

## **‘Sad ol’ mush’: the poetics and politics of porridge in residential schools in Canada**

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# 'Sad ol' mush': The Poetics and Politics of Porridge in Residential Schools in Canada

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## ABSTRACT

In *Indian School Days*, Basil Johnston remembers eating watery porridge – 'sad ol' mush' – at St. Peter Claver School for Boys. A collaboration between the Canadian government and Christian churches to assimilate Indigenous children, residential schools served food that aligned with this mission. Zooming in on the history of the poetics and politics of porridge, this article weaves together a study of the food residential schools served with writing by survivors and from the genre of children's literature. It asks: How does breakfast connect to larger conflicts over land and power? And what role does children's culture play in this?

## KEYWORDS

Canada; residential school; Indigenous literature; porridge; reconciliation

## Introduction

Whether called mush or gruel, oatmeal or porridge, the history of warm bowls of ground grain spills far beyond breakfast. In Canada, porridge – or what Anishinaabe writer Basil Johnston calls 'sad ol' mush' – narrates the country's history of enforced Indigenous assimilation, which was the goal of its residential school system. A collaboration between the federal government and Christian churches, the first school opened in 1831 and the last one closed in 1996. Residential schools served food that aligned with their mission. Porridge, thus, maps centuries of dietary assimilation, of efforts to replace bison with beef, corn with wheat, and turn hundreds of distinct Indigenous communities into Canadian citizens.

Porridge also narrates a history of resistance. Zooming in on the history of the poetics and politics of porridge in residential schools in Canada, this article weaves together a study of the foods schools served with residential school literature, including children's literature. 'How does literature claim land?' asks Margery Fee (2015, 1).<sup>1</sup> How does children's literature follow suit and claim or reclaim land? How does food connect to conflicts over land and power? This article turns to porridge to ask such questions. The mouth becomes a gateway to the continuation of one culture or the enforcement of another. Unfolding in three parts, the first part of the article summarizes the role of food in residential schools. The second discusses residential school literature, especially porridge in Johnston's *Indian School Days*, and the third spotlights children's books by Shirley Sterling and Nicola I. Campbell.

## The State and Its Schools

The first residential school opened in 1831: the Mohawk Institute in Brantford, Ontario.<sup>2</sup> Missionaries had run earlier ones; however, starting in the 1830s such schools became part of federal policy. In 1876 Canada passed the Indian Act ('An Act to amend and consolidate the laws respecting Indians'), which gave the government great power over Indigenous life, from governance and cultural practices to health care and education. Fuelled by a belief in forced assimilation, Canada's Indian Act was in synch with efforts in the United States that are best summarized by Richard H. Pratt's 1892 speech at Carlisle Indian School, the first American boarding school for Native children. 'Kill the Indian in him, and save the Man', declared Pratt (1973, 260). These schools believed that to 'save' the child, they must 'kill the Indian'.

From 1831 to 1996, one hundred and thirty schools operated across Canada. The Catholic Church ran three-fifths – the majority. The Anglican Church then operated one quarter and the Presbyterian and United Churches the rest. Around 150,000 children were forced to attend.<sup>3</sup> Students were forbidden to speak their mother tongues, having to communicate in English or French, languages they often did not know. Hair was cut and Christian names replaced Indigenous ones. Until the 1950s, days were divided between lessons and labour. Girls cooked, cleaned, and sewed. Boys were responsible for agricultural work and carpentry. This was to train students for blue-collar employment but also to contribute to school finances.

In addition to forced labour, thousands of children experienced abuse and died. Justice Murray Sinclair, the chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015b), estimates at least 6,000 children died but, because of poor record-keeping, the full number is unknown (Miller 2020). Not all deaths were reported and many children were classified as missing. Some parents never learned about their children's deaths.

Numbers feel abstract. They simplify in order to organize, to represent. On 28 May 2021 a headline announced: 'Canada: remains of 215 children found at Indigenous residential school site'. 215 unmarked graves at Kamloops Indian Residential School in British Columbia.<sup>4</sup> This headline confirmed what both reports and survivors had been saying for decades. It also posed a question: Are there more? Less than one month later, another headline answered: 'Canada discovers 751 unmarked graves at former residential school' (Cecco 2021). A number three times larger than last month's news, this time from Saskatchewan's Marieval Indian Residential School. Then, one day before Canada Day, the Lower Kootenay Band in BC found 182 unmarked graves at St. Eugene's Mission School. The question repeats: Are there more? How many more?

As should be clear, the residential school system enacted horrific abuse. Food, too, played a part. Wheat bread and oat porridge are victuals settlers introduced. Efforts to restrict Indigenous communities' abilities to procure their own food cultivated a dependency on processed foods, also called 'commodity foods'. These are examples of 'dietary assimilation' (Gadhoke and Brenton 2017, 208) and 'milk colonialism' (Cohen 2020, 36). Indigenous communities did not historically consume animal milk, but colonial beliefs about nutrition ignored this. Commodity foods, compared to traditional diets, introduced more fat, sugar, and carbohydrates (Bodirsky and Johnson 2008). But food is just as much about culture as it is nutrition. Sam Grey and Raj Patel point out that: 'Through adoption of a Westernized diet, the colonial supplants the traditional in the

most literal sense, with non-nutrient-dense, industrial foods deculturating people from the inside out' (2015, 438). Residential schools fed Indigenous children culturally-coded dishes to turn them into Canadians.

To lose land is to also lose culture. It is to lose relationships that bodies have to land through food. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, a Mississauga Nishnaabeg scholar, makes the argument that dispossession is more than land loss. 'We have to think of *expansive dispossession*', Simpson writes, 'as a gendered removal of our bodies and minds from our nation and place-based grounded normativities' (2017, 43). This also reveals how eating connects to larger landscapes. 'The edge of the plate', notes writer Priya Basil, 'is like a border emphasising the specificity of a choice, the relations, traditions and dispositions that influence it' (2019, 54). To eat is to express roots and routes.

How did residential schools use food to assimilate pupils? An 1893 menu from the Qu'Appelle North West Territories Industrial School, for example, lists oatmeal or cornmeal porridge with tea and bread, but butter only for 'working pupils and those not in robust health' (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, 491). This was breakfast four days a week. The other days 'all the pupils receive butter and cheese'. For lunch the menu lists soup, meat or fish with vegetables and bread with hot tea for 'weak children and those working outside', and for dinner 'meat for the working pupils and hashed meat and vegetables for the rest'. But what menus listed schools did not necessarily serve. According to one survivor, George Manuel, 'Every Indian student smelled of hunger' (Lindeman 2021). Many survivors recount meagre portions and hunger that led to malnutrition, examples of 'food abuse' (Bodirsky and Johnson 2008). They remember differences between what they ate – rotten meat, thin soups, bread with lard – and what staff ate – fresh fish and meat, butter and jam (Kelm 1999, 72–73). There were even cases of schools selling their farm produce while students went hungry (Kelm 1999, 71). And as historian Mosby (2013) reveals, some schools subjected students to nutritional experiments. Taking advantage of the pupils' hunger, scientists tested out diet theories, further de-culturing the bodies of Indigenous children.

It became obvious these schools were ineffective in advancing assimilation and in 1969 the Department of Indian Affairs decided to phase them out. The last school closed in 1996. Twelve years later, then Prime Minister Stephen Harper issued a public apology, and, organized by the parties of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) was founded. Its 2015 final report concluded that the government had committed cultural genocide. The subsection 'Food: "Always Hungry"' reports that 'no school was doing a good feeding job' (2015a, 57). One survivor was forced to eat 'porridge with worms', then beaten when she refused (2015a, 75). In 2020 the government announced plans to designate two former schools – Nova Scotia's Shubenacadie and Manitoba's Portage La Prairie – as national historic sites. What were once sites of assimilation are now sites of commemoration, sites where lives and culture were lost.

The TRC released 94 calls to action to 'redress the legacy of residential schools and advance the process of Canadian reconciliation'. It also put together 'A Reading List' spanning the categories of: History; School Histories; Memoirs; The Legacy and Reconciliation; Literature; International Experiences; and Young Readers. This last category includes: Nicola I. Campbell's *Shin-chi's Canoe* (2008); Larry Loyie's *Goodbye Buffalo Bay* (2009); Sylvia Olsen, Rita Morris, and Ann Sam's *No Time to Say Goodbye: Children's Stories of*

*Kuper Island Residential School* (2001); and Shirley Sterling's *My Name is Seepetza* (1993). Sterling's title is one of the earliest children's books about residential schools. But before I discuss children's books, the next section addresses the genre of residential schools literature at large. The rest of the article considers books written for adults by adults about childhood experiences and those written by adults for children – sometimes based on their experiences and other times on family experiences they have inherited – and the role that food plays in both.

### 'Please Sir, I Want Some More'

Basil Johnston describes having to eat watered-down porridge, what he calls 'sad ol' mush', in his 1988 memoir *Indian School Days* (1988, 58). Born in 1929 into the Chippewas of Nawash Unceded First Nation, Johnston lived with his family until he was ten. Then, an Indian agent took him and his sister to schools in Spanish, Ontario, one for boys and the other for girls. It was at St. Peter Claver School, Canada's only Jesuit-run school, where Johnston ate 'sad ol' mush'. Another Ontario school, the first to open in Canada – Brantford Mohawk Institute – was even nicknamed 'the Mush Hole' (Hewitt 1988, 12).

Johnston calls his fellow students 'inmates of Spanish' (1988, 19). 'We were "wards of the Crown"', he spells out, 'not citizens of Canada' (1988, 12). The school put its inmates to work. The boys produced food, but did not always eat the fruits of their labour. Johnston recalls boys who slaughtered chickens only for the meat to go to kitchen hospitals and not to their own plates (1988, 87). However, in the summer the boys picked blueberries, which they exchanged into pocket money 'to relieve our hunger during the coming winter by bread-lard-candy trading' (1988, 95). Seven jawbreakers bought a slice of bread, five a spoonful of lard (1988, 96).

One chapter describes breakfast. At 7:25 am, the boys entered the refectory and, in total silence, took their seats.

In the middle were two platters of porridge, which, owing to its indifferent preparation, was referred to as "mush" by the boys; there were also a box containing sixteen slices of bread, a round dish bearing eight spoons of lard (Fluffo brand), and a huge jug of milk. It was mush, mush, mush, sometimes lumpy, sometimes watery, with monotonous regularity every Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday. The boys would have vastly preferred the Boston baked beans that, along with a spoonful of butter, were served on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Sundays [...] Not until we had said grace – "Bless this mush," some boys said in secret, "I hope it doesn't kill us" – could we begin. (1988, 32)

Unlike Goldilocks who found porridge that was 'just right', Johnston remembers many complaints about 'sad ol' mush'. In the nineteenth-century British fairy tale 'Goldilocks and the Three Bears', the blonde protagonist visits the home of three bears. With them gone, she helps herself to their porridge. The first bowl is 'too hot', the second 'too cold', but 'this porridge is just right', she chirps about the third. Despite the dominance of mush at St. Peter Claver, the boys never warmed to it. No bowl tasted right. However, Johnston describes the quantity as 'just enough food to blunt the sharp edge of hunger for three or four hours, never enough to dispel hunger completely until the next meal' (1988, 40). Complaints about porridge also appear in Richard Wagamese's novel *Indian Horse*. Saul Indian Horse describes 'oatmeal mush' as 'lumpy tasteless porridge' accompanied by dry toast and 'watery powdered milk' (2013, 60, 78).

In addition to Goldilocks, porridge appears in Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* (2003), which was published as a serial from 1837 to 1839 and later assembled as a book. In a famous mealtime scene at the parish workhouse, Oliver walks to the front of the dining room with his empty bowl in his hands. 'Please, sir, I want some more', he shyly requests. 'What?' belches the master. Oliver repeats himself. 'More?' belches the master. Oliver drops his bowl and runs. Although he did not receive more, he did dare to ask.

Complaints about 'sad ol' mush' were important. This is because food was one of the few acceptable things to complain about. Johnston explains, 'Food was the one abiding complaint because the abiding condition was hunger, physical and emotional. Food, or the lack of it, was something that the boys could point to as a cause of their suffering; the other was far too abstract [...]' (1988, 137). Tucked behind these culinary protests were larger issues. To complain that they ate 'barley or pea broth' while staff feasted on 'roasts of beef and pork [...] was [...] a protest against abuse and maltreatment' (1988, 137). As Johnston unpacks the linguistic coding:

To say 'This mush is too salty,' or 'Why'd we have to have raw carrots? Why can't we have a sandwich once in a while?' was quite acceptable; it was a complaint that the prefects could tolerate. Saying that so-and-so prefects had no feelings would have been regarded as a statement tantamount to biting the hand that fed [...] So the boys took out on the peas, barley, mush and onions what they could not take out on the prefects. And yet they would not have dared, as *Oliver Twist* had once dared, to ask for more' (1988, 137).

Johnston's *Oliver Twist* reference recognizes the limits of their complaints.

Later, Johnston recounts four 'mystery' women who appeared one day in time for dinner. Because the school only admitted boys, the sight of women was out of the ordinary. The women made notes while they ate. Johnston describes the meal: 'Next to the mush was a bowl with eggs [...] and there was butter again, instead of lard. Some boys rubbed their eyes. They couldn't believe what they beheld. Was it an illusion?' (1988, 142). One boy asked what they were doing. 'We're here to inspect the food', one woman answered (1988, 142). 'About time', replied the boys. But then nothing happened: 'No police came to the school to investigate, as the boys had fully anticipated' (1988, 143). Months later a report arrived. 'While we were in your school we heard many complains about the food', wrote the women, 'but that is to expected from [...] boys who know nothing or care little about the nutritional value of food and who would prefer to subsist on candies, cookies, chocolate bars, hot dogs and soda pop' (1988, 143). The boys reacted: 'Throughout the school there was sense of betrayal and helpless bitterness directed at the new cook, at the women, at the prefects and at the priests' (1988, 144). This returns to their status as wards of the Crown. The report reflects the paternalistic relationship the school had with students, undermining their complaints and knowledge, neglecting their hunger.

*Indian School Days* belongs to a literary subgenre that Renate Eigenbrod has titled 'residential school literature'. The first example is Cree author Jane Willis's *Geniesh: An Indian Girlhood* (1973), published during the so-called Indigenous Renaissance. Addressing this period, Eigenbrod states: 'In tandem with the general marginalization of Native literature in English in the 1970s and 1980s, Indigenous survivors' stories were hardly noticed and not many were published' (Eigenbrod 2012, 278). Ranging from poetry and plays to memoirs and fiction, she defines this subgenre as recreating 'the school experience

through the literary imagination' (2012, 278). Literature establishes a cultural memory of residential school. Writers create a record that combines historical experiences with literary imaginations. 'Survivors express a sense of survivance [...]' writes Eigenbrod, 'which may also be understood in terms of agency and "imaginative sovereignty"' (2012, 277). She notes how the genre has shifted from representing school experiences to its legacy (2012, 278, 292). The TRC's Reading List has brought more awareness to this genre, but also introduced a subcategory: children's residential school literature.

### Thin Soup and Hard Buns: Children's Literature

One title on the TRC Reading List is Shirley Sterling's 1993 *My Name is Seepeetza*. Like Johnston, Sterling draws from her own experience, but translates it into a chapter book for young readers instead of a memoir for adults. At six years old Seepeetza is taken to residential school. Jo-Ann Episkenew points out: 'Throughout her journal, Seepeetza continually juxtaposes her life at home on the reserve at the Joyaska Ranch with her life at Kalamak Indian Residential school both visually and in narrative' (2009, 133). The diary grants Seepeetza a private space to write and reflect. Although she does not romanticize home, her narrative favours it over residential school. For her Thursday, 18 September 1958 entry, Seepeetza writes:

Today we shucked corn [...] When Sister wasn't looking one of the girls took a bite from the raw corn. Then she passed the corn down the line so we all got a bite. It tasted sweet and juicy. [...] Then we started to get happy, even the big girls. We started joking and laughing like Mum and Aunt Mamie and Yay-yah do when they're cleaning berries together at home (Sterling 1992, 14).

Sharing in the delights of fresh corn triggers memories of home. Even though the girls had to sneak their bites, food connects them to memories of the homes they were forced to leave.

After revealing that supper is usually cabbage stew, Seepeetza remembers finding a worm in hers: 'When I told Sister Theo she told me not to be ungrateful. There were starving children in Africa' (1992, 25). This entry recalls the survivor who was forced to eat porridge with worms, only to be beaten when she refused. It shows how residential schools used food to physically and emotionally control Indigenous children.

Like Johnston, Seepeetza is not a fan of mush. Her account also includes the themes of hunger and the staff eating better food than the students. One journal entry recounts: 'After Mass we [...] line up for breakfast [...]. We can talk then because Sister goes for breakfast in the Sisters' dining room. They get bacon or ham, eggs, toast and juice. [...] We get gooey mush with powder milk and brown sugar' (1992, 24). Another passage details girls hiding carrots and bread in their bloomer legs, saving these scraps to eat late at night (1992, 26). Similar to both Johnston's memoir and the TRC Report, the portions were not enough to keep hunger at bay for long.

As Mavis Reimer points out, 'The primary setting of children's books typically is the dwelling in which the protagonist lives, usually' with family (2008, xiii). Titles that narrate adventures – or misadventures – that 'take a child away from home often are resolved with the child's return to it' (2008, xviii). The TRC Reading List includes one picture book, aimed at ages four to eight: *Shin-chi's Canoe*. By Nicola I. Campbell – a

Nle?kepmx, Syilx, and Métis writer – *Shin-chi's Canoe* is a sequel to her 2005 *Shi-shi-etko*, which follows Reimer's observation and takes place in the home. Four mornings before school begins, Shi-shi-etko's mother says: 'My girl, we will not see each other until the wild roses bloom in the spring and the salmon have returned to our river'. The book is peppered with culinary memories: the scent of barbecued sockeye salmon and memories of blueberry, salmonberry, saskatoon and huckleberry bushes, of wild potatoes and celery. The foods of Shi-shi-etko's people's land are abundant and animated, a means of connecting to her culture. As one passage describes: 'Shi-shi-etko promised herself, "I will remember everything". Each plant [...] she listened carefully to its name [...] Then [...] she placed [...] [it] into her bag of memories'. The book ends with Shi-shi-etko gripping this bag as she rides a cattle truck to school.

Published three years later, the sequel – *Shin-chi's Canoe* – takes place at school and introduces her six-year-old brother, Shin-chi. On the cattle truck ride, she explains: 'we will not see our family until the sockeye salmon return. [...] At night, when you go to sleep, remember the tug of the fish when you and Dad pulled the nets in and we made smoked and wind-dried salmon'. The first book was about what was left behind – home, family, plants and animals, a sense of belonging – and the second chronicles assimilation efforts: haircuts and English names. One part describes how:

In the dinner hall the boys and girls sat on opposite sides of the room, brothers and sisters not allowed to talk to one another. [...] the children ate porridge and burnt toast. Through the doors they could see their teachers carrying steaming plates of bacon, eggs and potatoes from the farm. For lunch they ate thin soup, and dinner was hard buns with stew. For dinner the teachers had meat, vegetables and corn. The children were never given enough food.

Using straightforward language and decorative illustrations, these books use food to contrast Shi-shi-etko's life at home versus at school.

Beyond attending mass and lessons, 'The girls did the cooking, cleaning, knit mittens and scarves, and they laundered and sewed everyone's clothes. The boys learned how to farm, do carpentry and blacksmithing'. This echoes the history of residential schools enforcing child labour. As the story unfolds, Shin-chi makes a friend, with whom he steals apples and carrots from the cellar. Mistaking black olives for preserved cherries, they steal those too. The cherry-turned-olive story adds lightness to the book's depiction of life at school. Despite the darkness of hunger, *Shin-chi's Canoe* has a happy ending. The salmon swim up the river, which means that Shin-chi and Shi-shi-etko can, too, return home.

These books were not written by a survivor, but through her family the author is connected to the history of residential schools. This represents a transition from personal experience to multigenerational legacies. As Eigenbrod writes: 'We can identify a shift in the genre of residential school literature from an emphasis on representations of experiences in the school to representation of the traumatic legacy' (2012, 292). These titles reveal that residential schools have affected Indigenous communities at large, and not just those who were forced to attend.

Beyond sharing multigenerational stories and educating readers, these books challenge harmful stereotypes. Didactic rather than imaginative, they have a social justice purpose. Writing about *Shi-shi-etko*, Brianne Grant points out:

By representing more contemporary images of the characters and focusing on daily life, the stories crumble the notion of the “noble savage” or “wild Indian”. Furthermore, they clearly express that colonialism is not an aberration in time, but that it is part of a distant history and also remains inherent in contemporary times (2007).

This supports Eigenbrod’s claim that the genre has moved from representing school experiences to charting the system’s ongoing legacies.

Grant’s observation also recalls Thomas King. ‘Most of us think that history is the past’, he writes. ‘It’s not. History is the stories we tell about the past’ (2013, 2–3). Children’s literature plays a role in this. ‘Picture books’, Grant summarizes, allow ‘for accessible aesthetic and efferent responses to reach younger audiences, so that an empathetic understanding of aboriginal history can be made in conjunction with an accurate understanding of Canadian history’ (2007). Circling back to Fee’s question about how literature claims land, *Shi-shi-etko* and *Shin-chi’s Canoe* represent efforts to revise colonial accounts of Canada’s history. To reclaim this history.

## Conclusion: From Announcements to Acknowledgements

Books like *Shin-chi’s Canoe* are often read in schools. In Canada, breakfast is typically a private affair at home. When students arrive at school the day begins with announcements. Every morning I, a fourth-generation settler, first had to sing the national anthem. ‘Our home and native land’, I hummed, never much of a singer but always an obedient student. In high school, some of my classmates changed the words, singing: ‘Our home *on* Native land’. One word can possess great power. One word reveals the ongoing tensions about the stories Canada tells about its past and its present.

Books about residential school are also read on the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, known as Orange Shirt Day, which debuted 30 September 2013. The name comes from Phyllis Webstad’s first day at St. Joseph’s Mission School in BC, for which her grandmother had bought her an orange shirt laced with string. But at school the teachers stripped her, taking away her new shirt. Orange reminds her of: ‘how my feelings didn’t matter’ (Orange Shirt Day, n.d.). Three years after the first Orange Shirt Day, in 2016, the Toronto District School Board introduced a land acknowledgement to the morning announcements. In addition to the anthem, the school day begins by acknowledging the traditional territories of ‘the Wendat, Anishinabek Nation, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nations, and the Métis Nation’. And like literature – for adults and children – acknowledgements challenge historical erasure. Food does too.

## Notes

1. This connects to my book project, *Culinary Claims: A History of Indigenous Restaurants in Canada* (Gora, forthcoming), which discusses contemporary Indigenous chefs who are cooking to reclaim their traditional foodways.
2. The last was Gordon Residential School in Punnichy, Saskatchewan.
3. In 1996, 799,010 people identified as Indigenous, 3 per cent of the population. In 2011 this was 1.4 million, 4.3 per cent (Trovato and Aylsworth 2015).
4. Operated by the Roman Catholic Church, the Kamloops Indian Residential School opened in 1890 and closed in 1978. Enrolling up to 500 students, it was Canada’s largest and the subject of *The Eyes of Children* (Austen 2021; CBC 1962).

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on Contributor

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