

Unbecoming a “dirty savage” Jane Willis’s *Geniesh: An Indian Girlhood*

Jane Willis’s autobiography, *Geniesh: An Indian Girlhood*, deals with the author’s experiences growing up in the 1950s as a student resident at the St. Philip’s Indian and Eskimo Anglican Residential School in Fort George, Quebec and the Shingwauk Indian Residential School at Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario.¹ It locates a particular life story within a larger—though, until very recently, occluded—narrative of Canadian history. Indeed, this autobiography is itself somewhat occluded, having received only passing notice from readers and critics of Canadian literature. Published in 1973, it has long been out of print. Only two short reviews of the book were published: one in *Canadian Forum*; the other in *Chatelaine* magazine. And although it is sometimes mentioned in surveys of Native literature, such as Penny Petrone’s *Native Literature in Canada: From the Oral Tradition to the Present* (116-17), or histories of Canadian autobiography, such as Shirley Neuman’s essay on “Life Writing” in the second edition of *The Literary History of Canada* (351), to date no literary critic has undertaken a detailed critical analysis of this text.

Willis’s autobiography was published in the same year as Maria Campbell’s *Halfbreed*, but while Campbell has gone on to attain a substantial reputation, and her book is regularly read and studied in universities and elsewhere, Willis has fallen into relative obscurity, even within the Native writing community itself. Janice Acoose notes that several contemporary Native writers, including Jeannette Armstrong, Beth Cuthand, and Lenore Keeshig-Tobias, regard *Halfbreed* as a classic, and some even credit

Maria Campbell with being an inspiration to them (Acoose 106). Jane Willis, however, doesn't seem to have made much of an impression on anyone.

Among reasons for the lack of critical attention paid to Willis's autobiography are that *Halfbreed* was published by McClelland and Stewart, an influential mainstream Canadian publishing house, intent on marketing the book to a general readership. *Geniesh: An Indian Girlhood*, on the other hand, was published by New Press, a smaller and more specialized publishing house with a more limited distribution network. Furthermore, no paperback edition was ever published, so the text was not popularized in the same way that *Halfbreed* was. As is the case with many autobiographical texts by Native writers, Willis's book has been valued more for its ethnographic and historical content than for its literary interest. It remains tucked away in the Native history and anthropology section of libraries. Furthermore, literary critics have tended to be somewhat uninterested in Native writers who write only autobiographies. As Emma LaRocque pointed out in a paper she delivered at the 1995 Learned Societies conference, readers and critics of Native literature consistently focus their attention on a limited number of writers and implicitly privilege those who write fiction. With her single autobiographical book, Jane Willis was not deemed a significant writer by a literary and academic establishment which quickly moved to establish a new canon of Native literature consisting of a few rising stars whose works conformed, to some extent at least, to predetermined generic categories and standards of evaluation.

Penny Petrone's comments on *Geniesh: An Indian Girlhood* reveal a common critical bias against Native autobiography. Petrone notes that "Willis's account of her early life and education does not rise above autobiographical protest because she has not moved beyond bitterness and the desire to condemn" (117). As Hartmut Lutz points out, to name Native writing "protest literature" is another way of dismissing it, for such writing is "not really considered part of Canadian 'literature' as defined by English departments and literary scholars in the mainstream" (2). Petrone compliments the author on her "gift for remembering and recording and her sharp eye for detail" (117), but she seems to believe that autobiography is a rather immature form of writing and that Native writers have to "rise above" their personal experiences, as well as move beyond their anger, in order to be considered serious writers of *literature*.

Certainly, Willis's narrative represents a harsh indictment of a paternalistic government, which sought to manipulate and control Native children through agencies such as residential schools, but it is also a subtle and often humorous text, which explores the complex processes through which the Native child was turned into a subject of the Canadian state. A deeper reading of *Geniesh: An Indian Girlhood*, a reading informed by the insights of colonial discourse analysis, reveals a complex Native subject constructed in language. In writing her autobiography, Willis uses the language of colonialism, understood to be patriarchal and European and disseminated by various colonial agents (church ministers, school teachers, employees of the Hudson's Bay Company, the Indian Agent) in order to reveal how she was positioned as an inferior subject under settler colonial rule. However, Willis uses this language self-consciously and often ironically, as a way of undermining its power to capture and contain her subjectivity. Much of the language of the text is focused on the Native body, which is stereotypically represented as an alien, dirty, and corrupt body. Willis's representation of her body—how it was treated and how she herself related to it—signifies the violent rupture that the imposition of colonial ideology causes in the Native subject. Although Native life writing can be understood as an act of political agency, in that the Native writer represents her experiences and her subjectivity from her own perspective, the extent to which the Native autobiographer writing in English can distance herself from the discursive structures that have represented her as a “dirty savage” is necessarily limited.

Jane Willis was born in 1940 in a small island community called ‘jisah-seebee,’ or Great River, near Fort George on the eastern shores of James Bay in northern Quebec. She is mixed blood, the child of a Cree mother and a Scots father, but she identifies herself as “Indian.” At the time of her birth—and, indeed, until the relevant clauses were revoked in 1985 by Bill C-31—the Indian Act dictated that if a Native woman married a white man she and any children produced by the union lost their Indian status and their accompanying right to live on reserve land. Because her parents never married, Willis's Indian status was never in question, but this naming of her as an Indian is a legal designation with wide-ranging consequences.

The Indian Act of 1867 gave the federal government exclusive jurisdiction over “Indians and Indian lands.” By granting Native people special status as “Indians” defined by the Act, the government sought to protect them from

European exploitation. However, as John L. Tobias argues, special status was supposed to be a short-term measure. The long-term projection and goal of the government was that Native people would assimilate into mainstream (i.e. white) culture through training in European values (Tobias 39). The education system was a prime agent of this assimilationist policy: it was assumed that Indianness could be—and should be—eradicated in Native children so that a new generation would grow up thinking of themselves as “Canadians” not as “Indians.” It was also hoped, as Vicky English-Currie notes, that these children would function as mediators between older generations and the state, thus serving as a catalyst to a more comprehensive assimilation (51).

The responsibility for Native education has historically been placed in the hands of the federal government. The government’s commitment to establish schools on reserve lands was part of the package of promises made in many of the treaties negotiated between First Nations and the Canadian state in the nineteenth century. Precisely how that responsibility was to be met, however, has long been a source of contention and debate. In the 1890s, the government set up day schools on reserves, yet some officials questioned the effectiveness of such schools on the grounds that parents and elders continued to have a significant (and, presumably, negative) influence on their children. Full assimilation was not readily accomplished. As a solution to the ongoing “Indian problem,” officials such as Edgar Dewdney, who was then minister of the interior and a former Indian commissioner, proposed that the government establish boarding or residential schools so that training in European knowledge and values could be more effectively achieved. This shift in policy is registered in remarks made by Dewdney to the House of Commons in 1891:

The Indians say they have a sufficient number of children on the reserve to attend a day school, and we have had to establish one: but where those children go to school for a few hours and then return to their wigwams or houses, there is not much chance to improve them. . . . The sooner we can close the day schools and send the children to the boarding schools, the sooner we will be able to do something with them. (qtd. in *Youngblood Henderson* 252-53)

Between the 1890s and the 1950s thousands of Native children were legally removed from their homes as early as age six and placed in Indian residential schools (usually kilometers away) where they would remain until they were sixteen. These schools were funded by the federal government, but

they were run by the various Christian churches. The schools operated according to three main objectives: to Christianize Native children; to teach them to speak English; and to give them a minimum education in both scholastic and practical matters.²

When Jane Willis attended The St. Philip's Indian and Eskimo Anglican Residential School, she inherited a history of Native education that was fraught with conflict. Native people generally recognized that education in the ways of the settler society would benefit the younger generation, and, as Barman, Hébert and McCaskill argue, "For a time, colonial and Indian interests coincided" (4). But no one could have predicted how insidious the effects of a thoroughly Eurocentric education would be not only on those who attended residential schools but also on later generations. Individual accounts of the residential school experience vary, as, of course, did the particular beliefs, attitudes and behaviours of those white people who worked in them, but for most former Native students the experience was traumatic and the result was that they learned to be ashamed of their people and of themselves.

The hardships and injustices Native students suffered were numerous. Once the children were at the residential school they became subject to a myriad of rules and prohibitions, most of which, because they were in direct conflict with indigenous social conventions, seemed illogical and arbitrary. As in any institution, rules meant the loss of certain individual freedoms, but in the particular context of Indian residential schools, many of those losses had profound and long-lasting consequences. One obvious loss was the ability to speak their own tribal languages. Students were generally forced to speak English, and although Willis and others report that this was a rule that the children consistently broke, they were generally severely punished if caught speaking "Indian." In the Foreword to Celia Haig-Brown's study of the Kamloops Indian Residential School, for instance, Randy Fred reports that his father was "physically tortured by his teachers" at the Alberni Residential School by having needles pushed through his tongue (15). Native children were frequently victims of overt verbal, physical, and sometimes sexual abuse. Children were routinely intimidated, humiliated, beaten, and incarcerated. To this day, many former students wonder why their teachers felt that they had to treat children so brutally.

Although some former students bear the physical scars of beatings on their bodies, much of the damage is not visible to the eye. Because they

were denied access to elders, who are the traditional educators in Native communities, Native children who attended residential schools lost the opportunity to learn and live their own cultural knowledges. Attaining those knowledges later in life is, for some, an important part of the process of healing. Moreover, because they were separated from their families for ten months of the year, many former students bear the emotional scars that accompany neglect. Even within the same school, siblings were separated, and brothers and sisters became strangers to one another. Some people grew into adulthood unable to form healthy intimate relationships with others, often experiencing difficulty relating to their own children or becoming abusive in their turn, because they had not had the opportunity to learn positive parenting skills through observing their own families. In an interview in which he discusses his experiences at the Fort Alexander Indian Residential School, Chief Phil Fontaine comments on the long-term effects of this alienation:

At home I learned certain things about love and how it was expressed, but that was cast aside when I went to residential school. There, I was completely cut off from my parents and I lost a lot. I lost my sense of family. I didn't develop the kind of love one should experience in a family, never being hugged or held other than when I experienced touching for purposes other than loving someone. At residential school I was part of an institution. (53)

For all that was taken away from them, Native students got little in return. During this period, residential school education placed greater emphasis on the teaching of religion, and the acquisition of domestic, agricultural, and technical skills than on the teaching of a solid academic curriculum; thus, students who attended Indian schools were academically—and, ultimately, economically—disadvantaged. Some commentators suggest that academic standards for Native education were deliberately kept low because whites assumed that Native people only needed to learn “a bit of reading, writing, figures and some notion of hygiene” because they were destined to live apart from and not participate in mainstream Canadian society (Cardinal 53). White people may have feared that if Native people were to be equally educated, they would become unwelcome competitors in the work force (Barman 120). Important studies of Native education have been written;³ however, many believe that those best equipped to recount the history of Indian residential schools in Canada and to analyze their long-term effects are Native

people themselves. First-hand personal accounts, such as Jane Willis's *Geniesh: An Indian Girlhood*, are integral to the investigation.⁴

In his account of the years he spent at the St. Peter Claver's Indian Residential School in Spanish, Ontario, Basil H. Johnston claims that the very word "Spanish" came to signify for him "penitentiary, reformatory, exile, dungeon, whippings, kicks, slaps, all rolled into one" (6). Johnston's evocation of penitentiaries and dungeons is significant, for, indeed, these educational institutions were essentially structures of discipline and punishment. They were analogous to what Michel Foucault would call "carceral spaces" or "spaces of exclusion" (199), but where those incarcerated were innocent children whose only "crime" was being racially and culturally different. These institutions were shaped by a complex colonial discourse that authorized white settler management of Native children. Teachers and administrators, hired by the Christian churches, occupied the classic paternalistic role of the colonizer: they understood themselves to be benevolent parents of "their Indians" who had a responsibility to protect Native people and to settle the enlightenment of European civilization upon them. As the twentieth century advanced, however, and as resistance to white society's exclusive control of Native education grew, it became more and more difficult for teachers, ministers, and government officials to justify some of their assumptions and practices. As it became increasingly evident that students in these schools were receiving a substandard academic education, as disturbing accounts of injustices and abuses became public knowledge, and as the students themselves tenaciously resisted having white values forced upon them, the task of managing "their Indians" became increasingly difficult.

Although official policy of this period was dominated by the belief that Native people had to become more like white people, the discourse that naturalized and stabilized the relationship between white school teachers and Native child subjects insisted on their racial difference. The Indian residential school system was underwritten by a colonial discourse that represented "the Indian" not just as the "other" but as the "absolute other," radically different from the normative white "self." In his essay "The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism," Homi K. Bhabha explains that colonial discourse is "an apparatus that turns on the recognition and disavowal of racial/cultural/historical differences" (70). It "produces the colonized as a social reality which is at once

an 'other' and yet entirely knowable and visible" (70). The primary strategy of this discourse, explains Bhabha (drawing on the work of Freud and Lacan), is the production of the stereotype, which functions as both phobia and fetish to the white colonizer. The stereotype is the repository of the colonizer's fear and desire, and it enacts a complex psychodrama within which both the colonizer and the colonized are interpellated. The stability of the colonial relation, as Bhabha explores in much of his work, is always an illusion, for the colonizer is caught in a conflicted position as an agent of both a civilizing mission and a violent subjugating force. This position is even more conflicted in the Canadian situation where the white settler himself might feel colonized in relation to a distant European authority. Furthermore, both parties are implicated in a subtle and always shifting play of psychic identification and disidentification. Power is never total; nor is subjugation. Hence the urgent and consistent need for *repetition*. The stereotypical figure of the native (and here I use the term "native," as Bhabha does, in a more general sense) as a knowable and ultimately manageable type must be constantly reiterated by the colonizer in an ongoing effort to secure and normalize unequal relations of power.

It is a truism that colonial discourse is fundamentally racist, but what exactly does that mean? Kwame Anthony Appiah makes a useful distinction between *racialism*, the belief that different races have variable genetic and physiological characteristics, and *racism*, the belief that people of different races also vary morally and intellectually from one another. Appiah further distinguishes between extrinsic and intrinsic racism. Extrinsic racists can be persuaded to change their minds, given the appropriate evidence, about the supposed inferiority of the racial "other." Intrinsic racists, on the other hand, cannot be persuaded by any amount of evidence, but hold fast to the belief that racial difference is itself sufficient reason to think of and treat people of "other" races unequally. Whether extrinsic or intrinsic, racism is an ideology that confuses and conflates physical characteristics with intellectual and moral ones, thereby motivating some people to treat racially "other" human beings as inherently inferior (Appiah 4-12). Within the terms of a racist discourse, the identity of the racial "other" is reduced to his or her morphological features, reduced to what Frantz Fanon calls "the fact of blackness," but that "fact" is always in *excess* of what can be empirically substantiated.

In his psychoanalytic study *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon dramatizes how colonial discourse, which produces the stereotype as its primary strategy of enunciation, determines his own subjectivity. He recalls a scene where a young white child sees him on a train platform and is afraid of him because he is black.⁵ Fanon suggests that this moment functions as a metonym linked to a range of complex psychic effects produced in the black man by a white person's fear and rejection of him. The black man experiences a feeling of being divorced from his own consciousness, an experience Fanon describes as an "amputation" (112). He becomes an object, even to himself. His individuality—his very personhood—is erased as he is turned into a signifier of a whole history of racial myth:

I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism [sic], racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: "Sho' good eatin'," (112)

"I am overdetermined from without," continues Fanon, "I am the slave not of the 'idea' that others have of me but of my own appearance" (116). His skin, then, is the signature of his identity, which is really a non-identity. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. contends that "[r]ace, as a meaningful criterion within the biological sciences, has long been recognized to be a fiction. When we speak of 'the white race' or 'the black race,' the Jewish race' or 'the Aryan race,' we speak in biological misnomers and, more generally, in metaphors" (4). But these metaphors, as Fanon demonstrates, are extremely powerful. Indeed, they are internalized and lived as if they were real.

Jane Willis explores how the production of a particular stereotype determines and contains her subjectivity. That stereotype is of the brown Indian body as a dirty body: savage, degenerate, both prone to and responsible for disease, naturally given to sexual licentiousness and corruption. Not surprisingly, colonial discourse frequently translates itself into a surveillance and administration of the body. The colonial agent seizes on the body of the Native "other" as both the visible sign of difference and the signature of an alien and inferior identity. Overdetermined as it is, the Native body becomes a primary point of subject-formation for both the colonizer and the colonized: the colonizer because of the disavowal of the "other" in the "self"; the colonized because of the internalization of the ideological statements of a racist colonial discourse which attributes positive qualities only

to whiteness.

The gendering of the stereotype also makes a difference. Native girls and women are fixed within specific categories of identification, which Janice Acoose names the "Indian princess" and the "easy squaw." While the former is a romanticized version of Rousseau's "noble savage," the latter is "a contemporary distortion of the squaw drudge" (39). Both images are damaging to Native women, for, in Acoose's view, they "foster dangerous cultural attitudes that affect human relations and inform institutional ideologies" (49). Furthermore, they obscure and deny the fundamental humanity of Native women by reducing complex human beings to iconic types. In part, Native women writers write against these seemingly polarized but interrelated stereotypical representations; however, a simple reversal or refusal of them does not necessarily weaken their power, for stereotypical representations of Native women continue to be reiterated within contemporary culture, and they continue to confirm white expectations and fulfill white fantasies.⁶ As Barbara Godard suggests, Native women writers confront the *effect* that the production and repetition of these stereotypical representations has had on their subject positions. These writers not only expose but also historicize and critically analyze the origins, manifestations, and cultural meanings of stereotypes. Such critical analyses are located within a politics of decolonization. As Godard contends,

... through struggle, acquiring some of the strategies and structures of the dominant, the subaltern [Native subject] rises 'into hegemony', this process constituting a *dis/placement* of the dominant discourse and strategies of hybridization that undermine its monolithic position of power. Both speaking marginality and speaking against it, exploiting the ambiguity of their within/without position with respect to power, these emerging subjects destabilize institutional practices. (193, emphasis in the original)

The language of Jane Willis's autobiography can be characterized as just this kind of double-speaking from a position that is both inside and outside structures of power. While Willis does represent herself as a child who, upon entering residential school and confronting a figure of white authority, knows immediately that she is "completely at her mercy, to do with as she pleased" (39), she also employs specific linguistic strategies that suggest that she is neither completely dominated by individual white people nor by the discourses that authorize their power over her. One such strategy is to

mix languages. In telling her life story, Willis uses both standard English and Cree. Fragments of dialogue between the narrator and her relatives are often represented in Cree, and these fragments are not translated into English either within the main text or through the addition of a glossary. Admittedly, the non-Cree-speaking reader can get the gist of what is being said from the context of the utterance; nevertheless, the primary effect of incorporating the Cree language into the narrative is that the white reader—like the white characters in the autobiography—is never completely privy to all of the exchanges between family members. The importance of Willis writing in Cree should not be understated. For a woman who has been punished for speaking her mother tongue, the act of reclaiming that tongue is already an act of agency. Furthermore, by positioning the non-Cree-speaking reader as outsider, the author prevents that reader from ever fully knowing and, thus, *managing* the Native subject.

In residential school, Native children learn that their own speaking is unauthorized, yet the prohibition against speaking does not mean that they are uninterested in language. On the contrary, struggles over language, over the right to *name*, become part of their daily lives. Within Native cultures, generally, the power inherent in language is recognized and respected. In a collaborative dialogue between Douglas Cardinal and Jeannette Armstrong about the Native creative process, Armstrong states that

One of the central instructions to my people is to practise quietness, to listen and speak only if you know the full meaning of what you say. It is said that you cannot call your words back once they are uttered and so you are responsible for all which results from your words. It is said that, for those reasons, it is best to prepare very seriously and carefully to make public contributions. (90)

Jane Willis articulates her life experiences in language, and thus makes a significant public statement. Yet she does more than just use words: she thematizes the ways in which an alien language, the colonizer's language, shapes her subjectivity. Willis explores how particular words can be abusive and coercive. She also throws words back at the colonizers by mimicking their racist language, and, in doing so, holds them responsible for it.

Willis's narrative begins not with her own words but with a direct quotation: "No white person employed by the Hudson Bay Company shall fraternize with the natives [Indians]" (1). Here Willis immediately signals that the colonizer's words are of a particular kind: declarative statements of law. Yet while Willis frequently repeats this language of law, she also under-

mines its authority by ironically commenting on how she and other Native people heard and responded to it. This first law of The Hudson's Bay Company, we quickly discover, was "more often ignored than obeyed" (1); indeed, Willis cites this law primarily to show that her own existence is the consequence of her parents' disobedience. Rules and laws also characterize the environment of the residential school. The narrator recalls listening to the principal recite a formal list of the ground rules on the first day of school. Each rule has a number and is stated in short, declarative sentences. For example, Rule number one is "There will be no Cree spoken in this school. Anyone caught speaking it will be severely punished" (46). Immediately following the inscription of this statement in the text, however, Willis adds a parenthetical comment: "(This was a rule we absolutely refused to follow. By refusing to speak either Cree or English when any of the staff were around, we were able to escape punishment)" (46). Similar parenthetical comments follow several of the rules inscribed at this point in the text. The effect of this running commentary is that the reader acquires a more complete understanding of how students both reacted to and dealt with the constraints placed upon them. Resistance to the colonizer's law, then, is not simply enacted in the behaviour of the child; it is also enacted in the writing of the adult autobiographer. By critiquing the rules, the autobiographer refuses to repeat them "straight" or to state them as a matter of fact.

Nevertheless, the life story told here is one of domination and neglect. Much of the language of the text is devoted to descriptions of how school authorities controlled Native children through controlling their bodies. In some ways, *Geniesh: An Indian Girlhood* can be read as a biography of the narrator's body. As Gerald R. McMaster (following Chris Doran) suggests, the Native body is a "coded body." "In coding 'Indians' as 'bodies,'" writes McMaster, "the state exercises a form of state power whereby people are treated not as physical bodies but are forced upon a grid or master code, which can be rendered silent, docile, and infinitely manipulable instead of being seen as a resistant and challenging body" (76). Within the residential school, the Native child body is under constant surveillance. It is the first object of colonial administrative control, because it is her body—her skin—that is the visible sign of her difference. Furthermore, through acting on her body colonial authority ultimately hopes to convert her into its subject. The body, as Foucault argues in *Discipline and Punish*, might be the

focus of institutional regulation, but it is only an intermediary (11). What the authorities are actually after is control of the mind and conversion of the soul.

Unaware of the real conditions at the residential school, at first the narrator longs to live there. But on the day when she is handed over by her reluctant grandparents and mother to Miss Moore, “the female-wrestler supervisor” (37), she quickly learns that school is something more than a new adventure. In her excitement and eagerness to be accepted and approved of, she has taken great care over her appearance. She presents herself before her teachers in a new dress, her hair is clean, combed and braided, her body is freshly bathed. However, the first thing she is required to do is submit to being scrubbed in scalding water and having her hair and scalp doused with kerosene. Because “common knowledge” states that all Indians are filthy and louse-ridden, the teacher denies what she sees—a young girl whose personal hygiene has been scrupulously overseen by her grandmother—and acts, instead, according to what she believes, which is that all Indians are “dirty savages.” The colonized Native body, as Sander L. Gilman among others has documented, has been subjected to all sorts of biological investigation (see especially his chapter three), but colonial authority is not really concerned with the empirical body; rather, it produces the colonized Native body as its own object of scrutiny and regulation through stereotyping. The colonized Native body is always already inferior, degenerate, abnormal, dirty. It cannot be otherwise. And, as Appiah reminds us, intrinsic racism, of the kind that Miss Moore exhibits here, cannot be defeated by any amount of evidence. It is so ingrained, so normalized, that actions resulting from it are automatic.

The school authorities are obsessed with cleanliness. Not only is the external bathing and delousing a ritual event (and a scene that is repeated in many Native life narratives), but the children at St. Philips are subject to various other kinds of bodily regulation. The girls are all required to cut their hair short in the same page-boy style; they are made to sleep in unheated dormitories with the windows wide open, even in winter; they are made to wash six times a day and even brush their teeth with Lifebuoy soap; they are told when to sleep and when to wake; they are told when they can go to the toilet and when they cannot; they are fed the same food (some of it rotten and never enough of it) at the same time every day with variations only at Christmas and Easter; and they are regularly dosed with

laxatives. In an ironic comment about the hateful laxatives, the narrator notes "Our insides too had to be sterilized, just like our bodies" (44). While this statement signals that the school authorities hope to bring about good health and organic purity in their charges, it also signals that they want to bleach the Indian out of them, to cure them of the "disease" of racial and cultural difference.

Real disease and illness, however, often go untreated. Indeed, the authorities, not the children themselves, determine when they are sick. Children quickly learn that complaints about feeling sick are likely to prompt further scorn and possible punishment. For example, one of the girls, Annie, has a tape worm which she is afraid to tell anyone about for fear that it will prove what white people already believe. Earlier, when she had developed an allergic skin reaction to the Lifebuoy soap, Annie gets this response from Miss Moore: "You dirty little Indian! If you weren't so dirty, you wouldn't have this problem" (86). Note the irrationality here: Annie has a skin problem precisely because she washes so much. Another girl, Ellen, falls seriously ill, but her condition goes untreated because the teachers, believing that Indians are naturally lazy, think that she is faking sickness in order to avoid work. Ellen dies.

Willis's own child body, represented as a sick or potentially sick body, plays a complex role in the text. First, it provides her with an opportunity to compare and contrast her grandmother's traditional home-made remedies with "white man's medicine." When she is ill with tonsillitis as a young child at home, she tries to run away from both kinds of treatment, her grandmother's goose fat concoctions and the white nurse's hypodermic needle. Each remedy seems equally repugnant to her, and neither is judged more effective than the other. Her grandmother too seems to have no objection to the nurse's antibiotics, perhaps believing in the power of the double whammy. By contrast, when Willis enters the residential school, and her body falls under the exclusive regulation of the school authorities, only white treatments and medicines are valued and employed. In fact, colonial discourse dictates that Indians themselves are the source of disease. This belief is one of the mysteries the girls attempt to unravel:

"Did you know that white people don't have germs like us?"

"How do you know that?"

"Because they're always yelling at us about *our* germs. They're afraid of catching them. When we sneeze or cough they always scream at us to cover our

mouths so we won't spread our filthy germs around. If they had germs, they wouldn't be afraid of ours, would they?"

We all had to agree it made sense. They were always yelling at us about our dirty germs. This was one theory we could never disprove. If a white person got sick, we always felt that we were to blame. (48-49, emphasis in the original)

In fact, when a flu epidemic hits the village, the school principal refuses to allow the narrator to visit her dying grandfather for fear that she will bring the virus into the school and infect others. Because many of the school's residents (both students and teachers) are already infected, his logic is insupportable.

Curiously, the narrator maintains a fantasy about illness. She dreams of contracting tuberculosis and of being sent to the hospital. She regards TB as her "big ambition" (93), but this is an ambition motivated primarily by her curiosity about the world beyond the island. The narrator wants the illness but without the symptoms: "I don't want to get sick. I just want to get TB, I would explain patiently. The children who returned from the sanatorium were always telling us about all the good movies they saw, all the juice they drank, and all the good food and fruit they ate. All they did was lie around all day eating good food" (94). To a young girl who is chronically underfed and overworked, such images of luxury foods and leisure are understandably attractive. Yet to desire a tubercular body in order to attain these luxuries is, ironically, to desire what had actually meant thousands of Native deaths. This fantasy, then, functions not only to characterize the narrator as a naïve child, but also to evoke another deadly legacy of European settlement.

The stereotype of the "dirty savage" is constantly repeated, yet it has various manifestations. The Native body is consistently linked with a range of degeneracies, including slothfulness and sexual promiscuity. The girls are repeatedly told that if they do not work hard and uncomplainingly, they will be condemned to a life of perpetual pregnancy, prey to the lusts of drunken and abusive men.⁷ They are warned—even at age seven—not to speak to boys, because "boys are after one thing only" (47). And by the time the narrator is a teenager, she is regularly being accused of behaving promiscuously. A teacher even tries to change the way she walks, accusing her of provocatively wiggling her hips in an effort to attract male attention (116). But the truth is that the narrator and the other students are sexual innocents. At age seven, she has no idea what the "thing" boys want is, and

even when she is older she remains largely in a state of ignorance. Despite their obsession with sex, the teachers do not explain puberty and its accompanying physical and emotional changes. In fact, puberty is a phenomenon that is repressed to the point of denial. The narrator develops a painful abscess on her chest caused by the coarse material of her school uniform rubbing against her growing breasts. Because girls under the age of fifteen are apparently not permitted to have breasts, she is not issued a brassiere.

When Willis leaves St. Philips and travels to Sault Ste. Marie, where she boards at the Shingwauk Indian Residential School while attending classes at a white high school, she takes the lessons of a racist Eurocentric education with her. Although she is excited to be finally seeing the outside world, she is also disappointed because the world does not conform to the images she has come to expect. Even other Indians disappoint, for "They looked and dressed the same as the Indians on my island. The only difference, a very slight one, was the dialect. I had expected Indians in buckskins and feathers like the ones I had seen in the movies" (128). Such a response reveals just how effective her indoctrination has been.

Of course, these stereotypical movie images are also images of herself, and the narrator cannot easily distance herself from them. Just how powerful they are becomes apparent when she visits her step-father's sisters during a stopover in Moose Factory. With their encouragement, the narrator thinks about changing her appearance so as to look more like other city girls. But when Lillian suggests that she get rid of her thick school-issue stockings, the narrator thinks: "Me? Go bare-legged? Why, it was unthinkable! It was sinful and indecent! She might well have told me to walk around naked" (131). So used to being accused of being dirty in both body and mind, when attention is drawn to her body the narrator instantly feels ashamed. Indeed, she has learned to alienate herself from her own body, to repress and fear her corporeality (not to mention her sexuality). Her body, she believes, is a thing that can act on its own and betray her, a thing that has to be kept under tight control. Her body is her identity, in that colonial discourse reduces her to the sign of her skin. But what she has actually learned and internalized is western culture's need to gain mastery over the body and the dichotomy of "soul" and "body" that would locate the "self" outside of the corporeal. She is caught in an impossible situation: both defined by her body and required to deny it.

And yet Jane Willis does find ways of resisting the totalizing power of

colonial discourse. An important but undervalued feature of Willis's narrative technique, as I have been suggesting, is her use of irony. Willis repeats various derogatory stereotypical statements about Native people in her life story as a way of exposing their falsity. Moreover, she uses such statements with reference to herself, thereby revealing how a particular language influences and shapes her subjectivity. The text is punctuated with phrases that Willis appropriates from colonial discourse and turns against herself.

When she recounts a time when she was once again ill with tonsillitis, for example, the narrator comments "I awaited my death like a good little Indian" (93). The notion that the only good Indian is a dead Indian, is a notion that not only informed the plots of countless Westerns but also contributed to the actual murder of Native North Americans. As I have already suggested, the language of Westerns provides Willis with a rich vocabulary. On another occasion, when she is again ill but this time with a stomach ailment, the narrator expresses her anger at the lack of care and sympathy she receives by commenting that rather than complain, "I merely plotted all kinds of revenge—scalping, a quick shove down the fire-escape or stairs, getting out my bow and arrow or slingshot and 'accidentally' piercing the heart of any white person I happened to despise at the moment" (117). Here the narrator raises the specter of the warring Indian who is by nature given to acts of random, unpremeditated violence of a particularly brutal kind. The occasion for this comment is the automatic assumption on the part of the teacher that the narrator is faking illness in order to shirk her share of the work load. Willis's strategy is to counter one stereotype with another one, thereby exposing both as false, even ridiculous. But she also mimics the language of colonialism in order to point out its insidious effects. What becomes increasingly clear is that this is a language that is *available* to her. Indeed, she is supposed to internalize it, believe it, and use it when thinking or speaking about herself in the process of becoming a good colonial subject. The effect is jarring, for the reader can easily recognize the racism behind such statements, as well as Willis's sarcastic tone in repeating them. But the white reader is simultaneously and uncomfortably aware that such stereotypes have authorized a long history of settler colonialism in Canada which continues to this day and in which he or she is implicated.

In their comments on *Geniesh: An Indian Girlhood*, Penny Petrone and Shirley Neuman both note Willis's anger; however, anger, I would argue, is only overt on the final page of the text. At the end of her autobiography Willis's

language becomes polemical. She steps back from narrating the details of her experiences and makes a more general statement. Her approach is blunt; the effect is striking. I offer a small excerpt as an example, but the tone and diction is consistent throughout the four paragraphs that follow this one:

For twelve years I was taught to love my neighbour—especially if he was white—but to hate myself. I was made to feel untrustworthy, inferior, incapable, and immoral. The barbarian in me, I was told, had to be destroyed if I was to be saved. (199)

Echoed in Willis's language is the language of Christian doctrine, which is what justified the teachers' attempts to Christianize Native child subjects by eradicating their identities as Native people. While this final page represents a summation of the injustices Willis and others like her endured, the polemic here represents a marked shift in tone.

Although the book ends on a powerful assertion of renewed self-esteem and the accompanying assertion of freedom from colonial servitude—"Now I can, once again, say with pride, 'I am an Indian'" (100)—this assertion perhaps fails to convince, for the text as a whole represents a sophisticated examination of the tenacity of a racist colonial discourse that equates Indians with savages and barbarians. Indeed, the autobiography articulates what this naming of her *as* an Indian has cost the author. Within the text of *Geniesh: An Indian Girlhood*, the narrator both is and is not the "dirty savage." By repeating and ironically inhabiting the stereotype, Willis attempts to loosen its power to name her. She does challenge its "naturalness" and, in doing so, she diminishes its power. Yet whether or not she articulates an alternative liberatory subject position in the text is not so clear.⁸ There is no position *outside* of her brown body, her brown skin, as that skin continues to be inscribed by a racist colonial discourse, from which to write. As the Métis poet Marilyn Dumont acknowledges in her poem "Memoirs of a Really Good Brown Girl," "my skin always gives me away." The various narrative strategies Willis employs in this text—mixing English with Cree, using ironic commentary and mimicry to deconstruct stereotypes, inscribing blunt polemic—all contribute to, if not fully create, an autobiographical subject resistant to the authority of settler colonialism. Ultimately, however, *Geniesh: An Indian Girlhood* will only further the broader political project of decolonization if it finds an audience, for the racist colonial discourse that the text exposes and critiques can only be overthrown if both writers and readers situate themselves in relation to it.

NOTES

- 1 This paper was written with the assistance of a SSHRC Postdoctoral Fellowship. I am also grateful to my colleague Renée Hulan for her comments on an earlier draft.
- 2 The idea that the priority of the education system was to enact the wholesale assimilation of Native children into mainstream society continued to inform official policy until the federal government adopted proposals outlined in a position paper authored in 1973 by the National Indian Brotherhood (precursor to the Assembly of First Nations). In this paper, Native leaders argued that the control and administration of Native education should be in the hands of parents and communities and be designed in accordance with traditional Native philosophies of education which emphasized fostering pride in oneself, enabling understanding of one's fellow human beings, and learning how to live in harmony with nature (*Indian Education Paper—Phase One*, Annex A, 1).
- 3 The two-volume collection of essays titled *Indian Education in Canada*, edited by Jean Barman, Yvonne Hébert, and Don McCaskill, is comprehensive and insightful. Important case studies of particular residential schools have been written by A. Richard King, Celia Haig-Brown, Diane Persson, and Elizabeth Furniss. A recent collection of essays, *First Nations Education in Canada: The Circle Unfolds*, edited by Marie Battiste and Jean Barman, represents an important contribution to research into Native education. Many of these essays attempt to undo the stubborn legacy of Eurocentric pedagogical practices by articulating a specifically Native pedagogy.
- 4 More of these accounts are being published all the time. A partial list would include the collection of life narratives edited by Linda Jaine in *Residential Schools: The Stolen Years*; Isabelle Knockwood's *Out of the Depths*, Basil H. Johnston's *Indian School Days*, and Alice French's *My Name is Masak*. Ethnographies by Haig-Brown, Furniss, Persson, and Shorten also include the oral testimonies of former residential school students.
- 5 Bhabha also discusses this "primal scene" in Fanon (75-76).
- 6 The Disney film *Pocahontas* is a recent example of the rearticulation of the Indian Princess stereotype. While the Native woman in such a representation is "naturally" beautiful, noble, and desirable, she is also always savage and less civilized than a white person. See Rayna Green for a discussion of the ways in which the Pocahontas myth has circulated in American popular culture. Beth Brant offers an alternative account of the story of Pocahontas and John Smith.
- 7 In Beatrice Culleton's autobiographical novel *In Search of April Raintree*, the Métis protagonist and her sister are lectured by a social worker on the "native girl syndrome." More fully articulated than in Willis's autobiography, this "syndrome" constitutes a seemingly inevitable and natural fate:

It starts out with the fighting, the running away, the lies. Next come the accusations that everyone in the world is against you. There are the sullen uncooperative silences, the feeling sorry for yourselves. And when you go on your own you get pregnant right away or you can't find or keep jobs. So you'll start with alcohol and drugs. From there, you get into shoplifting and prostitution and in and out of jails. You'll live with men who abuse you. And on it goes. (66-67)

- 8 Linda Hutcheon notes that one of the lingering questions about irony, even in its post-modern formulation, is that while irony can subvert dominant discourses from within and raise political consciousness, it is not clear whether it can move beyond "the destabilizing and dismantling to construct something new" (45).

WORKS CITED

- Acoose, Janice/Misko-Kisikāwihkwè (Red Sky Woman). *Iskwewak—Kah' Ki Yaw Ni Wahkomakanak: Neither Indian Princesses nor Easy Squaws*. Toronto: Women's P, 1995.
- Appiah, Kwame Anthony. "Racisms." *Anatomy of Racism*. Ed. Theo Goldberg. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1990. 3-17.
- Barman, Jean. "Separate and Unequal: Indian and White Girls at All Hallows School, 1884-1920." Barman, Hébert, and McCaskill vol. 1. 110-31.
- Barman, Jean, Yvonne Hébert, and Don McCaskill. *Indian Education in Canada*. Nakoda Institute Occasional Paper No. 2. Vancouver: U of British Columbia P, 1986. 2 vols.
- Battiste, Marie and Jean Barman, eds. *First Nations Education in Canada: The Circle Unfolds*. Vancouver: U of British Columbia P, 1995.
- Bhabha, Homi K. "The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism." *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994. 66-84.
- Brant, Beth. "Grandmothers of a New World." *Writing as Witness: Essay and Talk*. Toronto: Women's P, 1994. 83-103.
- Campbell, Maria. *Halfbreed*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1973.
- Cardinal, Douglas and Jeannette Armstrong. *The Native Creative Process*. With Photographs by Grey Young-Ing. Penticton: Theytus, 1991.
- Cardinal, Harold. *The Unjust Society: The Tragedy of Canada's Indians*. Edmonton: Hurtig, 1969.
- Cheda, Sherill. Rev. of *Geniesh: An Indian Girlhood*, by Jane Willis. *Canadian Forum* (Aug. 1974): 41-42.
- Culleton, Beatrice. *In Search of April Raintree*. Winnipeg: Pemmican, 1983.
- Dumont, Marilyn. "Memoirs of a Really Good Brown Girl." *A Really Good Brown Girl*. London: Brick Books, 1996.
- English-Currie, Vicki. "The Need for Re-evaluation in Native Education." *Writing the Circle: Native Women of Western Canada*. Comp. and ed. Jeanne Perreault and Sylvia Vance: Edmonton: NeWest P, 1990. 47-60.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann. New York: Grove, 1967.
- Fontaine, Phil. "We Are All Born Innocent." *Jaine* 43-60.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage-Random House, 1979.
- French, Alice. *My Name is Masak*. Winnipeg: Peguis, 1977.
- Furniss, Elizabeth. *Victims of Benevolence: The Dark Legacy of the Williams Lake Residential School*. 1992. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp P, 1995.
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. "Writing 'Race' and the Difference It Makes." "Race," *Writing and Difference*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986. 1-20.
- Gilman, Sander L. *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985.
- Godard, Barbara. "The Politics of Representation: Some Native Canadian Women Writers." *Native Writers and Canadian Writing*. Ed. W.H. New. Vancouver: U of British Columbia P, 1990. 183-225.
- Green, Rayna. "The Pocahontas Perplex: The Image of Indian Women in American Culture." *Sweetgrass* (July/Aug. 1984): 17-23.

- Haig-Brown, Celia. *Resistance and Renewal: Surviving the Indian Residential School*. Vancouver: Tillacum, 1988.
- Hutcheon, Linda. "The Power of Postmodern Irony." *Gender, Trope, Genre: Critical Essays by Northrop Frye, Linda Hutcheon, and Shirley Neuman*. Ed. Barry Rutland. Ottawa: Carleton UP, 1992. 35-49.
- Indian Education Paper—Phase 1*. Ottawa: Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, 1982.
- Jaine, Linda, ed. *Residential Schools: The Stolen Years*. Saskatoon: University Extension P, 1993.
- Johnston, Basil H. *Indian School Days*. Toronto: Key Porter, 1988.
- Knockwood, Isabelle, with Gillian Thomas. *Out of the Depths: The Experiences of Mi'kmaw Children at the Indian Residential School at Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia*. Lockeport, N.S.: Roseway, 1992.
- King, A. Richard. *The School at Mopass: A Problem of Identity*. Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967.
- LaRocque, Emma. "The Place of Native Writing in Canadian Intellectual Categories: Native Resistance Literature." Paper presented at the Canadian Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies; joint session with the Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English. Learned Societies Conference. Université du Québec à Montréal. Montreal. 29 May 1995.
- Lutz, Hartmut. "Preface." *Contemporary Challenges: Conversations with Canadian Native Authors*. Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1991. 1-11.
- McMaster, Gerald R. "Borderzones: The 'Injun-uity' of Aesthetic Tricks." *Cultural Studies* 9.1 (1995): 74-90.
- Neuman, Shirley. "Life-Writing." *Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English*. 2nd ed. Vol. 4. Ed. W.H. New. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1990. 333-70.
- Persson, Diane. "Blue Quills: A Case Study of Indian Residential Schooling." Ph.D. dissertation. University of Alberta, 1980.
- Petrone, Penny. *Native Literature in Canada: From the Oral Tradition to the Present*. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1990.
- Shorten, Lynda. *Without Reserve: Stories from Urban Natives*. Edmonton: NeWest P, 1991.
- Tobias, John L. "Protection, Civilization, Assimilation: An Outline History of Canada's Indian Policy." *As Long as the Sun Shines and the Water Flows: A Reader in Canadian Native Studies*. Ed. Ian A. L. Getty and Antoine S. Lussier. Nakoda Institute Occasional Paper No. 1. Vancouver: U of British Columbia P, 1983. 39-55.
- "Two Girlhoods." Rev. of *Dobryd*, by Ann Charney, and *Geniesh: An Indian Girlhood*, by Jane Willis. *Chatelaine* Oct. 1973: 12.
- Willis, Jane. *Geniesh: An Indian Girlhood*. Toronto: New P, 1973.
- Youngblood Henderson, James [sákéj]. "Treaties and Indian Education." *Battiste and Barman* 245-61.