

Frozen Chains of Childhood (2017)

Editorial

Photograph, printed on photo paper, 25" x 15"

The cover photograph [Frozen Chains of Childhood](#) was captured in 2017 after a January ice storm in Barrie, Ontario, Canada. The piece is a reflection on the residential school systems, in operation in Canada from 1831 to 1998. Enforced by the Canadian government and supported by the Catholic church, residential schools were designed to “kill the Indian in the child” by forcibly removing Indigenous children from their communities and placing them in these so-called schools. In 1920, Deputy Superintendent of the Department of Indian Affairs Duncan Campbell Scott details the schools’ intent, saying: “Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department.”

In total, there were over 130 federally run residential schools across the country. However, this number excludes day schools and other boarding schools that have not officially been categorized as residential schools, even though they too operated under a similar mission. According to the charitable organization Reconciliation Canada, it has been estimated that 150,000 Indigenous children were forced to attend residential schools and over 90% suffered severe physical, mental, emotional, and sexual abuse. Many children experienced malnutrition, diseases such as tuberculosis, and forced sterilization, and many were used in experimental trials without parental consent. Research shows that malnutrition during childhood can cause intergenerational health complications, as seen in the higher rates of diabetes in Indigenous communities. Likewise, childhood abuse has a lasting impact on a person and has resulted in the intergenerational traumas still felt by many Indigenous families today.

Like the swing in the cover photograph, many Indigenous children felt isolated, frozen, neglected, and immobile at these schools. Children were trapped in these institutions and while some, like Chanie Wenjack, tried to run away, others could not. It is estimated that there was a 40–60% mortality rate of children in residential schools (Reconciliation Canada). As I write this editorial, thousands of bodies of

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Indigenous children are being recovered from unmarked graves at residential school sites across North America. For years, Survivors have been speaking about these graves, but it is only now that the truth is being confronted and shared widely for Canadians to reflect upon. With this truth comes pain, but also healing. As the bodies of children are found and returned home, the truth behind the residential school system becomes widely known and the frozen chains of childhood begin to melt.

It is important to note that this truth is not simply a dark chapter in Canadian history, but rather an ongoing chapter. Indigenous children are still being taken away from their families—first into residential schools, then through the Sixties Scoop, and now through the foster care system. Census Canada data (2016) shows that over 52% of children in foster care nationwide are Indigenous, even though Indigenous children make up only 7.7% of the country's child population under the age of 15. Today, there are more Indigenous children in care than at the height of residential school system. Although the last residential school closed in 1998, the systems that created them are alive and well.

The Chief Commissioner of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, Senator Murray Sinclair, once said, “education has gotten us into this mess, and education will get us out” (Senate of Canada Debates, 2017). It is through education that I have begun to melt these chains and unpack my own identity as a Cree-Métis woman who came through the public education system without ever learning about residential schools. It was not until the third year of my undergraduate degree, when I chose to enroll in an Indigenous Health and Healing course with Professor Jon Johnson (York University, Toronto), that this truth was shared with me. Until then, I did not understand why members of my family had kept our Indigenous identity a secret and felt compelled to pass as white, for the safety of themselves and their children. Learning the truth has forever changed my life. It has put me on a path of learning, unlearning, and relearning so that I can reclaim my culture and pass it on to future generations. Although it was not safe for my ancestors to be Indigenous, I hope that my future children can grow up in a world where it is not only safe, but celebrated.

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FURTHER READING

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