

## Bones and Voices: Doreen Manuel's *These Walls*

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## Bones and Voices: Doreen Manuel's *These Walls*

Murray Leeder

In 2021, GPS evidence revealed the presence of 200 suspected human remains on the grounds of the Kamloops Indian Residential School in British Columbia. This discovery shocked settler Canadians into a long-overdue reckoning with the country's history of colonial violence. However, numerous Indigenous artists had long dealt with colonialism in general and the Indian Residential School (IRS) system, including through the medium of film. Some such representations have turned the conventions of dystopian science fiction (e.g. *Night Raiders* (2021) by Danis Goulet (Cree/Métis), while others come closer to horror. Features include *Older Than America* (2008) by Georgina Lightning (Cree) and *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* (2013) by Jeff Barnaby (Mi'kmaq), as well as such short films as *Savage* (2009) by Lisa Jackson (Anishinaabe), *The Candy Meister* (2014) by Cowboy Smithx (Blackfoot) and *These Walls* (2012) by Doreen Manuel (Ktunaxa/Secwepemc).<sup>1</sup> *These Walls* was part of the 2012 Crazy8s, a filmmaking challenge in Vancouver, where six finalists are given a small budget and production resources to produce a short film in eight days.

In brief, the Indian residential school system (IRS) was established in 1883, based on pre-existing U.S. models, to separate Indigenous children from their parents and communities in order to pacify, assimilate and Christianize them under the guise of education. They were funded by the Department of Indians Affairs and largely administered by the Catholic and various Protestant churches, and were compulsory from 1894 to 1947; they only fully closed in 1996 (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2014, Milloy 2017, MacDonald 2019). They became notorious sites of physical and sexual abuse, with teachers and clergy operating with almost complete impunity. The conservative estimates of numbers of children who died in their care exceed 4000 (Deer), with many not given proper burial, but thanks to poor record keeping the real number is likely substantially higher. Some of the schools themselves are gone but others still stand, either abandoned or repurposed<sup>2</sup> reminders of this tragic history that still haunts communities across the country.

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<sup>1</sup> The makers of these films may not universally accept the label "horror film," though I feel each at a minimum engages with some of the generic preoccupations of cinematic horror.

<sup>2</sup> For example, the Blue Quills Residential School in Alberta now houses Blue Quills First Nation College ("The State of Canada's Former Residential School Buildings" 2017).

Doreen Manuel is herself a Survivor of the Port Alberni residential school, and her parents were the celebrated activist, writer and chief George Manuel and spiritual leader Marceline Manuel (Smith). Her subsequent projects have largely been non-fiction, including the feature *Unceded Chiefs* (2019). She explains on her website that *These Walls* came out of a dream vision:

*These Walls* is in a way an adaptation. I wanted to stay true to the original text, which is the dream vision, the dream story. My spiritual practices tell us that when we want or need something in our lives, we need to meet the spirits half way. We need to work and pray as hard as we can to achieve our hopes. Then if it doesn't turn out the way we envisioned, it is then that we realize that it has come to us the way it was meant to be.

It tells the story of troubled Indigenous teen Mary (Grace Dove) who has car trouble near an abandoned school and seeks help there, flouting the advice of her survivor mother, Claire (Andrea Menard). Hearing voices, she looks inside and sees a baby crawling through a debris-strewn hall. Entering to investigate, she is soon supernaturally sucked into the walls of the building and trapped there alongside a skeleton. She then sees a vision of a priest seizing a baby from an Indigenous mother – her own origin story.

She is let out by Father Kelly (Peter Hall), who clutches a skull and claims it is his confession. He says that she was the baby he let live, but then tries to strangle her, saying that she must “Go with them to their final burial.” She manages to escape to her mother, who then confronts Father Kelly and another priest who are trying to hide the evidence of their crimes. Claire and Mary overpower them and reclaim the bones of the murdered children.

Sound plays a significant role in *These Walls*, suggesting the invisible presence of spirits who are suffering and benign, rather than malign. Whispered spirit voices are heard throughout the film, and Manuel's website provides translations for them: “We are in here. Find us. Help us. Protect us. We need you. Tell everyone about us. Don't forget us.” While Mary is imprisoned in the wall, one says, “Sing your helper song,” cuing Mary to begin to sing (“*These Walls*”). Throughout the film the cries of babies and children, of those dead and improperly mourned, fill the soundtrack. At the film's close a voice whispers “Don't forget about us.” As Salomé Voegelin writes, “Sounds are like ghosts. They slink around the visual object, moving in on it from all directions, forming its contours and content in a formless breeze. The spectre of sound unsettles the idea of visual stability and involves us as listeners in the production of an

invisible world” (12). *These Walls* plays on the longstanding cinematic tradition of supernatural aurality, providing voices at the level of soundtrack that both Mary and Claire nonetheless respond to.

*These Walls* is, as Manuel puts it, “an experiment in some ways to see if I could take a dream vision and turn it into a film” (“*These Walls*”). Numerous significant themes are packed into *These Walls*’ nine minutes. Corrupt clergy preside over separations and murders to cover the evidence of their own crimes, and face only much-belated punishment. Bodies of innocent, murdered children are hidden and unearthed. Though long abandoned, the residential school still stands as an ominous relic of the system that did so much damage to Indigenous communities. It is understood as simultaneously a physical location and a spiritual prison for both the living and dead. The daughter comes to see her own origins and what her mother suffered, and the last image frames them together, finally unified by a common understanding, as a spirit exhorts them to remember the murdered.

*These Walls* would be interesting to pair with the recent podcast *Kuper Island* (2022), hosted by Duncan McCue (Anishinaabe), which is also about a west coast residential school and deals with many of the same topics from a journalistic perspective. In its first episode, we hear of the apparitions of ghosts being spotted while the community searches, as so many now do in the wake of the Kamloops discovery, for evidence of unmarked graves. The point is made, however, that the language of ghosts and hauntings is somewhat inadequate to convey the concept, but is also the best available in English.

It is interesting to note that, as of this writing, the last item shared on the promotional Facebook page for *These Walls* is a CBC article about the Kamloops discoveries (“*These Walls*”). In the days after these graves were first publicized, writer Alicia Elliott (Tuscarora) wrote that,

this entire country is a real-life Indian burial ground . . . Just like those white families in horror movies, though, non-Indigenous peoples of Canada seem to believe they are innocent . . . They lean into the silence that’s expected of them, hoping that the nationalistic myth of Canada—polite, multicultural, consistently more tolerant and humanitarian than the United States—will overcome the gruesome facts of how this country was actually forged. (Elliott 2021)

If the conventions of the horror film provide Elliott with a metaphor for white ignorance, Indigenous horror films like *These Walls* provide the opposite, a

window into the crimes of the past, the ongoing effects of colonialism and the need for justice against the still-living perpetrators.



Figure 1.

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