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# The *Secret Path* to Reconciliation: Impact and Legacy of Gord Downie's Musical Activism

By Duncan McCallum

## Abstract

In 2016, Canadian musician Gord Downie released a solo concept album titled *Secret Path*, which dealt with the death of Chanie Wenjack, an Anishinaabe boy who passed away after escaping an Ontario residential school in the 1960s. This album came just one year after the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was published, marking a major national step in the reconciliation process. This, in combination with Downie's terminal brain cancer diagnosis that same year, gave the album a particularly heightened prominence within Canada. This paper examines Downie's album through the musicological framework of secondary musical witnessing, where Downie acts as a witness in defining the story of Chanie Wenjack. Through analyzing Downie's role as a musical witness, broader questions of Indigenous allyship are explored through the colonial lens of settler witnessing. This paper aims to explore the nuances and circumstances around *Secret Path* to understand its historical and cultural significance in the reconciliation movement upon its release, as well as the problems with its legacy related to Indigenous allyship when judged by modern standards as a way of demonstrating how far the reconciliation movement has progressed since 2016.

## Article

Chanie Wenjack was an Anishinaabe boy who passed away after escaping an Ontario residential school in 1966. Chanie attended Cecilia Jeffrey Indian Residential School for three years in the early 1960s before planning his escape and journey home. After Chanie successfully escaped the school, the twelve-year-old boy then attempted to walk home on foot. Unbeknownst to Chanie, however, his home on the Marten Falls Reserve was over six hundred kilometres away from the residential school in Kenora, Ontario. Chanie succumbed to starvation and the elements within a few days of his escape and died on October 23, 1966.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ian Adams, "The Lonely Death of Charlie Wenjack," *Maclean's*, February 1, 1967.

Chanie's story is unfortunately not unique in Canada's long and dark history of residential schools. The Indian Residential School system, which began in the late nineteenth century, was funded by the Canadian government, and run primarily by the Catholic church. Children as young as three years old were forcibly removed from their homes and sent to boarding schools that were designed to "kill the Indian in the child."<sup>2</sup> It is estimated that 150,000 Indigenous, Métis and Inuit children attended residential schools throughout their existence in Canada (from the passing of the Indian Act in 1876 to the last school closing in Nunavut in 1997), with roughly 75% of all Indigenous children between the ages of seven and fifteen in attendance by 1930.<sup>3</sup> Human rights scholar Rosemary Nagy points out that this trauma not only affected the survivors but also the communities at large, stating that "the risk associated with historically traumatic events can accumulate across generations."<sup>4</sup> By 2003, one survey concluded that 37.2% of all Indigenous peoples living on reserves in Canada knew at least one parent who attended a residential school.<sup>5</sup> It is a shared trauma that transcends cultural borders and affects nearly every Indigenous nation and community in Canada to this day. As one residential school survivor explains, "Wherever we have travelled, we are different, but the stories are basically the same."<sup>6</sup> Indigenous advocates have been working tirelessly for years to define this cultural trauma, through collecting survivor testimonies and reclaiming cultures and languages. The push for reconciliation and allyship on the part of non-Indigenous Canadians, however, is a relatively new movement—at least in terms of national traction—yet a necessary endeavour and partnership on the path to achieving reconciliation. As Justice Murray Sinclair put it, "This is not an aboriginal problem. This is a Canada problem."<sup>7</sup>

Cultural trauma is defined by sociologist Jeffery C. Alexander as a collectivity of members who "feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks on their group consciousness, forever marking their memories and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways."<sup>8</sup> It is clear then to see how the legacy of residential schools falls under this definition of cultural trauma, given the scope and effect on Indigenous communities throughout

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<sup>2</sup> Amy Bombay, Kimberly Matheson, and Hymie Anisman, "The intergenerational effects of Indian Residential Schools: Implications for the concept of historical trauma," *Transcultural Psychiatry* 51, no. 3 (2014): 322. Quote originally from the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People (RCAP), 1996.

<sup>3</sup> Bombay, Matheson, and Anisman, "The intergenerational effects of Indian Residential Schools," 322.

<sup>4</sup> Rosemary Nagy, "Settler Witnessing at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada," *Human Rights Review* 21 (2020): 322.

<sup>5</sup> Bombay, Matheson, and Anisman, "The intergenerational effects of Indian Residential Schools," 322.

<sup>6</sup> Brieg Capitaine, "Telling a Story and Performing the Truth: The Indian Residential School as Cultural Trauma," in *Power Through Testimony: Reframing Residential Schools in the Age of Reconciliation*, ed. Brieg Capitaine and Karine Vanthuyne (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2017), 50.

<sup>7</sup> Mark Kennedy, "Teachings about aboriginals 'simply wrong', says Murray Sinclair," *Ottawa Citizen*, May 24, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey C. Alexander, "Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma," in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, eds. Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, Piotr Sztompka (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 1.

Canada, and working to define this cultural trauma has been years in the making by Indigenous leaders and advocates. Arguably the most significant achievement of this work came in 2015, with the publishing of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, commonly referred to as the TRC. This extensive project documented hundreds of first-hand testimonies of residential school survivors and the families of victims, as well as a list of calls to action to the Canadian government and population. Canadian journalist and Gitksan Nation member Angela Sterritt explained how “the TRC led to significant changes in the way Canadians understand their own history, including Canada’s treatment of Indigenous people” and was one of the first movements of its kind to bring this Indigenous trauma to a larger settler Canadian audience, in the hopes of sparking conversations about reconciliation.<sup>9</sup> When Canadian musician Gord Downie released the album *Secret Path* on October 18, 2016, he was able to capitalize on the achievements that had been made with the TRC and Indigenous reconciliation movements across Canada and worked as an ally to the cause. Downie acted as a secondary musical witness to Indigenous cultural trauma by telling the story of Chanie Wenjack and advocating for non-Indigenous allyship. As will be explored below, *Secret Path* was considered by many Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians to have contributed considerably towards reconciliation, while simultaneously being a problematic example of non-Indigenous allyship. Exploring these issues with Downie’s work as an ally does not diminish the album’s value in the reconciliation process, but instead demonstrates how much the conversations around reconciliation and allyship have changed since 2016. This album serves as a historical marker of early allyship to the reconciliation movement, with its successes building on work done by the TRC, and its problems only showing how far the movement has progressed since its release.

Gord Downie was a member of the Canadian rock group The Tragically Hip. The Hip, as they were commonly known, were most successful in Canada and indeed made a career writing about Canadian history, locations, and social issues. As *National Post* contributor Dave Kaufman wrote, “Although Downie sings of Canada, his songs are by no means patriotic, or no more than in the way that we’re all influenced by where we’re from. The band have never been so obvious as to drape themselves in a Canadian flag, but instead, they evoke that shared experience of what it’s meant for many of us to grow up in Canada.”<sup>10</sup> The Canadian poet, as Downie became known, often wrote about social and political issues that faced Canadians, both historical and modern. By this account, it is no surprise that Downie later chose to write songs that grappled with Canada’s heinous legacy of the residential school system. In December of 2015, Downie was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer, and embarked on a final farewell tour across Canada with the Hip, the *Man Machine Poem*

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<sup>9</sup> Angela Sterritt, “Reconciliation in Canada,” *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, December 16, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Dave Kaufman, “How Gord Downie and the Tragically Hip became a part of our landscape, an experience in what it means to be Canadian,” *The National Post*, July 21, 2016.

tour.<sup>11</sup> Throughout this tour, Downie began speaking of issues facing Indigenous peoples in Canada and how every Canadian has a role to play in the reconciliation process. Given his heightened status in Canadian media and popular culture more generally as a result of this tour, Downie was aware of his platform and the influence he had when discussing these issues. Following the conclusion of this final tour, Downie devoted the next year of his life to promoting his solo album, *Secret Path*.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the album was released only three weeks after the Hip's final show in Kingston, Ontario.<sup>13</sup> This concept album tells the story of Chanie Wenjack, where Downie acted as a secondary musical witness in telling Chanie's story.

Secondary musical witnessing describes the process whereby an artist or composer takes on a historical event or cultural issue in which they personally were not present and seeks to define or explore the issue musically. As musicologist Amy Lynn Wlodarski defines it, a "musical witness embodies this dialogical relationship between art, history, and memory, in which 'memory and its meanings depend not just on the forms and figures in the [work] itself, but on the viewer's response to the [work], how it is used politically... who sees it under what circumstances, how its figures enter other media and are recast in new surroundings.'"<sup>14</sup> Put another way, musical witnessing allows difficult and often traumatic conversations to be held through music to reach audiences that may not be able to grapple with spoken or written testimony. Musicologist Maria Cizmic adds to this by stating that "Aesthetic works that foreground such fragmentation and disruption can engage complicated issues around suffering and historical memory and prompt audiences to experience empathy that widens their understanding of the world."<sup>15</sup> Given how little Indigenous cultural trauma and modern Indigenous social issues had been dealt with by non-Indigenous artists at the time, Downie was able to position himself strategically as a musical witness to reach his fanbase with music that was meant to spark conversations about reconciliation and allyship.

With *Secret Path*, Downie acted as a musical witness to Chanie Wenjack, as well as to the larger impact of Indigenous cultural trauma at the hands of the residential school system. Wlodarski notes that musical witnessing "reveals itself as 'never merely individual and never merely social, but rather [an art form] that operates at—or as—the jointure of the two.'"<sup>16</sup> To add to this, Downie's

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<sup>11</sup> Laura Fraser, "Tragically Hip singer Gord Downie has terminal cancer, band plans tour 'for Gord,'" *CBC News*, May 24, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Gloria Galloway, "Gord Downie to release album, graphic novel about residential schools," *The Globe and Mail*, September 9, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Barclay, *The Never-Ending Present: The Story of Gord Downie and The Tragically Hip* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2018), 369.

<sup>14</sup> Amy Lynn Wlodarski, *Music Witness and Holocaust Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2015), 2.

<sup>15</sup> Maria Cizmic, *Performing Pain: Music and Trauma in Eastern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, January 19, 2011), 20.

<sup>16</sup> Wlodarski, *Music Witness and Holocaust Representation*, 4.

album on the surface seems to be defining the cultural trauma of residential schools as it relates to Chanie's story, and how it fits into a broader legacy of Indigenous trauma. While this is true, a larger aim of the album is to bring this cultural trauma and history to a larger non-Indigenous audience in the hopes of sparking national conversations about reconciliation. Through working as a musical witness, Downie gives space for non-Indigenous listeners to be confronted with, and perhaps work through their understanding of, the history and legacy of residential schools. Métis artist David Garneau states that "In environments of perpetual conciliation, non-Indigenous people struggle with their inheritance of privilege, unlearn the colonial attitude, and work toward non-colonial practices," and building off of his argument, giving space for settlers to work through this privilege—in this case, an imaginary musical space—can be an important tool for settlers gain new perspectives and begin participating in the reconciliation process.<sup>17</sup> "All collective traumas have some bearing on national identity" and while this album tells the story of one residential school victim, it brings to light the larger collective and cultural trauma of the residential school system, its victims, and survivors in Canada, a reality all Canadians must face as a first step in the reconciliation process.<sup>18</sup>

Much like the effectiveness of reconciliation efforts when both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples participate, Wlodarski proposes that musical witnessing can only be successful when both the composer and the listener interact with the work.<sup>19</sup> This is something Downie was very cognisant of when composing this album. Musically, the style of the album is nothing new when compared to Downie's musical output with the Hip. While some of the songs off this album lean into folk-style traditions much more than the rock-oriented music of the Hip, I would argue that given the musical style of the album, *Secret Path* would have been well received musically by Downie's fanbase regardless of the subject matter. Given the circumstances around Downie's terminal diagnosis, his fanbase was eager to consume any new music he put out in the last years of his life, meaning Downie was able to use this to his advantage and share the story of Chanie and larger themes of residential schools and reconciliation as an ally. As journalist Alex Tesar so bluntly stated, "The fact is white people tend to listen to white people. But to the extent that Downie has shaped white Canada's perception of itself through his music, he is also the best ambassador to deliver hard truths to them."<sup>20</sup> Here, Tesar is suggesting that on top of Downie's beloved musical style, his lyrics have always shaped how Canadian fans think of themselves, and this album only

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<sup>17</sup> David Garneau, "Imaginary Spaces of Conciliation and Reconciliation: Art, Curation, and Healing," in *Arts of Engagement: Taking Aesthetic Action in and Beyond the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, eds. Dylan Robinson and Keavy Martin (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2016), 24.

<sup>18</sup> Neil J. Smelser, "Psychological Trauma and Cultural Trauma," in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, eds. Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, Piotr Sztompka (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 43. Found under subheading "Collective Trauma and Identity."

<sup>19</sup> Wlodarski, *Music Witness and Holocaust Representation*, 4.

<sup>20</sup> Alex Tesar, "Gord Downie's Path to Reconciliation," *The Walrus*, October 21, 2016.

builds on that legacy by addressing Indigenous history and cultural trauma as it relates to residential schools.

To get a better sense of the album and its unique musical voice, attention can now be turned to the first track to appear on the album: “The Stranger.” This track serves as a setup for the album, introducing Chanie’s story specifically by referring to Chanie as a stranger—that is, an unknown victim of residential schools—and discussing his “walk along the path,” referring to his journey home while following the nearby train tracks. The second verse of the song begins by suggesting Chanie is resting, when he says, “I’m just catching my breath.” Only two lines later, however, this phrase returns in a varied form, where Chanie states “Please just let me catch my breath,” noting his struggle as he journeys alone, running from the residential school that he so fears will catch him and bring him back. This track also introduces larger themes of cultural trauma as it relates to residential schools and colonialism. For example, the lines “My dad, he’s not a wild man” and “Doesn’t even drink” poke at stereotyped racism aimed at Indigenous peoples. This creates an effective introduction to the nine other tracks that follow.<sup>21</sup>

What is of particular interest in this first track is Downie’s use of the first person, singing “I am the stranger,” or “I walk along the path” while telling the story of Chanie. Wlodarski notes how musical witnessing engages listeners “through a medium that secretes the intimate encounter associated with first-person testimonies.”<sup>22</sup> That said, engaging with first-person testimony as a secondary witness is much different than defining a testimony as if one had gone through the trauma personally, and it is worth considering why Downie chose to write in this manner. Knowing that his audience would be primarily non-Indigenous Canadians who were originally fans of the Hip, speaking to the listener in the first person adds weight to the story and the message meant to be taken away. This is of course not without its problems, with Downie being a non-Indigenous settler witness speaking as if he were Chanie. I will return later to these specific issues with allyship, but it is worth noting here that the use of the first person is nonetheless quite an effective tool in drawing the listener into Chanie’s story.

“I Will Not Be Struck” is the fourth track of this ten-track album, which reveals much more about Chanie’s struggles. While “The Stranger” leans heavily into a folk style with Downie’s unfiltered voice being accompanied by just a solo acoustic guitar, this track is similar to Downie’s later work with the Hip being more rock and pop-oriented and serves as a good example of the range of musical styles Downie used on this album. Notice how in both songs the words “Secret Path” appear. Indeed, this titular phrase reoccurs in almost every track on the album. Given the songs tend to shift in and out of telling Chanie’s story specifically and painting a larger picture of Indigenous cultural trauma, this repetitive device gives unity to the two narratives, showing how

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<sup>21</sup> Gord Downie, *Secret Path*, Arts & Crafts Productions AC123LP (October 18, 2016).

<sup>22</sup> Wlodarski, *Music Witness and Holocaust Representation*, 4.



one cannot be separated from the other. These tools Downie used garnered immense success nationwide for the reconciliation movement and non-Indigenous allyship, as will be explored below.

The success of *Secret Path* was felt almost immediately throughout Canada. Coming at a time when the TRC was just beginning to gain national traction, Downie was able to build off that work to help non-Indigenous people engage with reconciliation efforts. A major initial push of the TRC, a first step of sorts, was education initiatives. This album gave many pedagogical benefits to educators in teaching reconciliation in the classroom and communities. On top of the album's release, a picture book with Downie's lyrics printed as the text was also published with illustrations done by Jeff Lemire, as well as a short film that strung along the music videos of the album.<sup>23</sup> This led to teachers being able to use a variety of mediums to engage with Chanie's story and larger themes of Indigenous trauma and history. There is extensive news coverage from this time that shows how *Secret Path* was used in classrooms throughout Ontario, with one Peterborough elementary teacher using the album alongside Trent University's Indigenous history curriculum as a way of making the story of Chanie resonate beyond reading it as a testimony in a textbook.<sup>24</sup> Peterborough teacher Mitch Champagne said the timing of Downie's illness and heightened Canadian social status also played a big part in using this album in his grade 6/7 class at Immaculate Conception School, saying that "Because of Gord's popularity, the kids are going home and telling their parents what they're learning, then the parents are having these discussions about reconciliation at their tables and I couldn't ask for a better outcome than that."<sup>25</sup> Here Mr. Champagne was able to use *Secret Path* to engage his students in learning about the history of residential schools, while also using Downie's position as a famous Canadian musician to spark conversations about reconciliation with the students' families at home.

On top of being a useful educational tool, Downie set up *Secret Path* to give back to Indigenous communities and reconciliation endeavours through charitable donations, with 100% of the profits going to the University of Manitoba's National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, where the archives of the TRC are housed.<sup>26</sup> On top of this, the Gord Downie and Chanie Wenjack Fund was set up as a registered charity that aims to "build cultural understanding and create a path towards reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples" through charitable donations and social programming.<sup>27</sup> Given Downie passed away on October 17, 2017, only a year after the album's release, the Downie Wenjack Fund was also able to act as a sort of estate for the album, administering its continued use and protecting its legacy. This is all to say that Downie's work as a

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<sup>23</sup> Galloway, "Gord Downie to release album, graphic novel about residential schools."

<sup>24</sup> Greg Davis, "Peterborough teacher incorporates Gord Downie's 'Secret Path' for Indigenous history lessons," *Global News*, November 2, 2017.

<sup>25</sup> Davis, "Peterborough teacher incorporates Gord Downie's 'Secret Path' for Indigenous history lessons."

<sup>26</sup> Galloway, "Gord Downie to release album, graphic novel about residential schools."

<sup>27</sup> Gord Downie, *Secret Path Official Website*, Ogoki Post, Ontario: September 9, 2016. Found under "Donate" section of website.



musical witness was well received by non-Indigenous Canadians and did great charitable work in the name of reconciliation, but how was the album received by Indigenous communities? Put simply, this album was incredibly well received by Indigenous leaders and communities for the work it did. Most notably, Downie was presented with an Eagle feather and honorary Lakota name, *Wicapi Omani*, which translates to “Man Who Walks Among the Stars” on December 6, 2016, at the Assembly of First Nations in Gatineau, Quebec.<sup>28</sup> In this, he was accepted into the cultural community for the work that he did to bring Chanie’s story to the nation.

As shown above, this album was generally quite well received at its release in 2016. While there are a host of issues this album brings with it when judging Downie’s work as an ally by modern standards—that I will demonstrate below—there are several reasons why this album in particular was able to be so successful in its reception and legacy, not the least of which is it being a product of its time and circumstances. Prior to the publishing of the TRC, only one in every two Canadians knew of the existence of residential schools, much less their impact and harm on Indigenous communities and cultures.<sup>29</sup> This percentage rose to 66% by 2015, showing how real strides were being made in education and reconciliation efforts, upon which Downie was able to capitalize. As noted earlier, this album came only a year after the publishing of the TRC, which was a massive step forward in national public discussions on reconciliation. By the time of *Secret Path*, few non-Indigenous artists had engaged publicly with this topic in their music, certainly none with as large a national platform as Downie in the months following his terminal diagnosis. What is particularly interesting is that this album was not recorded at the time of the TRC’s release nor Downie’s illness. Indeed, Downie’s biographer Michael Barclay confirms that *Secret Path* was originally recorded and mixed in November of 2013, three whole years before its release, with the titular track being performed live in Toronto as early as December 2014.<sup>30</sup> This suggests that Downie was aware of the work being done by Indigenous advocates at the time and waited for a time in which he could better contribute to the cause, mainly with the release of the TRC. Regardless of intentions, the timing aligned well to play off the work that had been done with the TRC as well as Downie’s heightened social status and platform. To rephrase, the two came together at a time that made this album widely accessible and new. If this album were to be released today, it may not be as well received, especially given its problematic criterion with allyship and musical witnessing. This, however, only shows how the album was a product of its time and circumstance. Analyzing this album shows its historical context and how far the conversations around reconciliation have progressed since its release. Its problems when judged by today’s social standards prove how much

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<sup>28</sup> John Paul Tasker, “‘Man who walks among the stars’: AFN honours tearful Gord Downie,” *CBC News*, December 6, 2016.

<sup>29</sup> Nagy, “Settler Witnessing at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada,” 225.

<sup>30</sup> Barclay, *The Never-Ending Present*, 366-368.

reconciliation efforts have evolved. I would argue then, that this album should not be used as a framework to be repeated but a historical marker of the early reconciliation movement.

As important an artistic and social endeavour as musical witnessing is, it almost always brings with it a host of potential problems too. On top of this, Downie's work as an ally when judged by modern standards reveals many flaws in his approach. The first of which, when considering Downie's place as a non-Indigenous settler witness, is the lack of Indigenous involvement in the creation of the album. In his theory on cultural trauma, Alexander discusses Max Weber's concept of carrier groups, which are defined as agents of the trauma process, and which often use their elite status in society and have "particular discursive talents for articulating their claim" and spread the message of cultural trauma to a wider audience.<sup>31</sup> While this is certainly true of Downie and his position as a musical witness, it also suggests that there were no Indigenous peoples doing work on the same level as Downie, which is far from true. Indeed, many Indigenous leaders and advocates had worked tirelessly to define the cultural trauma of residential schools, and there have been many Indigenous musical witnesses, some speaking of first-hand accounts, working on levels similar, if not greater than that of Downie's *Secret Path*. As Ojibwe journalist Jesse Wenthe points out, "From Tanya Tagaq and A Tribe Called Red to Rebecca Belmore and Alanis Obomsawin, from Joseph Boyden and Leanne Simpson to Zacharias Kunuk and Tara Beagan, there is a legion of Indigenous creators who have been embedded in reconciliation for years."<sup>32</sup> The main difference here was Downie's "elite status" in Canadian society at the time of the album's release. Still, in releasing this album Downie seems to take on the role of a carrier group himself, seemingly undermining—or at least not giving credit to—the decades of work that had been done by Indigenous communities.

Continuing to examine Downie's role as a carrier group through his musical witnessing, he invokes a sort of settler-focused hungry listening. Stó:lō/Skwah artist and scholar Dylan Robinson describes the term hungry listening in his book of the same name as one "derived from two Halq'eméylem words: shxwelítelmeḥ (the adjective for settler or white person's methods/things) and xwélaḥà:m (the word for listening)."<sup>33</sup> With this term, Robinson challenges listening positionalities and how they affect engagements with Indigenous art and music among settlers. Building off this work, Downie engages with Indigenous stories through the dominant colonial medium of popular music meant for a non-Indigenous audience. Doing so places shxwelítelmeḥ and xwélaḥà in conversation with each other and successfully creates what Robinson describes as "an admittedly uncomfortable pairing between Indigenous and settler orientations toward the world."<sup>34</sup> That said, this iteration of hungry listening in many ways goes against what Robinson is arguing for. Robinson's *Hungry*

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<sup>31</sup> Alexander, "Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma," 11. Found under subheading "Carrier Groups."

<sup>32</sup> Jesse Wenthe, "With Secret Path, Gord Downie is illuminating a way forward to Indigenous Artists," *CBC Arts*, October 18, 2016.

<sup>33</sup> Dylan Robinson, *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 2.

<sup>34</sup> Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 2.

*Listening* critiques how colonial attitudes can permeate even well-intentioned engagements with Indigenous music and culture, and *Secret Path* is no different in this respect. In essence, Robinson argues for a more equitable path towards reconciliation than the one Downie offers with his music, leaving a hunger for more Indigenous engagement and participation.

In the same vein of speaking on behalf of Indigenous voices, it is important to point out here that Downie was not the first artist to take on Chanie's story musically. Indeed, Métis and Mi'kmaq musician Willie Dunn released his single "Charlie Wenjack" in 1971, only five years after Chanie's death. This song was met with great success within Indigenous communities, where it connected "musically, socially, [and] culturally" with Indigenous peoples already familiar with Dunn's music, as well as the shared understanding of residential schools.<sup>35</sup> To continue drawing similarities to Downie and Dunn's versions of Chanie's story, the accompanying book by Lemire is also not unique to *Secret Path*. Stó:lō writer Lee Maracle worked with Dunn to release her short story "Charlie" in 1976, demonstrating how the book and music combination was a precedent set long before Downie ever heard of Chanie, and yet neither of these artists are taken into account in *Secret Path*.<sup>36</sup> As Heather Macfarlane argues in her paper on Dunn's music, Downie never cites or even acknowledges Dunn and Maracle's versions of Chanie's story, "which is telling of the cultural divide that exists between Indigenous and settler artists and audiences in Canada," where Downie promotes reconciliation completely removed from communal Indigenous narratives that are present in Dunn's music.<sup>37</sup> That said, while it is important to note the larger implications of Downie's work ignoring Dunn's contribution—and indeed many other Indigenous artists like him—Downie was, in many ways, able to bring this story to a larger audience that Indigenous artists like Dunn would have struggled to achieve in the 1970s. Downie's work as a solo artist taking on this topic without including other Indigenous voices should not, therefore, be viewed entirely as a negative given the message of reconciliation spread much further with Downie than it may have in the hands of other allies or Indigenous artists of this time. As Wenté argues, those Indigenous artists who engaged themselves in the reconciliation process continue to provide "a pathway forward for the multiple nations that exist on this land—a pathway that Gord Downie just helped to illuminate for many."<sup>38</sup> So while this work did have a positive impact on giving voice to many Indigenous artists, activists, and knowledge keepers after the fact, it is unfortunate that Downie did not include these same voices or artists on his album and instead cemented his position as a carrier group of Indigenous cultural trauma as a white settler. Intentional or not, it is an unfortunate outcome of the album that stands on the backs of Indigenous advocates, often without the fandom realizing it.

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<sup>35</sup> Heather Macfarlane, "The Resurrection of 'Charlie' Wenjack," *Canadian Literature* 236 (2018): 94.

<sup>36</sup> Macfarlane, "The Resurrection of 'Charlie' Wenjack," 94.

<sup>37</sup> Macfarlane, "The Resurrection of 'Charlie' Wenjack," 94-95.

<sup>38</sup> Wenté, "With *Secret Path*, Gord Downie is illuminating a way forward to Indigenous Artists."

When working as a settler ally to Indigenous trauma and reconciliation, intentions may be good, but the outcome can indeed still be problematic. Another issue with the album as it relates to allyship is that it lacks any suggestions on how to move forward. Philosopher Anna Cook argues that “we need to complicate the assumption that non-Native Canadians simply need to hear testimonies of residential school survivors in order to challenge their historical amnesia.”<sup>39</sup> This is to say that learning about the history of residential schools is a starting point, and indeed the bare minimum that non-Indigenous Canadians must do to then start participating in the reconciliation process. Roger Simon, a public memory scholar, notes that “there is a difference between learning *about* and learning *from*” the history of residential schools.<sup>40</sup> To build off Wlodarski’s notion of musical witnessing, being confronted with first-hand testimonies of residential school survivors brings with it an obligation as settler witnesses to this trauma, allowing oneself to experience the emotional impact of such stories. In essence, *Secret Path* does exactly what Cook argues against, and simply tells the testimony of one victim. This album does not offer any path forward for settler allies, nor does it tell the listeners how to responsibly witness this testimony as a settler witness. To echo Cook’s argument, it simply does not go far enough. Perhaps this paper boasts a misleading title then, as this work offers no path forward, yet that does not mean the conversation has failed to move forward and evolved since the release of the album. As shown, this album had incredible success with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous fan bases, and yet when looking at the work objectively compared to today’s standards in terms of Indigenous allyship, it is not without its problems. While the aim here is not to diminish the value of this album and the work it did, exploring its issues concerning allyship is an important aspect of understanding the larger reconciliation movement, and how much the landscape has changed since the album’s release.

The reconciliation movement has come a long way since the TRC was published in 2015. Some major shifts in the aftermath of the TRC’s “Calls to Action” included the implementation of residential school history curriculum in elementary and high schools across Canada.<sup>41</sup> At the time of *Secret Path*’s release, however, education initiatives were not so widespread, which is partly why Downie was able to find so much success with this album. With education seen now as a first step in the process of reconciliation and indeed one that has been widely implemented in schools, it is clear to see why Downie’s album does not go far enough in its engagement with the topic when judged by today’s standards, which brings to light the impact the reconciliation movement has had since 2016. Other major milestones for the movement included The United Nations released a Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which aimed to provide a roadmap for the Government of Canada and Indigenous peoples to “work together to implement the Declaration based on lasting reconciliation, healing, and cooperative relations.” British Columbia became the

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<sup>39</sup> Nagy, “Settler Witnessing at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada,” 220.

<sup>40</sup> Nagy, “Settler Witnessing at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada,” 220. Emphasis in original.

<sup>41</sup> Sterritt, “Reconciliation in Canada.”

first Canadian jurisdiction to implement this Declaration into its government in 2019, and on June 21, 2021, the Declaration received Royal Assent and became a federal Act.<sup>42</sup> Following that, the creation of the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, announced by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in 2018 builds off the Orange Shirt Day movement meant to bring recognition nationally to victims of residential schools.<sup>43</sup> The National holiday's implementation on September 30, 2021, of course, came in part after the discovery of hundreds of unmarked graves at former residential school sites throughout Canada, as well as increasing calls for an inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls by Indigenous advocates, which were two major shifts in the public sphere that helped to reframe the movement by pointing out the continued problems that face Indigenous communities and the work that still needs to be done in the name of reconciliation and Indigenous allyship. Every major milestone just discussed, from social and political movements to terrible histories being revealed were all important steps forward on the path to reconciliation, and each represents the incredible momentum of the movement.

While the reconciliation process is indeed an ongoing endeavour, analyzing this album through a critical lens to point out its problems with allyship by today's standards shows how far the movement has progressed among settler allies since the release of *Secret Path* in 2016. There is still much work to be done as allies to Indigenous trauma and reconciliation, and this album serves as a reminder of what can be done by settlers of heightened social status in Canada, not as a framework to be repeated, but as a sentiment and goal to strive for. As Canada continues to confront these horrific testimonies and histories of residential schools, settler allies must remember the goals and mutual responsibilities of reconciliation. As Downie said himself, "The next hundred years are going to be painful as we come to know Chanie Wenjack and thousands like him—as we find out about ourselves, about all of us—but only when we do can we truly call ourselves, 'Canada.'"<sup>44</sup> Downie spent his final days speaking to non-Indigenous settlers in the hopes they would heed his call to participate in the reconciliation process and given I have spent much of this paper showing how far the movement has progressed since 2016, I now echo Downie's call to action, but with the understanding that the movement faces new problems, and requires new artistic responses that build off Downie's work and continue to promote settler allyship with equitable inclusions of Indigenous voices on a path towards reconciliation.

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<sup>42</sup> Government of Canada, "Reconciliation," *Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada*. July 13, 2022. Found under "Implementing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act" section of website.

<sup>43</sup> Sterritt, "Reconciliation in Canada."

<sup>44</sup> Downie, *Secret Path Official Website*. "Official Statement by Gord Downie." Found under "About" section of website.

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