *Maclean's* by Scott Reid states the following:

The emotion and attention that has greeted Downie since news of his condition was made public has been almost unprecedented. With an audience that's never been larger and a platform that's never stood higher, one gets the feeling that Downie knows exactly what he's up to. He's going to unleash the full force of his current influence to tell Chanie's story as loudly as he can.

Downie is clearly aware of the power of affect, and his illness accentuates the tragedy of Wenjack's story. This can, on the one hand, help push people to action, but on the other it can cross the line so that people disassociate themselves entirely. Affective responses create the empathy necessary to elicit an active response, but as Simon has noted, excessive pathos can result in a defensive splitting off. This splitting off may disengage the audience enough that they distance themselves from the emotion and perceive the use of pathos as excessive and manipulative. There is also the risk here of conflating two very different tragedies so that the focus becomes Downie himself instead of Chanie Wenjack and residential school victims.

Like Boyden, though, who rehabilitates Chanie's agency in his afterword, Downie seems to grasp the dangers of excessive pathos. At the final Tragically Hip concert, in front of the audience of almost twelve million, he

entreated Canadians to act. In an effort to harness and direct the audience's affective response, he invited Chanie's sister on stage to sing a traditional healing song; further, proceeds from the album and graphic novel are being donated to a fund set up by Downie and Wenjack's family to promote education about residential schools. It's hard to say whether these gestures are enough to counter the over-reliance on pathos, and the risk of unintentionally pathologizing Indigenous experience. The TRC's practice of collecting the tears of witnesses during hearings to eventually release in a sacred fire was replicated at Downie's *Secret Path* concert. This ceremony arguably does not translate to a rock concert setting, and trivializes the very real and ongoing effects of colonialism and land theft. This trivialization was also seen in one audience member's response when the Wenjack family asked why Chanie died. "To bring us together!" the audience member replied (King).

Pottawatomi/Ojibwe scholar and activist Hayden King responds to this in his review of the concert: "In that moment I could not imagine a more grotesque thing to say, shocking and predictable at the same time. Because I suspect that individual would not, for one second, sacrifice their son or daughter for our unity. The capacity of some Canadians for reconciliation is often so clearly shallow." King praises Downie, however, for making the Wenjack family such an important part of the evening. Their presence, he writes, countered the tragic as they cheered at scenes of their home and laughed, talking loudly among themselves. Nevertheless, King underlines the dangers of damage-centred representations of Indigenous peoples:

It was pain, though, that was the predictable and over-arching theme of the show. . . . While the pain is captured in the poetry and music, the animation drives it home, often uncomfortably. From the very first scenes, Charlie's humanity is stripped away. It is difficult to watch and I have to wonder about the result if taken on by an Indigenous artist.

According to King, the concert had the desired effect of moving the audience; whether it had the power to make people act is another question altogether since, as King states, it was pain that was the dominant theme of the show.

While pain dominates the narratives of Downie and Boyden, it is hope and resistance that dominate in the Indigenous tellings. At the time of Willie Dunn's death in 2013, a *Globe and Mail* headline called him a "First Nations Troubadour" who "sang truth to power" (Shanahan). The same article reports that he was heckled off the stage by a racist audience in Kenora in the late 1960s—not long after Wenjack's death near the same town. Rather than writing from a position of privilege, Dunn, while a victim of racism

himself, was still able to resist. In the folk tradition of the 1960s protest song—designed as a call to action—Dunn’s song honours Chanie Wenjack’s resilience, and turns him from what could be considered a powerless victim into one capable of escape and survival. The song begins and ends with the words, “Walk on, little Charlie / Walk on through the snow.” Here the singer does not merely describe the boy’s plight, “moving down the railway line,” but he goes so far as to encourage the boy to “try to make it home.” Although Dunn tells us the situation is dire—“he’s made it forty miles / six hundred left to go”—he never gives up on the boy, and never once suggests he return to the school. Drawing upon the civil rights movement of the time, and foregrounding the work of the American Indian Movement and texts such as Cree activist Harold Cardinal’s revolutionary *The Unjust Society* (1969), Dunn grounds his work in a tradition of protest. Dunn’s “Charlie Wenjack” is part of the tradition of protest music influenced by such musicians as Woody Guthrie and Phil Ochs, and is written in much the same vein as his most famous song, “The Ballad of Crowfoot” (1968), where the central subject may die or be “held hostage,” but can never be defeated. Dunn’s “Charlie Wenjack,” then, is written not to bring about despair to Indigenous communities but conversely to bring hope through active resistance.

Protest implies agency, and it is action that leads to survival. This is where the narratives by non-Indigenous writers so often differ from those authored by Indigenous writers. Ian Adams’ 1965 and 1967 articles, like the works of Boyden and Downie, and in spite of their calls for social justice, portray Chanie Wenjack and the Indigenous peoples of Kenora solely as victims, which feeds the idea of powerlessness and ultimately inhibits agency. Adams repeats the word “lonely” continually, first in reference to a “lonely” Indigenous leader, and then the “lonely minority” in the school system (“The Indians” 6). His 1967 article is titled “The Lonely Death of Charlie Wenjack,” and he refers to the “lonesome” students at the residential school. The element of collective agency and resistance celebrated by Dunn is absent here, which serves to perpetuate stereotypes of helplessness. Unangax scholar Eve Tuck, like Simon, warns of the dangers of “damage-centred” research and writing about Indigenous peoples in her article “Suspending Damage,” suggesting that focusing on loss and trauma reinforces the one-dimensional perspective of Indigenous peoples as “depleted, ruined, and hopeless” (409). Cynthia C. Wesley-Esquimaux (Chippewa) echoes this warning in her article “Trauma to Resilience” when she underlines the importance of privileging hope over despair:

Instead of telling only the stories about trauma and victimization and pain, let us talk about our survival and our undeniable strengths. It is essential for us to articulate the strengths that we have, not only in a way that validates our survival, but in a way that validates and ‘victorizes’ our ability to take control of our lives and be, in spite of past pain and present dysfunction. (28)

Dunn’s use of the protest song to tell Wenjack’s story conforms to both critics’ calls for narratives of resistance. The act of running away, and what it tells us about the strength of the children attending the schools, is what explains the survival and resilience of Indigenous communities; damage-centred narratives simply contribute to what Marie Battiste (Mi’kmaq) refers to as “cognitive imperialism,” where Indigenous peoples are “led to believe that their poverty and powerlessness are the result of their cultural and racial origins” (26). Cognitive imperialism, as Battiste explains, removes agency and traps Indigenous peoples in cycles of powerlessness. This does little to encourage reconciliation that privileges Indigenous subjectivity and resurgence.

Like Dunn, Lee Maracle understands the strength and resilience of Indigenous communities, and her short story “Charlie” portrays Chanie Wenjack accordingly. In 1976, Maracle produced one hundred copies of the handwritten story, which was subsequently published in her collection *Sojourner’s Truth* in 1990 and later anthologized. The fact that Maracle herself hand wrote and made copies of the story contributes to the “political tract” nature of her narrative, and honours the call to action introduced in Dunn’s protest song. That Maracle chose to include her version of the story in her first published collection fourteen years later is no coincidence—as Kish indicates, Dunn’s song kept the story circulating among Indigenous peoples, while the tragedy of residential schools was being repeated across the country. In the tradition of protest, Maracle demanded change. Thus in adapting Chanie Wenjack’s story, and Willie Dunn’s song, to the medium of fiction, Maracle re-energizes the boy’s story.

Like Dunn, Maracle uses third-person narration. Unlike the first-person narratives of Boyden and Downie, this would seem to follow the storytelling protocol McInnes describes as “taking on [. . .] words” rather than “taking on [. . .] voices” (106). Accordingly, it is Maracle’s voice more than Chanie’s that is audible throughout the story, most significantly in its use of irony, as in the following example:

Charlie was a quiet boy. This was not unusual. His silence was interpreted by the priests and catholic lay teachers as stoic reserve—a quality inherited from his pagan ancestors. It was regarded in the same way the religious viewed the

children's tearless response to punishment: a quaint combination of primitive courage and lack of emotion. All the children were like this and so Charlie could not be otherwise. (327)

Maracle's voice here is clear in its mockery of the ignorance of the religious figures and teachers. In the same vein, she repeatedly gives the child agency, careful not to remove Charlie's voice, as per the protocol McInnes describes. Chanie masterfully manipulates his situation at the school in order to survive: "Like the other children, he would stare hard at his work, the same practiced look of bewilderment used by his peers on his face, while his thoughts danced around the forest close to home—far away from the arithmetic sums he was sure had nothing to do with him" (327). The word "practiced" belies the intelligence of the children, who manage to deceive the teachers with little effort. Moreover, not only Chanie but *all* the children are "practiced" in deceiving the teachers, demonstrating the same collective resistance that allowed so many groups of children to plan their escapes from residential school together. Charlie is able to preserve some sense of individuality by skilfully manoeuvring his way around the rules and by using the biases of his teachers to his advantage: "He learned to listen for the questions put to him by the brother over the happy daydream. He was not expected to know the answer; repeating the question sufficed. Knowing the question meant that, like the others, he was slow to learn but very attentive. No punishment was meted out for thickheadedness" (327). Maracle also describes Chanie's intelligence and self-awareness: "He was bothered by something unidentifiable, tangible but invisible. He couldn't figure it out and that, too, bothered him" (328). Like Dunn, Maracle writes to give her community strength and not despair. In both versions, Chanie depicts resilience rather than victimhood and agency rather than powerlessness.

Both tellings thus successfully deploy protest and ultimately resistance strategies, and in doing so advance an agenda of change. Maracle's contextualization of the school adds to this effect, since it underlines its far-reaching impact, both spatial and temporal. The first paragraph, in which she details some of the stereotypes contributing to the ministers' treatment of the children, places the story of the schools within the broader context of the ongoing effects of colonialism. Speaking through the lens of the teachers at the school, she qualifies Chanie as "stoic," "primitive," and "emotionless," but then disproves the stereotypes in her descriptions of Chanie's self-awareness, intelligence, and agency. As Simon points out, to isolate the schools as the only tool of cultural genocide would allow readers to historicize them, and

to speak in terms of “closed chapters,” as Prime Minister Stephen Harper did during his 2008 apology to the survivors of residential schools. Harper has been widely criticized for referring to residential schools as a “sad chapter in our history,” effectively closing doors on the damage caused by residential schools, as though the effects are finished and neatly in the past. If the experience of Indigenous peoples is relegated to the past, however, no one considers the ongoing and systemic effects of colonialism, and no substantive change is possible. Maracle further demonstrates the far-reaching impact of the schools when she speaks of the self-loathing of Chanie’s father when he is forced to send his children to the schools: “His private agony was his own lack of resistance. He sent his son to school. It was the law. A law that he neither understood nor agreed to, but he sent them [*sic*]. His willingness to reduce his son to a useless waster stunned him. He confided none of his self-disgust to his wife” (331). The father’s shame is insidious, and contributes to the intergenerational effects of residential school and of colonialism more broadly, making it impossible to speak of “closed chapters.” Anishinaabe activist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson writes that “[s]hame traps us individually and collectively into the victimry of the colonial assault, and travels through the generations, accumulating and manifesting itself in new and more insidious ways in each re-generation” (15). Maracle’s choice of the word “resistance” in the passage about Wenjack’s father demonstrates the imperative of resistance to ongoing colonial practices.

Both Dunn and Maracle seek to empower their subjects in an attempt to “validate and ‘victorize’” (Wesley-Esquiaux) Indigenous experience and bring about change, and this is enhanced by the propagation of a communal story. The artists’ fictionalized accounts of Chanie Wenjack, both of which include the mythic figure of the Windigo at the end of the story, demonstrate their movement from the realm of everyday stories (dibaajimowinan in Anishnaabemowin) into the realm of mythic stories (aadisookaanan) (“dibaajimowinan, ni”; “aadisookaanan, na”). It has become a story that is told and retold transnationally in order to reinforce the imperative of resistance and illustrate survival. In becoming a part of Indigenous mythology, Wenjack’s tragic story becomes one of cultural strength and validation, and unites communities as a kind of dialogue develops between tellings. Following traditional protocol, Maracle asked Dunn for permission to re-invent his song in story, and she further emphasizes the communal element when she acknowledges Dunn in her portrayal of the Windigo at the end of the story. The inclusion of the mythic Windigo links both stories

to the oral, thus further enhancing communal empowerment. Both artists unusually depict the Windigo as a positive, welcoming figure, where he is most commonly depicted in Anishinaabe tradition as the embodiment of insatiable consumption. Dunn speaks of the “great Wendigo / Come to look upon [Charlie’s] face . . . Her arms outstretched and waiting,” while Maracle describes it as “the Great Wendigo—dressed in midnight blue, her dress alive with the glitter of a thousand stars” (332). Here it is Chanie’s arms that are outstretched as “he greet[s] the lady that came to lift his spirit and close his eyes forever to sleep the gentle sleep of white death” (332). The embrace is an embrace between works, and the artists’ depiction of a welcoming Windigo reflects their efforts to empower rather than create despair, showing death as a welcome return home to culture and away from the assimilationist and genocidal forces of residential schools. The turn to the mythic in the form of the Windigo is significant here, since myth represents the distinct worldviews that ultimately define culture. It is culture and agency that these two artists emphasize, knowing that it is senses of identity and nationhood, or what Tanana Athabascan scholar Dian Million terms “Indigenous subjectivity (to be Cree, to be Anishinaabe, to be Inuit, to be Stó:lō)” (171), that can serve as an antidote to colonial violence. Simpson describes the importance of Indigenous subjectivity in resurgence this way:

We need our Elders, our languages, and our lands, along with vision, intent, commitment, community and ultimately, action. We must move ourselves beyond resistance and survival, to flourishing and *mino bimaadiziwin*. If this approach does nothing else to shift the current state of affairs—and I believe it will—it will ground our peoples in their own cultures and teachings that provide the ultimate antidote to colonialism. . . . Building diverse, nation-culture-based resurgences means significantly re-investing in our own ways of being. (17)

Culture, as Simpson posits, is essential to resurgence, and the celebration of distinct cultural elements highlights distinct national identities. Indigenous subjectivity or sovereignty thus underlines cultural survival and permits Indigenous cultures to flourish.

The versions of the Chanie Wenjack story as told by Dunn and Maracle both honour the same type of call for Indigenous subjectivity made by Million, as both are dominated by strength and resilience rather than by pain and powerlessness. The versions of Downie and Boyden, however, threaten Indigenous cultural sovereignty. Simon signals this threat clearly when he states, “There is present in contemporary society a historically specific, socially organized mode of regarding the pain of others that has the potential

to deny a person a subjectivity that is self-constituting. This is particularly troubling in the context I am discussing here as it seems to edge towards a replay or instituting of colonial power relations” (131). This hearkens back to Downie’s statement that only after “we” learn about residential schools can we “truly call ourselves ‘Canada.’” Truly calling oneself “Canada” appears to be nothing less than claiming Canadian subjectivity, which ironically undermines Dian Million’s call to claim Indigenous subjectivity. This is where “re-writing history” becomes difficult. Wenjack’s story told in its communal form by Indigenous communities is markedly different from the versions told by Canadians for Canadians. The first reflects a need for a distinct Indigenous subjectivity, while the second subsumes Indiogeneity under the Canadian national umbrella. If the tellings are divergent to this degree, then how do we go about creating a new national narrative?

NOTE

- 1 The song became popular enough in Indigenous communities that it was released in three different formats: first as a single in 1971, then on Dunn’s first self-titled album in 1972, and finally on the album *Akwesasne Notes* in 1978. Dunn’s music was also popular with both the Native Youth and the Red Power Movements (Maracle, Personal interview).

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