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Prof. Tobler

Reflection Paper: “Find My Talk”<sup>1</sup>

My protest song is Willie Dunn’s “I Pity the Country,” first released in 1973. The song focuses on many of the social and political struggles faced by Indigenous people throughout Canadian history. Dunn, who was born in Montreal and was of mixed Mi’kmaq<sup>2</sup> and Scottish/Irish heritage, wrote about Indigenous issues throughout his career, including the effects of residential schools<sup>3</sup> on Indigenous people and communities. My characters are Sharon Membertou and Connie Barker, two Mi’kmaq young adults who attended the St. Helena Indian Residential School<sup>4</sup> in Yarmouth County, Nova Scotia until 1962. Connie left the reserve while

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<sup>1</sup> “Find My Talk”: Allusion to Mi’kmaq poet Rita Joe’s 1978 poem “I Lost My Talk,” in which the author confronts feelings of frustration over being forced to learn and speak English in Canadian residential schools (Nanjappa).

<sup>2</sup> Mi’kmaq: First Nations peoples indigenous to a traditional territory called Mi’kma’ki, which includes most of Atlantic Canada. According to *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, the largest contemporary Mi’kmaq communities are in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, with smaller communities in Québec, Newfoundland, Maine, and the Boston area. As of 2015, there were around 60,000 registered members of Mi’kmaq nations in Canada, about 56% of whom live on reserves (“Mi’kmaq”).

<sup>3</sup> residential schools: Schools of which the primary purpose was to remove children from their families and isolate them from their cultures in order to forcibly assimilate them. According to *They Came for the Children*, the formal creation of Indian residential schools began in 1883 (14). Most residential schools were modeled not off of true boarding schools but rather youth reformatories and jails (22), and physical, sexual, and psychological abuse were common. The Canadian government began the long process of shutting down residential schools in 1949, although the final school would not be closed until the 1990s (10, 28). From 2008 to 2015, Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission worked to educate the public about residential schools as well as make reparations to victims and affected communities. The concept was not unique to Canada; cultural assimilation of indigenous/aboriginal people through boarding schools was also employed in the U.S. and Australia.

<sup>4</sup> St. Helena Indian Residential School: A fictional institution based heavily on the Shubenacadie Indian Residential School, which opened in 1930 in Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia. According to *They Came for the Children*, the Shubenacadie school was the only residential school in all of Atlantic Canada, and therefore children (many of whom were Mi’kmaq) from all over the region were brought there; it was largely intended for children “who were orphans, deemed illegitimate, or neglected” (31). This fictional institution also contains characteristics of other residential schools.

Sharon stayed behind, and the school closed its doors in 1970. Now both 26, the two women find themselves reconnecting and trying to process their experiences over Dunn's music.

*Crow Ridge Reserve<sup>5</sup> in Yarmouth County, Nova Scotia — 1973*

Connie's letter arrived before she did, but only by a day. The envelope seemed to appear in Sharon's mailbox out of thin air, bearing a stamp with Queen Victoria's doughy face on it and no return address. She sliced it open with a knife—the good one, the one sharp enough for fish and paper—and pulled out a folded letter that was so immediately, *obviously* from Connie that it was radiating off paper. Even without unfolding it, Sharon could see ink bleeding through the cheap lined paper, and she could make out the silhouette of Connie's distinctive loopy handwriting. Her words were punctuated by fierce dark scribbles where she'd clearly crossed something out. When Sharon held the letter up to the light, those dense clots looked like black tumors on an X-ray. She unfolded the letter, and had to read it four times before really absorbing the information.

The gist of it was that Connie was coming from Montreal on her way to Halifax, and she couldn't go through Yarmouth without stopping in and seeing "her old pal" for a night or two. That was that. No date was to when she would arrive. The letter was more than its manifest content, though; the strikethroughs and scribbles told Sharon that Connie had written this letter in a hurry, although that was nothing new. It seemed like Connie was always rushing into something. The left edge of the page was jagged, too, as if the paper had been torn out of a notebook. Clearly, this had once been a piece of scrap paper. There were doodles in the margins, a phone number written in the upper left-hand corner, a shopping list ("bread, Spam, Ovaltine")

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<sup>5</sup> Crow Ridge Reserve: A fictional reserve, based on real Mi'kmaq reserves in Nova Scotia.

scrawled hastily at the bottom. On the back of the paper was the most puzzling addition, some sort of poem written in faint, ghostly pencil that was illegible in some spots thanks to the bleeding ink.

*Government is bumbling*

*Revolution is ...ing*

*To be ruled in impunity*

*Is ...ition continuity*

*I pity the count...*

*I pity the state*

*And th... of a man*

*Who thrives on ....*<sup>6</sup>

Sharon wondered if Connie had written it. She'd always been creative, especially after the two of them had left St. Helena. Before she had left the reserve, Connie wrote poems on napkins, receipts, her wrists—anywhere that absorbed ink. Sharon thought Connie might have been making up for lost time; there were no poems or brand new thoughts in St. Helena.<sup>7</sup> All the ideas bottled-up in her brain had just started spilling out of her, and if this was any indication, they'd been spilling ever since.

Sharon stuck the letter to her icebox with a magnet, poem-side out, to remind her to ask about it whenever Connie got here. “Whenever,” it turned out, was the very next day at a quarter to midnight. Sharon was in her pajamas, shuffling through a stack of papers for work and mustering up the nerve to go to bed, when she heard the knock on her front door. When Sharon

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<sup>6</sup> *Government is...thrives on*: Lyrics from Willie Dunn’s “I Pity the Country” (“Willie Dunn”).

<sup>7</sup> no poems...St. Helena: According to *They Came for the Children*, rote learning and memorization were staples of residential school education. At Shubenacadie in particular, students never received written exams. Instead, students would sit at their desks “with folded hands” and rotely answers questions “according to the book” (35).

opened the door, she found herself being embraced before she could even register that this woman with a guitar case hair cascading down her back was her old friend.

“Connie!” she said, returning the hug. “It’s good to see you! Look at you, you look like Buffy Sainte-Marie<sup>8</sup> or something.”

“Thanks.” Connie pulled out of the embrace patted playfully at the edges of Sharon’s short, feathery hair. “You look like an indigenous Jackie O.”<sup>9</sup>

Sharon clicked her tongue and made a move to grab Connie’s bags.

“Don’t worry, I got it,” Connie said, waving her hand as she heaved on her backpack. “Just show me where to put them. Am I taking the couch?”

“How’d you guess?” Sharon said as she closed her front door. “Set your stuff down anywhere, I’ll get you a blanket. Gosh, it’s late. You want coffee or something?”

“Nah, don’t fuss over me.”

Sharon plucked a quilt from the bed in her mother’s old room and placed it on the couch. “I know the ferry ain’t always on time,” she said, “but don’t tell me it just got in.”

“I got in a few hours ago. I was waiting for a real inconvenient time to come bug you.”

“Ain’t an inconvenience,” Sharon said, sitting on the couch. Connie sat across from her and ran her fingers through her hair. Lord, it was long now. Both of their hair had been so short while they were at St. Helena, and Connie had kept hers cropped even after they’d gotten out.<sup>10</sup>

“How long you been expecting me?” Connie asked.

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<sup>8</sup> Buffy Sainte-Marie: Renowned Native Canadian folk singer; a contemporary of artists such as Leonard Cohen, Neil Young, and Joni Mitchell.

<sup>9</sup> Jackie O: Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, the First Lady of the United States from 1961 to 1963 and a fashion icon.

<sup>10</sup> Both...out: According to *They Came for the Children*, one of the first thing to happen to children in residential schools was the cutting of braided hair, “which often had spiritual significance” (31). One former student recalled being told by teachers that he was “no longer an Indian” after having his head shaved at the File Hills school in Saskatchewan (31).

“Not long. I got your letter yesterday.”

“*Yesterday?* I sent it at least two weeks ago.”

“You’ve already forgotten that time moves different on reserves,” Sharon said. “It didn’t tell me much, anyway. What have you been up to?”

Connie caught Sharon up on the last few years. She’d moved around a lot, living all over Canada. Most recently she’d been playing guitar and had fallen in with some Indigenous musicians in Montreal.

“Is that what you wrote on the back of the letter?” Sharon asked. “Were those lyrics?”

“What are you talking about?” Connie asked, cocking an eyebrow.

Sharon got up, plucked the paper from her icebox, and handed the paper to Connie.

“Oh, this,” Connie said. “Didn’t realize this was here. Yeah, they’re lyrics. Not mine, though. It’s a Willie Dunn song. I wrote down the lyrics so I could cover it, but it’s all up here now.” Connie tapped a finger to her temple.

“Good, because this is unreadable,” Sharon said, taking back the letter. “Ain’t you gonna play it for me, then? I’ve been wondering what the proper words are.”

“Yeah, for almost a whole entire day,” Connie said. “You’ve *really* been in suspense.”

“Hey, you gotta play the song. It’s the price of sleeping on my couch.”

Connie looked at her wordlessly, but reached for her guitar. “Alright, alright,” she said as she tuned the instrument. “Don’t say I never did nothing for you.”

Sharon settled into the couch and rested her face against her hand as Connie began to pluck away at the guitar with nimble fingers. Sharon closed her eyes as Connie began to sing.

“I pity the country / I pity the state / And the mind of a man / Who thrives on hate. /  
Small are the lives / Of cheats and of liars / Of Bigoted newspress / Fascist town criers.”<sup>11</sup>

Connie had a softer voice when she sang. It went up and down like smooth, rolling hills.

“Deception annoys me / Deception destroys me / The Bill of rights throws me / Jails they  
all know me. / Frustrated are churchmen / The saving-of-soul men / The Tinker the tailor / The  
Colonial governor. / They pull and they paw me / They're seeking to draw me / Away from the  
roundness / of the life.”<sup>12</sup>

Sharon closed her eyes as Connie played wordlessly for a moment. Sharon felt like the  
vibrations from the guitar’s strings were phasing through her skin and going straight to her core.

“Silly Civil Servants / They thrive off my body / Their trip is with power / Back bacon  
and welfare. / Police they arrest me / Materialists detest me / Pollution it chokes me / Movies  
they joke me. / Politicians exploit me / City life it jades me / Hudson's Bay fleeces me / Hunting  
laws freak me. / Government is bumbling / Revolution is rumbling / To be ruled in impunity / Is  
tradition continuity. / I pity the country / I pity the state / And the mind of a man / Who thrives  
on hate.”<sup>13</sup>

As the song ended, Sharon and Connie opened their eyes at the same time. They stared at  
each other for a moment, then Sharon smiled and pushed playfully on her friend’s shoulder.

“You really are the next Buffy, aren’t you?” Sharon said.

“Yeah, yeah.” Connie put the guitar down.

“I mean it. That was real pretty.”

“No it wasn’t,” Connie scoffed. “It’s a sad God damn song.”

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<sup>11</sup> “I pity...town criers”: Lyrics from Willie Dunn’s “I Pity the Country” (“Willie Dunn”).

<sup>12</sup> “Deception...the life”: Lyrics from Willie Dunn’s “I Pity the Country” (“Willie Dunn”).

<sup>13</sup> “Silly...on hate”: Lyrics from Willie Dunn’s “I Pity the Country” (“Willie Dunn”).

“But you sang it real beautifully. Take the compliment, you jerk.”

Connie laughed breathlessly, her eyes pointed downwards at her hands in her lap.

Without a word, she nodded. Sharon bristled. Had she said something wrong? Connie’s demeanor suddenly made her feel like the two of them were back in St. Helena, holding their breath as they waited for the next inevitable bell to shove them through the day.<sup>14</sup> All at once, they were six and eleven and fifteen again, trying not to meet each other’s eyes under the razor-edged gaze of some ancient nun.<sup>15</sup>

“Hey,” Sharon said, forcing herself back to the present. “You okay?”

Connie knit her eyebrows together, clearly thinking. Then she looked at Sharon. “Tell me something, Sharon. Do you pity this country?”

“What?”

“Like the song said. You feel any pity? Because I don’t.”

Sharon narrowed her eyes and cocked her head, silent.

“I’m not big enough for pity. I’m just mad. Jesus, *I’m mad*. I’m mad that we’re talking in English right now cuz we had the *Lnuismk*<sup>16</sup> squeezed out of us, and I’m mad that I gotta write and sing in a language got burned onto my tongue,<sup>17</sup> and I’m mad that I got haggled out of a

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<sup>14</sup> the next inevitable bell: A former student from Fort Hope, in northern Ontario, recalled that in her residential school “there seemed to be bells everywhere. There was the morning bell at seven, when a nun came into our dormitory clapping her hands. She would make us say prayers, like Deo Gratias, on our knees beside our beds. Then there was a bell for breakfast, one for classes at nine, one for ten when we would play outside, one for lunch, and others too. The nun in my class also had a small bell that she rang to signal us when we should stand up and sit down” (qtd. in *They Came for the Children* 26).

<sup>15</sup> trying...nun: According to *They Came for the Children*, student life in most schools was highly regimented and disciplined. One former student recalled, “During certain periods of the day we were not allowed to talk, which only led to hand motions and sneaking around in secrecy” (qtd. in *They Came for the Children* 32).

<sup>16</sup> *Lnuismk*: One of the native names for the Mi’kmaq language (“Mi’kmaq”).

<sup>17</sup> *Lnuismk* squeezed out...my tongue: According to *They Came for the Children*, at Shubenacadie, the “most enduring and unyielding rule” was the children were forbidden from speaking the Mi’kmaq language (34). At some schools, children were made to write ‘I will not speak Indian any more’ hundreds of times if they were caught speaking their native language (33).

childhood, and I'm mad I said 'Jesus' a few seconds ago without even thinking about it,<sup>18</sup> and I'm mad that's it's been ten years since I got out of there and that place still has its claws in me."

Sharon couldn't really tell, but she thought she saw a tear or two in Connie's stony eyes.

Connie sighed. "I didn't come out here on my way to Halifax. I came for Crow Ridge. I came to see *you*, because I've been so damn torn up lately, and I thought maybe leaving here was a mistake. I thought coming home might be good, even if it meant being so near to Saint Hell-on-Earth again, because if I could just be with someone who...who *knew*, then I'd feel better."

A gossamer silence grew between them for a moment, two, three. It wasn't a tense silence. It grew between them and filled in gaps that English never could.

"Alright Barker, dry your eyes," Sharon said at last. Connie laughed as Sharon reached out to put a hand on Connie's knee and in *Lnuismk* said, "*You're home now, and you can stay as long as you want.*"

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<sup>18</sup> Both Catholic and Protestant churches were heavily involved in the operation of residential schools, for both "moral" and economic reasons: Christianity served to "replace" the belief systems stripped from indigenous children, and the Canadian government could often get away with paying missionaries less than trained educators (*They Came for the Children* 19).



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