

## Indigenous Writing and the Residential School Legacy: A Public Interview with Basil Johnston

Sam McKegney

Volume 34, numéro 2, 2009

URI : [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl34\\_2int01](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl34_2int01)

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (imprimé)

1718-7850 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

McKegney, S. (2009). Indigenous Writing and the Residential School Legacy: A Public Interview with Basil Johnston. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 34(2), 264-274.

# Indigenous Writing and the Residential School Legacy: A Public Interview with Basil Johnston

SCL/ÉLC INTERVIEW BY SAM MCKEGNEY

**T**HROUGHOUT HIS PROLIFIC LITERARY CAREER, Anishinaubae<sup>1</sup> elder, orator, and teacher Basil H. Johnston has advocated passionately for Indigenous cultural revitalization in Canada. Several of his fifteen English-language books, including *Ojibway Heritage* (1976), *Ojibway Ceremonies* (1982), *The Manitous* (1996), and *Honour Earth Mother* (2003), participate in the endurance of Anishinaubae worldview by examining the social, political, and spiritual traditions of the Anishinaubaeg. He has also published five books in the Ojibway language and developed an audio program for language retention among Anishinaubae youth. Johnston has been committed, over the past forty years, to ensuring the survival of elements of Anishinaubae culture that the Canadian government and Christian churches sought to eradicate through the disastrous policy of residential schooling, of which Johnston was himself a victim. It has been surprising to some, therefore, that Johnston's writings on the residential school system have avoided explicit condemnation of federal policy.<sup>2</sup> Published in 1988, Johnston's seminal memoir *Indian School Days* employs what Deena Rymhs calls a "mild, nostalgic tone" (5) rather than an overtly critical one to, in Johnston's own words, recall "not the dark and dismal, but the incidents that brought a little cheer and relief to a bleak existence" at Spanish Indian Residential School where Johnston was a student from 1939 to 1947 (*Indian* 11).<sup>3</sup> Avoiding the hyperbole often associated with the system (by both its defenders and its critics), Johnston has acknowledged that "you can't credit [residential] schools with everything, nor can you blame [the] schools for everything" (qtd. in Lutz 239).

I met with Johnston at Toronto's Gladstone Hotel for a public interview to discuss Indigenous writing and the legacy of residential schooling as part of Pages Bookstore's "This is Not a Reading Series."<sup>4</sup> It took place on 4 December 2007, during a period of profound change in the

public discourse on the residential school legacy. After decades of denial and evasion, the federal government had belatedly signed the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement in May 2006; the Common Experience Payments were finally finding their way into the hands of Indigenous survivors by late autumn the following year; and the Official Apology of the Canadian Government to the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit was set to occur on 11 June 2008, during the same month in which the Truth and Reconciliation Commission would begin. The interview thus took place at a time of intense (albeit cautious) optimism regarding the possibility for reimagined relations between Indigenous nations and the Canadian state and for forms of Indigenous empowerment and communal well-being that such relations might augur.

*SM* In *Indian School Days*, you stress that the experience of residential school was more difficult for the “wee ones” who were ripped from their families and social systems at the ages of five or six and therefore didn’t have the foundation of self-worth and culture that older entrants, like you, might have developed. Tell us about your experience of entering the residential school at Spanish and the feelings of dislocation involved.

*BJ* The little ones suffered the most, thrown into the schools, as they were, when they were still really babies. They were outcasts — cast out of their communities, families and homes. And what was worse, they were made to feel unloved and unwanted. They were told, of course, that Jesus loved them, but they were never given the love for which a child’s spirit yearns: never hugged, never caressed when they wept, never told “I love you.” So when those little ones were released into the world a decade later, they were lost; they were adrift in an alien world that didn’t accept them, a world in which they no longer belonged.

I guess, therefore, that I was “lucky” — if you can call it that — to enter the school at ten years of age with some sense of my culture and a sense that my mother loved me. But there was so much pain in that place. I’m talking about students who were violated, students who were raped by their own kind, by older Native students, fifteen to sixteen, and by the priests immediately after mass, by brothers in the various workplaces. And you often wondered what penalties [the perpetrators] had to undergo. Did they go to Father Superior and say, “This is what I had in mind, and this is what I did thereafter”? Not likely.

I didn't know it [then, but] when I was raped by two boys — and, not long after, I was felled by a priest immediately after mass — I really was thrown into another world. Abuse is too mild a word. It's a violation of the worst kind. It violates not only the body — the flesh — but also the spirit. And you live with this fear of death and fear of being dispatched to Hell.

And I thought, and many of us thought, that we were the only victims.

When I met Lucy — who was my wife and who remained my wife for forty-two years — when I met her and during the . . . well, thirty-five ensuing years, I never mentioned what happened to me. And when the students at Spanish sued the federal government and the Jesuits, I ended up on the negotiating team. That's when I learned that I was not the only one, that there were hundreds of other youngsters who had suffered the same indignities.

And when you become a victim of this, what happens is that you lose whatever sense of integrity that you've got. You are a worthless thing. And it's confirmed in the gospel readings that Jesus had to die for "our" sins.

Anyway, it's hard to get over that. It takes years, years, years.

And then I met Lucy who — after a year and a half, well, not quite a year and a half, maybe six months after we started going out — said, "I love you," to me. My sense of integrity and sense of worth escalated.

*SM* What do you make of the contrition of church and state representatives regarding their roles in administering this system that enabled your violation and that of so many others? Do you feel that the churches — many of which have officially apologized to Indigenous peoples — and the Canadian government — which will purportedly apologize in the coming months — are sincere in their stated regret?

*BJ* When I became part of the negotiating team for the suit against the federal government and the Jesuits, I learned a lot of things. At one of the meetings, they had the Father Superior for the Upper Canada Society of Jesus and his assistant, and one of the members of the team from the girls' school spoke. And there were many, many tears in the audience. And I watched the two Jesuits. There was not a sign of sympathy. Not one.

Two years ago this past spring, I was invited up to a spiritual centre

up on Anderson Lake, just south of Espanola. And I was called by the Jesuits and the Anglican Church and the United Church ministries. And I told them, “You know, you talk about sympathy, compassion. You don’t have any compassion! It’s just a word. And it’s supposed to have conveyed a sense of feeling, a sense of pity for your fellow human being. But it isn’t there. It’s an abstract notion.”

And that’s still my opinion about these institutions.

*SM* It’s interesting that you identified individual human reactions — or rather, non-reactions — from the Jesuits at that meeting but then finished your comments with “these institutions.” This suggests that human behaviour can be circumscribed by systems like that of the Jesuits, which you note in *Indian School Days* prevented the brothers from showing the students any form of love.

Do you feel that appropriate systems have been put in place to deal with the legacy of residential schools? A system of compensation, for instance, has been set in place with the Common Experience Payments, and such vehicles as the Aboriginal Healing Foundation have been financed and given specific mandates. You mentioned healing circles when you and I were speaking a moment ago; do you care to comment on the relevance of the whole “healing industry”?

*BJ* You know, I’ve found that there’s an awful lot of charlatans out there, not only Native, but also psychologists. They have an answer for everything. [*laughter*] All we need is a healing circle. “Come on in and we’ll heal you. We’ll take you to a sweat lodge. Brother, come in and be healed!”

And even though I’m very cynical about these things — a healing circle is not an instantaneous, miraculous healing; it takes a lot of time — one of the conditions [in our legal suit] that never passed was that we have healing from recognized, registered psychologists. And Wilbur Nadjiwon objected. He said, “I’m not havin’ no twenty-two-year-old kid with a psychology degree come and try to heal me, looking inside my soul and my spirit!” And I feel the same way. If I want one, I want one who speaks my language.

No. Being healed — the healing has to come from inside, from ourselves. And some don’t know it, unfortunately.

I don’t think I was able to articulate it, but I used to fight, fight, fight. And each time I fought, there was always some bigger guy, some-

body heavier, somebody who knew how to fight a little better, and “Pow!” I’d go down. I’d cry. Somebody would say, “Get up!” And I’ve taken that as a model for life. When you’re felled, you don’t wallow in self-pity. You get up.

I don’t know if the general asking of forgiveness will do much good. I was asked, “Would you forgive?” I don’t know. No one has ever asked me, “Will you forgive me?” for what the church has done, for what the government allowed their church to do. The government is just as much at fault.

I feel like fighting. [*laughter*]

*SM* I’m glad I’m on this side of the table!

If the goals of the Canadian government and the Canadian population are really “truth” and “reconciliation,” how can these be attained in the shadow of trauma? After the racist violence of a system of education designed to tear Indian identity from Indigenous students, how can the righteous rage of the Indigenous population not spill out in forms of hatred toward non-Indigenous Canada?

*BJ* How? I’m not sure there is one answer. How? Am I a bigot? I don’t know. I don’t think so. I try not to be.

I used to teach high school in North York. I had one rule: be fair in all your dealings. We had some examples of lies, bigotry. I remember there was a grade 10-11 ST&T [Science, Technology and Trades] class, and one of the boys complained that the boy sitting in front of him always wore the same outfit every single day. And that the boy who wore this outfit smelled.

Well, I didn’t know quite what to do. But you know, the boys themselves settled it. They told the complainant that he was a bigot and they apologized to the boy who was being complained on. That was one way. It was the crowd of maybe twenty-five boys of goodwill asserting their displeasure. And altogether, I think too many people stay silent when we’ve got incidents or articulations of ill will.

*SM* Part of the government’s strategy for dealing with the residential school legacy has been to historicize the system by requisitioning historical accounts. Certain church groups have financed such publications as well. In *Indian School Days*, you deliberately took an alternative tact by avoiding sources like government policy statements, federal and

church archives, newspapers, etc., and focusing on the behaviour of the children — not the typical focus of history.

Do you feel that the history of residential schooling in Canada has been adequately accounted for? What are your thoughts on Canadian history as a discipline?

*BJ* I was explaining the causes of the raz[ing] of Fort Ste. Marie in 1648 by the Iroquois to a group of . . . I think they were Mormons. That was in 1968 at the Canadian National Exhibition. And so they went away shaking their heads, you know, wagging their heads in agreement with this stuff that I had found in history books. After they had gone, Howard Skye (Onondaga from Six Nations) plucked me by the sleeve and said, “Would you like to hear *our* story?”

I didn’t know that there was another story. The only stories that I knew were those that had been “properly documented.” And so he took me aside, and he told me this story:

“When the missionaries settled down in Fort Ste. Marie and Midland, they established a school, and they were teaching the Huron kids and some of the Anishinaubae kids how to read, write, count, and learn all kinds of ‘civilized’ things that weren’t available to the Haudenosaunee youngsters. So the Haudenosaunee or Six Nations asked the missionaries if they could send their boys and girls up to Fort Ste. Marie because this was a good thing.

“In the spring, when they went back up to recover their young boys and girls, some of the girls were pregnant and some of the boys had been violated. So the Six Nations issued a warning. The second year, the same results took place.

“Instead of issuing a third warning, they sent eighteen hundred warriors in March of 1648 and torched Fort Ste. Marie.”

So that was the story that he told me. And then that also changed the way I look on history today. There are stories that are not recorded. And there are all kinds of stories of events that have been suppressed; it goes a long, long way back.

And the war today, it’s a war for oil. It has nothing to do with the Taliban, nothing to do with al-Qaeda. Oil. And I’m more inclined to believe that than what the president of the United States says.

*SM* What about Indigenous understandings of the past? Have Indigenous communities done a better job grappling with the meaning of this history than, say, mainstream historians or the federal government? What do you feel is needed in this regard?

*BJ* My next book will be about that. I am giving back to my heritage what it has given me: that is, an understanding of my heritage and my understanding of me. One of the projects is to set down our history from *our* point of view. I'm lucky. I know the stories. I know the words, many of the words. I know how we look on history.

And I'm going to make a real good case for the existence of institutions that the United States took up and adopted in its constitution and part of which Canada has adopted. I know European history and that they didn't have those institutions until they came over here and found them. We had them. We've got words for them. And I know where they fit in.

*SM* Is an element of learning that history, and making it relevant to contemporary Indigenous people, encouraging youth and others to learn their Indigenous languages? And how can that be facilitated?

*BJ* I've got all kinds of CDs on language . . .

*SM* . . . and they can be picked up at your nearest . . . [*laughter*]

*BJ* Write to me!

*SM* In terms of action, we've spoken about external strategies for dealing with legacies of acculturation and violence — strategies like psychotherapy, monetary compensation, and church-run healing circles — but what about strategies emerging within Indigenous communities themselves? What needs to be done throughout Indigenous Canada, and on your reserve specifically, to counteract the corrosive influence of a century of residential schooling?

*BJ* In teaching, in schools, we have to get back to the old values. For example, I was talking to Joan Roy in May about the loss of the sense of duty. The whole emphasis is on rights. "My rights are being violated." "My rights are being infringed upon." There's not a word about duties.

To us, a right is *debnimzewin*. But each right is also a duty. And we've forgotten to teach those in our Native schools. I've also noticed that they don't teach much in terms of duties to your neighbours in the secular schools and in the public school system of Ontario. And so we have to go back to some of these values: responsibility, duty, right.

And from my readings, I gather that the principal teachers [in Anishinaubae culture] were the grandmothers. They were the holders and keepers of the wisdom. Not so much the men but it was the women. And they were assigned this duty by the community because the males were out and it was the grandmothers who kept the villages together. And they had the primary responsibility of training the youth.

And I guess there is [a] need to go back to that system, to have grandmothers taking part in schools, teaching language, teaching the literature of the people. Our literature is rich with stories. I know five or six hundred. It's a matter of putting those in sequence.

*SM* Do you consider there to be a role for literature in Indigenous empowerment? I'm thinking of a story from your book *The Manitous* (1995) in which the Anishinaubae Trickster/Hero figure Nana'b'oozoo causes the regeneration of the world by breathing life into a tiny ball of mud. You write, "Nana'b'oozoo . . . had done what everyone is supposed to do, to quest for that tiny knot of soil, the gift of talent, and to make from it one's being and world" (12). Do you feel that literature and storytelling can be used to create one's "being" and one's "world" or at least to augment one's perceptions of those things? Has storytelling assisted you, for instance, in forms of self-realization?

*BJ* Well, it confirmed my worth, my sense of worth, but also the worth of my background. And so that, along with Lucy's love and the love of the Native people who offered me guidance, helped me, I think, restore my sense of integrity and sense of purpose.

*SM* The impact of literature — or at least literature that finds an audience — moves beyond the author her- or himself. I've often thought of *Indian School Days* as a story designed to celebrate and consolidate the community developed among Indigenous students at Spanish, students torn from their families and home communities. In that way, the story is a social act. At the same time, *Indian School Days* reorients historical focus on residential schooling away from administrators and overseers toward the Indigenous students themselves, thereby recognizing far

ahead of most historical accounts the agency retained by Indigenous people throughout situations of acculturation. Do you feel that books like *Indian School Days* facilitate Indigenous empowerment?

*BJ* No. I wrote *Indian School Days* with what I knew back in 1979. There were, I think, sixteen of us in Toronto who had attended residential school in Spanish. And we used to talk about the things that amused us when we were there. And I suppose they were little events, silly incidents — that we created — that assisted us in pulling through.

And that was the source of *Indian School Days*. It had nothing to do with trying to change or “empower” anyone. It was just to amuse the readers of, at first, *The Ontario Indian*. I had a definite purpose in writing that book: that is, to make people smile, chuckle, chortle, guffaw . . . There’s altogether too little of that human element in any of the books written by the most prominent authors in Canada. A lot of them aren’t humorous.

Now, I will write a very different book this time.

*SM* A follow-up to *Indian School Days* on the residential school experience? That’s exciting! What will that book look like? What will be its shape? Or, are you not in a position to divulge that at this point?

*BJ* I’d better not.

*Ever attuned to audience expectation, the seventy-eight-year-old author concluded the formal interview by leaving his listeners hungry for more details about this work in progress, which was but one of three major projects to which he alluded during the discussion.*

*During the open question period that followed, one audience member noted the age difference between interviewer and interviewee and asked if it had taken a new generation to start dealing with sins of the past like residential school.*

*BJ* I don’t think people ever learn. I really don’t think they learn from the mistakes of the past. They don’t even learn from their own mistakes. They keep repeating them and repeating them and repeating them. I’m not sure that there’s any lesson in residential schools that would, you know, enlighten the nation. Maybe it’ll get people more sensitive to our situations.

I think that much of the situations at home on Indian reserves really cannot be attributed too much to the residential school system but to

the Indian agency system. They were our managers. They looked after every single aspect of our lives. They're the guys who held us back.

And now we have professional young people — lawyers, business-people — they're the people who are going to make a difference. But I really don't believe that people learn from mistakes that were made in the past.

*Johnston's response apparently chafed against the desire of some in the audience for validation that Canadian society is progressing in terms of human rights and intercultural empathy. A second audience member pressed Johnston to acknowledge progress by asserting that activists and critical thinkers have accomplished a great deal by analyzing the past and seeking out more just and equitable courses of action.*

*BJ* I don't know if I can articulate it clearer than what I've already given voice to. That's my belief, you know, my observation. People don't learn. They make the same stupid mistakes.

*SM* Well, does this link back to your unwillingness to simply give up teaching? There are still things to be learned, so you put the ideas out there. You write the books. You want people to read them. You want Anishinaubae children to learn their language, to learn their culture. And just because we don't, I guess, learn the lessons as fully as we should, doesn't mean the teaching should stop.<sup>5</sup>

*BJ* No. I never would advocate that.

*SM* So maybe there's some learning that still needs to be done.

*BJ* There's always hope. [*laughter*]

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The Anishinaubaeg are a populous and diverse Indigenous nation whose traditional lands encompass much of what is now Ontario while stretching into Manitoba, Quebec, and the United States. Tribal communities within the Anishinaubae nation include the Ojibway (also known as Ojibwe or Ojibwa) and the Chippewa. For this publication, I employ the spelling of Anishinaubae Johnston uses in *The Manitous*, although the spelling "Anishnabe" is more common.

<sup>2</sup> This characteristic of Johnston's writing can be traced, in part, to the earliness of his entry into the public debate and also to the peculiarity of his authorial approach. *Indian School Days* was published prior to the disclosures of abuse by Indigenous survivors that catapulted the residential school issue into the public eye at the beginning of the 1990s. As

I have written elsewhere, “*Indian School Days* . . . offers counterbalance to accounts focusing on disclosure of abuses and the malevolent actions of overseers by concentrating narrative attention on the dynamic, precocious, and resistant actions of young students” (*Magic Weapons* 16). Johnston thus diverts attention away from the corrosive influence of culturally genocidal pedagogy toward the retention of agency by Indigenous children who develop senses of community even in profoundly oppressive and disempowering circumstances.

<sup>3</sup> Johnston’s authorial strategy in the book has actually caused one reviewer, non-Native historian Menno Boldt, to consider the book a “loss” because its author “does not view his experience in the framework of government policy” or provide explicit “analysis of tyranny or oppression” (312).

<sup>4</sup> The original interview, which was missing small sections due to recording malfunctions, has been edited and reordered for coherence. Both participants have had the opportunity to review and clarify their comments, but the substance of the interview remains the same.

<sup>5</sup> My leading question here betrays my own unwillingness to heed some of the difficult lessons Johnston had shared during the evening, insofar as it seeks to recuperate the author’s prior response into the very narrative of progress he had so eloquently repudiated and thereby placate the generally sympathetic audience.

## WORKS CITED

- Boldt, Menno. Rev. of *Indian School Days*, by Basil Johnston. *Canadian Literature* 124/125 (1990): 311-12.
- Johnston, Basil. *Indian School Days*. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1988.
- . *The Manitous*. Toronto: Key Porter, 1995.
- Lutz, Hartmut. *Contemporary Challenges: Conversations with Canadian Native Authors*. Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1991.
- McKegney, Sam. *Magic Weapons: Aboriginal Writers Remaking Community after Residential School*. Winnipeg: U of Manitoba P, 2007.
- Rymhs, Deena. “A Residential School Memoir.” *Canadian Literature* 178 (2003): 58-70.