



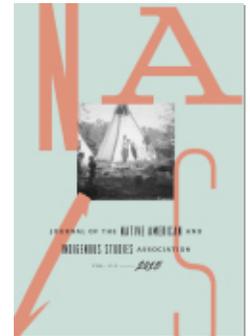
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MARGOT FRANCIS

“Bending the Light” toward Survivance: Anishinaabec-Led Youth Theater on Residential Schools

THIS ESSAY EXPLORES an Anishinaabec-led youth theater project on the intergenerational legacy of residential schools to rethink ideas about Indigenous survivance.¹ My aim is to develop a hermeneutics for listening to complex narratives within the play and in interviews with the audience and cast. While there is now a substantial literature on the racist ideological framework of these schools and their traumatic effects, less has been written about former students who considered themselves successfully assimilated graduates. A key story in the production discussed here concerns the legacy of one such student, Marguerite Stella Syrette, who attended St. Joseph’s Residential School for girls in Spanish, Ontario, in the 1930s. Her grandson, Teddy Syrette, was the lead writer and actor in this theater project, where he developed a compelling set of auto-ethnographic reflections on his relationship with his grandmother. These stories illustrate the legacy of those who considered themselves successful converts and model citizens as a result of residential schooling, capturing what may be for many readers an unexpected outcome of the residential school project. At the same time, these narratives also demonstrate how students wove complex narratives of appropriation and transculturation in contexts not of their own choosing.

My work draws on Indigenous analysis of survivance (e.g., that of Vizenor) and Figs’s study of those who endured the terror of Stalinist Russia, as well as insights from interviews from the cast and audience to explore the ambivalence at the heart of navigating domination. I argue that this performance enacted a risky and important form of Indigenous self-representation, where actors and audience members related anecdotes and shared ephemera which hinted at stories that can never be fully known. Through dramatic monologues, humor, and auto-ethnographic storytelling, Teddy Syrette’s performance highlighted both how racial and hetero-gendered norms taught in the schools echoed down the generations within Indigenous families, as well as the grit and determination that enabled Anishinaabec survivance—without papering over the contradictions.

The context for this theater performance is the present-day legacy of

boarding schools for Indigenous children. In Canada, as in other settler colonial contexts, residential schools were officially designed to alienate Indigenous children from their family and kinship relations, convert them to Christianity, and assimilate them into the lowest rungs of a settler society. Schooling practices aimed to extinguish Indigenous languages, culture, and spiritualities through representing them as backward and primitive, and many staff employed regulatory practices that ranged from public humiliation to physical and sexual abuse in order to punish students and expunge their Indigenous heritage.²

I will start with a brief review of the history of residential schools and then explore the contradictions of “assimilation” through analysis of Teddy Syrette’s compelling narratives from the play. The next section draws on interviews with the cast and selected audience members to elaborate on how they made sense of that legacy in order to “bend the light” toward Indigenous survivance. Throughout I highlight the contradictory ways in which Anishinaabec people (re)imagined the assimilative drive of residential schools and theorize the significance of Indigenous theater for navigating the inheritance of education as a racialized program of social control.

Background and Context

Boarding schools for Indigenous children first began to proliferate in Canada in the mid-1800s; while most closed in the 1960s or 1970s, the last institution did not shut its doors until 1996. The schools were jointly run by the churches and the government. They were systematically underfunded and in most cases provided a substandard education geared toward menial work.³ Yet these schools also provided a key plank in the mission of the Indian Department, which aimed, according to Duncan Campbell Scott, deputy minister in 1920, to get “rid of the Indian problem” through the “gradual civilization” of Indigenous people through education.⁴ The purpose of this Canadian policy, as one American Bureau of Indian Affairs official said in 1945, was “the extinction of the Indians as Indians.”⁵ This was pursued through many avenues, including land seizures, the reserve system, the outlawing of Indigenous spiritual and cultural practices, and state regulation of Indigenous legal status, governance, and economic activities. Schooling, however, was a critical component in that assimilative policy, and it was only with the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples in 1996 that the state publicly acknowledged this problematic legacy.⁶ The Conservative prime minister of Canada Stephen Harper officially apologized for the residential school system and set up a Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2008.⁷

It is important to note that it has taken well over a century and a half for Indigenous critiques of the residential school system to gain any official recognition. As one of my interviewees, the director of the National Residential School Survivor Society Mike Cachagee, commented, “For years we’ve had no credibility in telling these stories.”⁸ From the earliest experiments in church-run boarding schools, Indigenous communities resisted the coercive and assimilative aspects of the schools by withholding their children, to the extent that government officials in 1856 considered the early schools to be a failure.⁹ Nevertheless, attendance at an Indian school was made obligatory in 1920, with institutions unevenly distributed across the country and some communities having access to day schools which had similar aims and practices.¹⁰

Much of the scholarship produced over the past twenty years, including the 2012 Truth and Reconciliation (TRC) report *They Came for the Children* has emphasized Indigenous resistance. J. R. Miller’s book-length history of residential schools, *Shingwauk’s Vision*, recounts how some parents withheld their children from the schools despite the legal and financial consequences. Similarly, the TRC highlights that Haisla parents boycotted the school in Kitimat, British Columbia, when they believed children were not being treated well.¹¹ Celia Haig-Brown also described how parents, in at least one case, drove out an instructor who had been accused of abusing a female student.¹² Children in the schools were sometimes able to challenge the rigid disciplinary requirements by continuing to speak their languages despite punishments, or through acts of violence against the staff, or by running away—though some died of exposure or drowning in their attempt to escape.¹³ Further, a range of Indigenous authors have stressed the ways children and youth challenged the institutions from within, emphasizing the fact that students were not simply victims of social engineering. For example, Tomson Highway’s acclaimed novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen* employs fictional characters to reimagine his and his brother’s experience of residential school. Highway emphasizes the brothers’ continued connection to both Cree and Christian spiritualities and the creative resistance they displayed as adults when they turned a legacy of pain and loss into dance, theater, music, and art.¹⁴

Nevertheless, most Canadians continue to be unaware of the schools, and only recently has there been some limited acknowledgment that the schools’ objective was a (failed) attempt at cultural genocide. It is important to emphasize that many of the children who attended the schools died there. Government reports confirm that 24 percent of children in the pre-WWII Western schools died from tuberculosis and other diseases, and there were high rates of physical and sexual abuse.¹⁵ Consequently, stories that might be seen to underplay the traumatic nature of residential school experiences have been less often told. Despite this, the Anishinaabec actors and

audience members involved in the theater production highlighted a range of more ambivalent narratives emphasizing the contradictory ways that Indigenous parents, children, and communities navigated their residential school experiences. Listening to their analysis, it seemed to me that they were asserting the importance of survivance as a politics of interpretive autonomy and discursive agency in ways that invited me, as a researcher, to rethink what might be understood by the very words “assimilation” or “resistance” in the first place.

The 2011 theater production on which this essay is based was developed by an Anishinaabec-led group of actors who were participants in summer community theater projects in Batchewana and Garden River First Nations. The actors wrote the script based on interviews with their extended family, other survivors of the schools, and research from the Shingwauk Residential School archives.¹⁶ The play, *No Choices, Different Voices*, was first presented at the National Residential School Survivor Society biannual conference from July 1 to 3, 2011, and performed for a wider audience in August 2011 in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. The youth actors were mentored by Debajehmujig Theatre, one of the most accomplished Indigenous dramatic groups in Canada. The show itself staged a series of dramatic narratives to retell the legacy of residential schools primarily from the perspective of children attending those institutions, and each of the actors also constructed an auto-ethnographic response to these narratives. For some this meant speaking in their own voices as Indigenous youth who were, for the first time, grappling with the impact of this legacy in their family and community. For non-Indigenous youth the focus was on attempting to make connections with this traumatic history through related experiences of marginality,¹⁷ as well as confronting their responsibility as citizens in a settler state through their involvement in this project and through inviting audiences to consider the importance of this difficult legacy.¹⁸ In the next section I highlight a series of auto-ethnographic vignettes by Teddy Syrette, the lead writer and actor in this project, and theorize these in conversation with interviews with other Indigenous actors and community members.

Anishinaabec Performance: “I’m a Friggen Indian”

In the opening monologue of *No Choices, Different Voices*, Teddy Syrette introduces the audience to his gradual realization of the schools’ impact on his family, starting with his visit to the St. Joseph’s Residential School in Spanish, Ontario, in May 2011:

I see the building standing across a field and through the trees. This place is closed off to the public, but I’m fascinated by the discovery. . . . It is early eve-

ning and the sun shines from the southwest, pouring through the open holes of windows and doorways, so the air flows through its ribs and bones. The building stands thirty feet tall and it breathes . . . I grab my phone and snap a picture.

The visit to St. Joseph's Residential School where Teddy snapped this picture was originally a brief side tour on his trip to meet with Debajehmujig Theatre, the future mentors of the project documented here.¹⁹ Later in this monologue, Teddy describes arriving home and showing his father the picture taken on his cell phone. While he is aware of the existence of residential schools and is proud of his discovery of a "cultural ruin," what he doesn't know is that this school is part of his own family history. Indeed, the discussion with his father reveals that his grandmother attended this very institution. As Teddy notes later, the "discovery of the building" means that he is, in a certain way, meeting his grandmother "for the first time." Indeed, this photograph is the start of a process through which Teddy reimagines a long-estranged relationship. Within his family there had been no discussion about how his grandmother's school experience was sealed off from the everyday realm of familial and community memory.

Interestingly, questions about the ways the residential school legacy is invisible *within* Indigenous families and communities, as well as in the dominant society, were raised by all the Indigenous actors in the show. For example, a mixed-race Anishinaabec youth who lived off-reserve and who had been, up until his involvement in this project, disconnected from Anishinaabec history and culture, noted that family stories of his grandfather's traumatic flight from Hungary prior to WWII were well-known. In contrast, although he had three uncles and two aunts who were in residential schools, he knew nothing of that legacy.²⁰ Similarly, two other actors (Anishinaabec and Cree) talked about how they had some superficial understanding of the schools, but prior to working on this show, as Tazz McCloud put it, "residential schools were not really on my radar. . . . Everything the audience learned I also learned in the last few months."²¹ Actor Chase Neveau also remarked on this absence, suggesting that the lack of discussion was "eerie" in a community where many families had been profoundly affected by this legacy.²²

For these youth, however, the "eerie" silence was not just about the legacy of residential schools: it was also about the meanings associated with being Indigenous. Midway through the first act Teddy speaks to this issue directly:

For the longest period of my life I always thought I was either Italian, or what Cher likes to call a "half breed." Then my aunty told me that I was an Indian. . . . "AN INDIAN!?" Holy man! I'm a friggen Indian. I was so excited to discover I was an Indian. However, as a little boy I never knew what being Indian, Nish, Native, Aboriginal, or my favorite, only because it sounds fancy IN-DI-GE-NOUS actually meant . . . Hmm . . . Indigenous. That one always used to make me stutter if

I talked too fast. “Hey look at all those IN-DI-GE-GE-NOUS . . . IN-DI-DI-GE-GE-NEE . . . IN-DI-GE-GE-NEE, oh whatever, ‘Aanii Niishnaabs!’”

Teddy grew up in the Batchewana First Nation, on the outskirts of the mid-sized northern Ontario community of Sault Ste. Marie, and while the young actor realized this territory was “different,” the significance of this was unclear. In his opening monologue Teddy dramatizes the discovery of his “Indian” or Nish (short for Anishinaabec) status, and then turns to a satirical commentary on the politics of naming oneself. While “Indigenous” has recently become an umbrella expression signifying an international politics connecting Native communities, Teddy describes it, somewhat mockingly, as “fancy.” Employing a quirky sense of humor, he turns his point of address back to his community, “Aanii Niishnaabs!” (Aanii means “hello” in the Anishinaabemowin language), thus invoking a shared sense of cultural solidarity. In these ways, Teddy’s monologue uses humor as a flexible performative strategy which both acknowledges his sense of disconnection from “Nish” history and identity, and asserts his clear affinity with that same project. In this next excerpt, Teddy elaborates on that conflicted legacy:

One thing that always confused me as a child was that I always thought one side of my family wasn’t Aboriginal. My father said we were, but everyone on his side of the family has fair skin with light-colored eyes and hair. . . . I, on the other hand, was always brown: hair, eyes, and skin tone. I felt like the black . . . no wait, the *brown* sheep of the family. They even acted like, well how can I say this without using the “Z” word? Oh! I know, “like non-Aboriginal people.” I just always felt different and sometimes I thought I was treated differently.

The “Z” word refers to Zhaagnaash, which means “white people” in Anishinaabemowin.²³ When Teddy traces back this sense that his father’s side of the family seems “non-Aboriginal,” the place he lands is with his grandmother, Marguerite Stella Syrette, who attended St. Joseph’s Residential School. This estrangement is illustrated in a story that closes the first act of the play. Here Teddy describes the tension between himself and his grandmother through a series of binaries: she was a devout Roman Catholic, while he was a boy who “cried” when he “had to go to Sunday School”; she was a “flawless seamstress” who worked for the finest dress shops in Sault Ste. Marie, while he was “a curiously confused boy who tried on the dress when she left the room.” Despite all this, Teddy decided to tell her a secret. The occasion was a visit in the hospital, where his grandmother was recovering from a fall. Teddy chatted with her about the “crappy food” and whether he would return to finish high school:

But after a while I was ready to tell my grandmother, the one person I wasn’t close to, that I, her brown sheep grandson was GAY! However, before I could

speak she reached over to grab a magazine, pointed to the headline: 'Rosie O'Donnell Marries Longtime Girlfriend' and said, 'Did you see this? Tssk, tssk, disgusting!' I lied and told her I was going back to school then left.

As might be expected, after this conversation the rift between Teddy and his grandmother "grew wider"; she died a year before the performance documented here. Given the hetero-patriarchal religious ideology which characterized residential schools, it is not surprising that Marguerite Syrette was not familiar with the traditions that honored "two-spirit" people *within* many Indigenous communities.²⁴ Despite this painful schism, Teddy used his discovery of St. Joseph's Residential School as the starting point for "a journey to find out more about the grandmother" he "never understood."

Teddy's first opportunity came during his three-week internship at Deba-jehmujig Theatre in Wikwemikong (Wiki) on Manitoulin Island in the spring of 2011. He describes the incident in the second act of the play, highlighting how a casual conversation allowed him to reconnect with his grandmother's family on the island, whom he had never met:

When I met my other family members in Wiki what struck me more than anything was that almost all of them were visibly Aboriginal, they looked like me. The brown sheep of the family had finally found his matching flock. They mentioned to me that my gram was always a bit different from the rest: reserved, introverted, and kept to just her immediate family. My cousins talked about how she had a sister who passed away in Spanish Residential School [St. Joseph's Residential School in the community of Spanish] and that after she had returned to Wiki, she had changed. She was even more distant and the only people she really socialized with were other students who attended school.

While Teddy's grandmother was raised in Anishinaabemowin before being sent to residential school, when she returned she no longer spoke the language. Most striking for Teddy was that despite the many horror stories associated with these schools, his grandmother's "feelings . . . were of gratitude and personal growth." Indeed, Marguerite had "fond memories" of "playing baseball with her sister and sending notes to her brother Morris by hiding them in the brim of the Father's hat." Later, when Marguerite herself was a mother, she would have preferred that her own children went to a residential school, a perspective that seemed to fit with what Teddy described as her "drill sergeant" approach to her own children and grandchildren. Complaining about the distance her children had to walk to school, Marguerite noted that *her* classroom had always been "just down the stairs."²⁵

Teddy ends this sequence by asking himself, and implicitly the audience, the following question: "Did the government and church manage to kill the Indian in my grandmother through assimilation?' or 'Was my grandmother always open to the idea of identity [as a process of] adaptation?'" While the

only person who might address this question is no longer alive, Teddy used the development of the play to explore this unanswerable query.

As the audience for this production was primarily composed of members of Garden River and Batchewana First Nations, some of them knew Marguerite Syrette, and one of my interviewees, Alice Corbiere, commented on her representation in the play. Corbiere is a member of Batchewana First Nation and was the administrator for the band council from 1966 to 1978. While I did not specifically ask her about the representation of Marguerite Syrette, she raised this issue in response to a question about the schools' intergenerational effects:

Marguerite was a great woman, very strong. I think Teddy presented it quite well. Everything was black or white with her. The strictness of the residential school came out. She was a fantastic seamstress and she worked for the top shop here in Sault Ste. Marie. She was well respected in the city for her skills. When we are talking about the intergenerational effects—it is the lateral violence that is within our First Nations members. I really think that residential schools taught this. We were taught that you're not Indian. So we were taught, "I'm not as Indian as you are. You're more Indian than me." And on and on it went.

Here Alice Corbiere reflects on the legacy of a colonial education where the objective was to "kill the Indian in the child" and theorizes that this demeaning context contributed significantly to students internalizing negative ideas about "Indian" identity. The term "lateral violence" refers to the ways that people who are survivors of colonization, intergenerational trauma, and ongoing oppression may lash out against members of their own community. As Mick Gooda, the social justice commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Australia, remarked in 2011, the "concept of lateral violence has its origins in literature on colonialism from Africa and Latin America, as well as on the oppression of African Americans . . . and women. The process of colonisation . . . has its roots not only in the violent subjugation of groups but also more insidious forms of social control."²⁶ Theorists such as Frantz Fanon have argued that despite many expressions of resistance, the experience of ongoing oppression leads some colonized people to internalize the values of their oppressors.²⁷ In this context, lateral violence is understood as lashing out at your "own" rather than at those who are above you in the hierarchy of power. Or, as Mick Gooda explains, the "overwhelming position of power held by the colonizers, combined with internalized negative beliefs, fosters the sense that directing anger . . . toward the colonizers is too risky. . . . In this situation we are safer and more able to attack those closest to us."²⁸ The exercise of lateral violence, then, must be located within the context of the redemptive narrative taught in most residential schools

which asserted that Indigenous people needed to expunge their own cultures, languages, economies, and spiritualities—indeed, their own people—in order to gain a place within the modern social order.

I suggest that theories about the internalization of settler colonial values might productively be linked to other analyses about the impact of power in ways that produce additional shadings to this history. Here I draw on Orlando Figes's study of those who endured the terror of Stalinist Russia, in the hope that this perhaps surprising source might generate additional possibilities for understanding the complicated forms of survivance developed by those facing overwhelming state power. Figes explores oral-history accounts of the private lives of those who lived through the Stalinist terror, including interviews with people whose family members were arrested by the NKVD or who were deported to labor camps in the Gulag, and others who denounced their friends and family or were informers for the state. In all these instances, Figes is interested in how people speak about their "strategies for survival, the silences, the lies, the friendships," and the ways people "preserved their traditions and beliefs . . . if they were in conflict with the public values of the Soviet system . . . [in short] how did living in a system ruled by terror affect intimate relationships?"²⁹ His research details the complex ways people accommodated themselves to the Soviet ideals through individualized narratives of personal accomplishment, self-discipline, and stoicism, in order to assert a pride in their "way of life," despite the overwhelming context where they lacked control over foundational aspects of daily life.

I am interested in the ways Figes's analysis might be relevant for understanding Indigenous parents and children whose lives were also ruled by the overwhelming power of the state as they navigated the residential school system. In order to understand these narrative strategies in relation to Marguerite Syrette, it would be helpful to know more about her life history. As Alice Corbiere remarked, one could develop "a whole story" based on Marguerite, "and her marriage to a former war veteran, and what he came home to, and her own family from Manitoulin Island, and what they went through."³⁰ While I am not familiar with all the family history, I can provide a few additional details to flesh out this picture. Marguerite was taken from her family home on Manitoulin Island to the residential school on the mainland in the town of Spanish when she was six years old; she did not return until she was a teenager, after her mother had died, to help raise the younger children. As Mike Cachagee noted, "If your [non-Aboriginal] child doesn't go to school, they send a truant officer. But if I ran away from the residential school, they'd send the police after me."³¹ Thus any understanding of the "voluntary" release of children needs to be considered within the context of the legal control that governed the lives of Indigenous people during this period. Marguerite left her

family home to marry an Anishinaabec veteran after WWII. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal People has said that after the war, veterans returned to blatant inequalities in accessing medical benefits and funding for education or small businesses—all of which were offered to non-Aboriginal veterans.³² In this context, Marguerite Syrette developed her skills as an expert seamstress, learned in St. Joseph's Residential School, while also raising children and supporting her family. Marguerite also contributed to Anishinaabec governance by serving as the secretary for the Batchewana band council, and as a band councilor in the 1950s and 1960s.

Marguerite's early life story after she left residential school illustrates the gendered responsibilities that accrued to older girl children for social and familial reproduction. Her departure from the school she had been compelled to attend, but which she seemingly valued, was based entirely on the gendered assumption that she would take over the role of her mother in caring for her younger siblings. Later, as an adult, Marguerite faced a colonial system where Indigenous people were considered wards of the state (lacking the franchise until 1960) and systemic racist inequalities in gaining employment. Despite this, Marguerite worked her way up to becoming one of the most respected seamstresses in Sault Ste. Marie and was active in Anishinaabec band council administration and politics. Thus, throughout her life, she contended with and contested gendered racial and colonial discourses: being sent to school at age six, then being removed to raise her siblings; and as an adult making sustained contributions to the economic livelihood of her family as well as through her work in Anishinaabec governance.

In the final monologue of the play, Teddy pays tribute to this grandmother who remains an enigma for him. He reflects on her self-discipline, stoicism, and strength of spirit as qualities through which she developed a hybrid "way of life," excelling in a small-town economy meant to exclude her. He comments,

In one of my many adventures while interning at Debaj . . . I stumbled across a waterfall. Near the falls some trees are being prepared to be cleared. The lower branches have all been removed, but the trees still stand. As I look at the trees I have a moment of clarity and think of my grandmother and other people who also have been affected by residential schools. . . . Like these trees, they have been cut but continued to live on.

Here Teddy uses a land-based metaphor to describe how those wounded by Canadian state policies that "cut off" their language and familial connections may still engage in a process of negotiation which, as Homi Bhabha suggests, "is neither assimilation nor collaboration."³³ Teddy's description of trees being cleared from the land as an allegory for the removal of Indigenous people can be compared to Vizenor's concept of the trace, which he also

used in combination with Anishinaabec natural metaphors. For Vizenor, the trace could be connected with the word “agawaatese,” which “could mean a shadow, or casts a shadow. The sense of agawaatese is that the shadows are animate entities. The shadow is the unsaid presence in names, the memoires in silence.”³⁴ These shadows remind us that trees stripped for clearing can nevertheless carry a trace of their former presence. While these traces may frequently be overlooked, Teddy uses his memory of the trees to “story up”³⁵ that legacy in ways that allow him to understand the brutal context for his grandmother’s survivance.

Teddy ends the play by acknowledging Marguerite as “a respected woman in her trade, a devoted person of faith, a council woman for Batchewana First Nation . . . My grandmother.” In the final stanza he performs a simple but powerfully enacted story about how Marguerite adapted the technologies of sewing, taught at the residential school, for other purposes: “When I was a boy my grandmother made me a ribbon shirt³⁶ when I began to attend powwows. I am grateful that she did this and I am also grateful I was a chubby kid, because today I can still wear it. Miigwetch Nokomis, Miigwetch.” Teddy closes with the honorific “Miigwetch Nokomis” (Thank you, Grandmother). At the same time he dons the ribbon shirt—brought up to the stage by his parents, who sat in the front row at every show—and indeed, that shirt had weathered his transition from chubby child to a well-built young man, and still fits.

The enigma of Marguerite Syrette’s life remains at the end of this performance. But the play has taken the youth cast and the audience members present on an imaginative passage, which highlights both the oppressive violence of the schools and the ways that some survivors redeployed the skills learned there to remake their own lives, despite a system which taught them they were unfit to govern themselves and their communities. Through dramatic monologues, humor, and auto-ethnographic storytelling, Teddy’s story of Marguerite Syrette juxtaposed the coercive relations of power that structured the schools with narratives about the grit and determination that enabled Anishinaabec survivance without papering over the contradictions. In the next section I turn to reflecting on how cast, audience, and interviewees responded to this performance and then explore how these narratives “bent the light” toward other, equally conflicted, themes of survivance.

“Storying Up” the Responses: Survivors and Survivance

No Choices, Different Voices constructed a dramatic container which invited the audience into an intimate relationship with the performers and provoked strong affective responses. These reactions were given careful attention in

audience feedback and debriefing sessions after each performance.³⁷ Thus, in contrast to the “eerie silence” about residential schools that cast members noted at the start of their work, the process of writing and witnessing the play peeled back layers of raw emotion, including deep “frustration, sadness, anger.”³⁸ These emotions were particularly evident in some of the post-show interviews and discussions. For example, in my post-show conversations with Teddy Syrette he highlighted additional reflections about his grandmother that he had chosen not to discuss in the public performance. These included his perception that his grandmother harbored deep discomfort with his gendered “flamboyance” and sexuality, and a persistent uneasiness with people who did “not look white.”³⁹ While these reflections are consistent with Teddy’s narrative in the play, they provide a more pointed critique of the ways white supremacist and hetero-gendered norms taught in residential schools echoed down through the generations, and their impact on intimate and familial relationships.

Difficult emotions were also evident in my follow-up interviews with audience members. Carol Nolan talked about the corrosive power of the churches in “brainwashing” parents “into believing that the schools could offer a better life” for their children.⁴⁰ This theme was also evident in Joe Corbiere’s interview, although he noted that some parents did try to protect their kids by disappearing into the bush, moving to other communities, or going to the United States.⁴¹

Other members of the audience, however, challenged the youth actors’ representations. For example, women at two different performances made a point of standing, after the show, to say that while they appreciated the play it could not reproduce the torment they had experienced in their time at the schools.⁴² Indeed, the overwhelming majority of Indigenous audience members interviewed after the performance told stories which testified to cultural, physical, and sexual abuse and numerous attempts by parents and children to enact active and subterranean resistance. This multiplicity of stories served to highlight how the play provoked a profoundly difficult reckoning: as one Anishinaabec audience member noted, although she had been alive at the time when the Shingwauk Residential School in Sault Ste. Marie was in operation, seeing the play “just sent chills through me. The shock of it hit me more, what actually happened.”⁴³

Other interviewees noted that many students used the education they obtained from the schools, and the bonds they forged with other students, in future community work and sometimes for political activism.⁴⁴ This theme is evident in Teddy’s narrative insofar as his grandmother used the skills learned at St. Joseph’s school, both in her involvement in the Batchewana band council and also in making regalia for his participation in powwow per-

formances. Some audience members, however, highlighted more directly activist responses. Alice Corbiere, for example, noted that her husband, John Corbiere, chief of Batchewana First Nation (1966–78 and 1994–96) and the plaintiff in the *Corbiere* case (a 1999 constitutional challenge to the Indian Act based on the Charter of Rights),⁴⁵ used the connections he forged in residential school to build Anishinaabec solidarity. These activities were, to say the least, very different from those intended by school officials. Alice noted, “Whenever we were meeting in groups, there were so many people from other communities [who] knew each other . . . from residential school. And that certainly helped in their dealings, because they already had trust and respect built.”⁴⁶ As J. R. Miller also noted in his history of the schools, it was former residential school students who provided “the most vociferous criticism . . . and the most effective political leadership” to eliminate that system. Similarly, according to Miller, many who had attended the schools were also energetic proponents for preserving and reviving the cultural and spiritual practices that the schools were meant to eliminate.⁴⁷

Thus the overwhelming theme in most research about residential schools and in my interviews with audience members was the systemic violence of the residential schools. We can see, however, a more ambivalent narrative in Teddy Syrette’s representation of his enigmatic grandmother. This ambivalence was echoed in my conversation with Anishinaabec activist and community historian Alan Corbiere,⁴⁸ who has organized events for residential school graduates from Manitoulin Island, where he noted some “reaction against the ‘survivors’ narrative.”⁴⁹ While these residential school graduates were critical of students being taken from their family home, the physical punishments, and being forbidden to speak their language, they nevertheless asserted that “we’re not ‘survivors,’ we went to school.”⁵⁰ This response certainly highlights that some schools equipped students for their future lives, as in Corbiere’s community of M’Chigeeng First Nation on Manitoulin Island, where “it was the kids who went to school who went on to become the chiefs, teachers, and traditionalists.”⁵¹ This testimony could suggest some heterogeneity in the schools over time, where shifts in the management, personnel, and curricular structures could have modified aspects of the ideological violence at the heart of the system. However, it also implies that the discourse of “survivors” itself may impose a kind of “victimry” role, which emphasizes a confined helplessness rather than the vital survivance strategies that enabled these graduates to become leaders within their communities. Indeed, in Alan Corbiere’s observation, many of the elders in his community seem to refuse a collective identity based on victim typifications that might set them apart as forever marked by that experience. This ambivalence about the discourse of “survivors” may be particularly important in a context where

anti-Indigenous racism is frequently articulated through stereotypes which stigmatize Indigenous people as “whiners” forever locked in a history of injury or injustice instead of people who are mobilizing to re-create their collective cultural identity and sustain their communities. Vizenor himself has emphasized a related critique noting that the concept of survivance is itself meant to suggest a “quality of action” that creates a sense of “native presence over absence, nihility, and victimry.”⁵²

We might also speculate that the discomfort with the discourse of survivorship—which does imply a critique of the schools as places where only some, literally, *survived*—could have stemmed from the very real dangers of resistance. Indeed, it is important not to romanticize the impact of activist political protest, as sometimes these efforts were met with a backlash from religious authorities, the ramifications of which lasted for generations. For example, when I interviewed Alan Corbiere, he made a point of telling me the following story. In 1885, the Catholic day school for Anishinaabec girls in the town of Wiki was destroyed by fire. The Jesuits who ran the school initially planned to rebuild on the same site and hire local Anishinaabec men for the construction. The wages offered to the Anishinaabec laborers, however, were lower than those paid to non-Indigenous workers, and the Anishinaabec men mounted a strike in protest. According to Corbiere, the Jesuits retaliated against the strike by deciding to move construction of the new school to the mainland.⁵³ This new school site in the town of Spanish punished the strikers by denying them the work, and also limited what the Jesuits considered the excessive control of the Anishinaabec parents and chiefs who had been attempting to intervene in the running of the school in Wiki.⁵⁴ Indeed, Anishinaabeg parental protests about corporal punishment, starvation, and bed bugs in the earlier school in Wiki have been confirmed in other scholarship.⁵⁵ It was in the newer St. Joseph’s Residential School in the community of Spanish, far from the oversight of her parents, that Marguerite Syrette would be sent in the 1930s, and it was the shell of this building that Teddy Syrette, her grandson, photographed in 2011.

Conclusion

How then might I draw together the contradictory forms of survivance chronicled in the theater production and interviews highlighted here? It should be evident that neither the discourses of passive victim nor those of resilient graduate are sufficient for understanding these contradictory experiences, as both ends of the binary reduce, rather than add, complexity. Instead, I hope that Teddy Syrette’s efforts to “story up” his enigmatic grandmother, Marguerite Stella Syrette, have “bent the light” toward the shadows

of a colonial project whose impact is still unfolding. We can certainly say that sometimes, after long periods away from their family, children like Marguerite Stella Syrette grew up to take an individual pride in their stoicism and self-discipline and in the success they achieved in a small-town economy meant to exclude them, while also maintaining fond memories of the schools. This perspective might have been a strategy for transcultural appropriation, as Bhabha asserts; or a form of internalized oppression, as Alice Corbiere argued; or it could indicate strategies of survivance which themselves may have necessitated forgetting. Teddy Syrette's representation of his grandmother suggests it was all of the above.

More broadly, this theater performance provided an opportunity for Anishinaabec youth to articulate the contradictory effects of a profoundly corrosive education policy. This legacy will never be "overcome," but through this Anishinaabec project some youth did establish a different relationship to that history and created space for articulating new ways to make sense of this inheritance. My interviews with the cast and audience also hinted at the ways that Indigenous survivance affected, and continues to affect, white settlers, sometimes deeply and irrevocably: from the white managers of elite dress shops in Sault Ste. Marie, who acknowledged Marguerite Syrette as their most talented seamstress; to the non-Indigenous actors and audiences who participated in this contemporary theater performance on the legacy of residential schools and found themselves profoundly changed. This final aspect of Indigenous survivance is also critical, for if researchers fail to see Indigenous performance as having real effects then survivance is still seen as damaged and ineffective. Instead, we might take seriously the profoundly complicated affective responses to this production. As one white audience member from Sault Ste. Marie noted in my interview with her, now that she is aware of that history it is the "elephant in the room" when she is with Indigenous friends: "I can't ever seem to shake that feeling."⁵⁶ A non-Indigenous actor of mixed Roma and Romanian heritage reflected on a similar point in her monologue in the second half of the performance, commenting that she had grown up "obsessed with atrocities" in other places—"the Holocaust, Vietnam, Rwanda"—and yet she "had no idea" about the history of residential schools in Canada, nor that the Shingwauk Residential School stood just a few blocks from where she was raised.⁵⁷ It was her participation in this theater project which led her to hear the testimony of survivors and to build alliances with Indigenous actors; becoming acutely aware, for the first time, of the spaces of violent absence and constrained presence closer to home.

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Notes

1. I borrowed the phrase “bending the light” from Lee Maracle, “Oratory on Oratory,” in *Trans.Can.Lit.: Resituating the Study of Canadian Literature*, ed. Smaro Kamboureli and Roy Miki (Waterloo, Can.: Wilfred Laurier Press, 2007), 59.
2. John Milloy, *A National Crime: The Canadian Government and the Residential School System, 1879 to 1986* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1999).
3. Ibid.
4. Quoted in J. R. Miller, *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens: A History of Indian–White Relations in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 281.
5. Ibid., 282.
6. The report is online at AADNC-AANDC.gc.ca.
7. For the official apology see “Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s Statement of Apology,” *CBC News*, June 11, 2008, CBC.ca.
8. Mike Cachagee, personal communication with the author, August 2011.
9. Miller, *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens*, 143.
10. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer at NAISA for clarifying the history for compulsory school attendance.
11. J. R. Miller, *Shingwauk’s Vision: A History of Native Residential Schools* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), chap. 12; TRC, *They Came for the Children* (Winnipeg, Can.: Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2012), 50.
12. Celia Haig-Brown, *Resistance and Renewal: Surviving the Indian Residential School* (Vancouver: Tillicum Library, 1988), 102.
13. Miller, *Shingwauk’s Vision*, 365–68.
14. Tomson Highway, *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 1998), 38. For a literary analysis of Highway see Sam McKegney, *Magic Weapons: Aboriginal Writers Remaking Community after Residential School* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2007).
15. See Milloy, *National Crime*, 91–92; and Suzanne Fournier and Ernie Crey, *Stolen from Our Embrace* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1997), 49. See also the 2004 report *Historic Trauma and Aboriginal Healing* from the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, AHF.ca.
16. My involvement in this project first began in 2005–6 when I accepted a faculty position in the Sociology Department at Algoma University, located in Sault Ste. Marie, just adjacent to Garden River and Batchewana First Nations. As a white scholar focusing on settler–Indigenous relations I became interested in Garden River and Batchewana’s history of intercultural theater, which spanned the period from 1900 to 1968, a legacy about which I have written elsewhere

(see chap. 5 in Francis, *Creative Subversions*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2011). In 2005 Alice Corbiere and I cofounded the Garden River Arts Committee, and from 2006 to 2011 this group worked with Anishinaabec and Cree scriptwriters and with a local white director Sue Barber, to revive and reinvent Anishinaabec theater in that region. These productions have been supported by the Garden River Band Council and provincial and federal arts councils. From 2007 to 2011 this research was funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Strategic Grant, whose principal investigator was the Anishinaabec scholar Karl Hele, director of First People's Studies at Concordia University and a member of Garden River First Nation. I attended each of the performances and interviewed all the youth cast and sixteen audience members, including people from the local Anishinaabec communities and various white audience members who heard about the play through local media.

17. The actors who identified as non-Indigenous included a youth who was raised as white who had non-status Indigenous heritage which had been covered up in his family history, and one actor with mixed Roma and Romanian heritage. Several actors identified as gay or two-spirit.

18. While the most developed narrative in the play focused on the life story of Marguerite Stella Syrette (née Fox), from the perspective of her grandson, many other short narratives highlighted a range of traumatic stories. These included tales of child abduction by the Indian agents and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, brutal discipline and punishment in the schools, being forbidden to speak Anishinaabemowin, the separation of siblings, child abuse and child rape, the alienation and despair of the young adults returning to their reserves, and the prevalence of alcoholism and suicide to deal with this legacy.

19. This "side trip" was organized by Joe Corbiere, one of the longtime supporters of this youth theater project from Batchewana First Nation. He drove Teddy and several other members of the team to Manitoulin Island and, owing to his many years of work as a community-based lawyer on the island, organized a tour of key sites.

20. Isaac Rendell, personal communication with the author, August 2009.

21. Tazz McCloud, personal communication with the author, August 2011.

22. Chase Neveau, personal communication with the author, August 2011.

23. See "An Ojibwe Language Word List," n.d., NativeTech.org.

24. The term "two-spirits" gained prominence in the early 1990s as an alternative to Western labels such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered. For more information see "Who Are the Two Spirits? Q&A with Will Roscoe," n.d., WillsWorld.org. The erasure of the gender-diverse legacy within Indigenous communities is not uncommon. See K. Balsam, H. Bu, K. Fieland, J. Simoni, and K. Walters, "Culture, Trauma, and Wellness: A Comparison of Heterosexual and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Two-Spirit Native Americans," in *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, Special Issue: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Racial and Ethnic Minority Individuals* 10, no. 3 (2004): 287–301.

25. Teddy Syrette, personal communication with the author, August 2011.

26. "Social Justice Report 2010," HumanRights.gov.au. References in this document include Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963; London: Pen-

guin Classics, 2001); Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2006); S. Carmichael and C. Hamilton, *Black Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967); and J. Miller, *Toward a New Psychology for Women* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976).

27. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

28. "Social Justice Report 2010."

29. Orlando Figes, "Private Life in Stalin's Russia: Family Narratives, Memory, and Oral History," *History Workshop Journal* 65 (2008): 120.

30. Alice Corbiere, personal communication with the author, August 2011.

31. Mike Cachagee, personal communication with the author, August 2011.

32. Chapter 12 on Veterans in the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People, 523–76. Available at https://qspace.library.queensu.ca/bitstream/1974/6874/5/RRCAP1_combined.pdf.

33. Quoted in Gautam Premnath, "Remembering Fanon, Decolonizing Diaspora," in *Postcolonial Theory and Criticism*, ed. Laura Chrisman and Benita Parry (Cambridge, U.K.: English Association, 2000), 63.

34. Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance* (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 72–73.

35. I borrowed the phrase "storying up" from Lee Maracle, "Oratory on Oratory," in *Trans.Can.Lit*, ed. Kamboureli and Miki, 58.

36. For a description of the history and meaning of ribbon shirts see "Some History: Ribbon Work and Ribbon Shirts," March 23, 2010, BeyondBuckskin.com.

37. Here credit should go to Jeff Arbus, who trained the cast in effective strategies for post-performance discussion.

38. Joe Corbiere, personal communication with the author, August 2011.

39. Syrette, personal communication with the author, August, 2013.

40. Carol Nolan, personal communication with the author, August 2011.

41. Joe Corbiere, personal communication with the author, August 2013.

42. I witnessed these challenges by elder Anishinaabec women in the discussion following two performances.

43. Alice Corbiere, personal communication with the author, August 2011.

44. For a complicated analysis of the gendered dimension of this resistance, see Jo-Anne Fiske's fine article "Gender and the Paradox of Residential School Education in Carrier Society," in *Women of the First Nations*, ed. Christine Miller and Patricia Marie Chuchryk (Winnipeg, Can.: University of Manitoba Press, 1996), 167–82.

45. See *Corbiere v. Canada*, 1999. Available at <http://ualawccsprod.srv.ualberta.ca/ccs/index.php/constitutional-issues/the-charter/equality-rights-section-15/687-corbiere-v-canada-1999>.

46. Alice Corbiere, personal correspondence with the author, August 2011.

47. Among the Anishinaabec this included drumming, on the Plains it was dancing, and among those on the Pacific Coast it was the potlatch.

48. Alan Corbiere is a distant relative of Alice Corbiere and Joe Corbiere.

49. Alan Corbiere, personal correspondence with the author, May 2013.

50. Ibid..
51. Ibid.
52. Vizenor, *Manifest Manners*, 1.
53. Alan Corbiere, personal correspondence with the author, May 2013.
54. Ibid.
55. Miller, *Shingwauk's Vision*, 356.
56. "Dorothy," personal communication with the author, August 2011.
57. Sarina Merling, personal communication with the author, August 2011.