

# STAGING SURVIVANCE: INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY, DE-INSTITUTIONALIZATION, AND DECOLONIAL ARTS EDUCATION

**VICTORIA FREEMAN**

Independent Scholar  
[victoriafreeman56@gmail.com](mailto:victoriafreeman56@gmail.com)

**JAMIE OSHKABEWISENS**

Theatre Artist  
[xaviour.andre@hotmail.com](mailto:xaviour.andre@hotmail.com)

**JOE CLAYTON**

Visual Artist and Disability Activist  
[williamjc53@gmail.com](mailto:williamjc53@gmail.com)

**RICHARD FLETCHER**

Ohio State University  
[fletcher.161@osu.edu](mailto:fletcher.161@osu.edu)

**ABSTRACT**

This multimedia article comprises an illustrated conversation about the context, creation, and impact of the play *Birds Make Me Think About Freedom*, between non-Indigenous historian and theater artist Victoria Freeman, Indigenous actor Jamie Oshkabewisens, Indigenous artist and survivor of Rideau Regional Centre in Ontario, Joe Clayton, and non-Indigenous art education professor Richard Fletcher, originally presented at the 3rd International Conference on Disability Studies, Arts & Education. This slightly revised version of the conversation about intellectual disability, de-institutionalization, and decolonial arts education through the lens of the concept and practice of survivance is accompanied by still images from the play along with other images from the Zoom conversation and details of important artworks used in the play.

**KEYWORDS**

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When I wrote to Victoria Freeman about the possibility of us working together on a panel for the 3rd International Conference on Disability Studies, Arts & Education (DSAE), I initially thought of it as an opportunity for her to bridge her important work on settler colonialism (e.g., her 2000 book *Distant Relations: How My Ancestors Colonized North America*) and collaborations with Indigenous artists (e.g., Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) artist Ange Loft and their Talking Treaties project), and her work on disability studies (e.g., her 2019 book about her sister, *A World without Martha: A Memoir of Sisters, Disability, and Difference*). As part of my own teaching and research interests as a non-Indigenous academic working on decolonial arts education, settler colonialism, and global Indigenous arts, I was excited to learn from Victoria and her collaborations, especially given I had participated in a Talking Treaties workshop with Ange Loft at the Toronto Biennial of Art in 2019. I knew Victoria was co-writing a book for the next edition of the biennial in 2022 with Loft and Martha Stiegman, entitled *A Treaty Guide for Torontonians*.

Yet following our initial conversations, it became clear that the way I had anticipated a link between the two aspects of Victoria's work at the biennial was actually more deeply explored in another work she had co-created with L'Arche Toronto Sol Express. *Birds Make Me Think About Freedom* is a play about the experiences of people who were institutionalized for intellectual disability (and the experiences of their families and friends). It featured several stories of Indigenous people who were sent to these institutions (sometimes, apparently, after they had been labeled "trouble-makers" at residential schools), and these stories were co-developed with Anishinaabe actor Jamie Oshkabewisens, who was also a performer in the show, and with Indigenous institutional survivor Joe Clayton.

On learning about *Birds*, I was immediately persuaded that we needed to focus on this important work for the panel we convened at the DSAE, with myself, Victoria, Jamie, and Joe. What follows is a slightly revised transcript of our conversation on Zoom, with images from the play and a postscript by Joe (because his patchy internet connection in rural Ontario cut out several times during our presentation, his contribution had been less prominent than it should have been).

Throughout our conversation, we were guided by White Earth Anishinaabe writer Gerald Vizenor's concept of "survivance," a neologism conflating Indigenous survival with resistance. Survivance is a key process within decolonial arts education because it demonstrates how Indigenous peoples have not only survived settler colonial violence and its attendant institutions but also do so in a way that is culturally and artistically transformative. The panel told the story of a concrete example of survivance, specifically how it emerged in practice through the staged re-telling of stories of an Indigenous institutional survivor (Clayton) by an Indigenous actor (Oshkabewisens). Staging survivance stories meets at the intersections between disability justice and Indigenous activism through decolonial arts education comprising the theatrical staging of stories of institutionalized Indigenous and non-Indigenous children and adults with intellectual disabilities. Through our conversation and its publication in this form, we ask: how can a decolonial arts education centered on the theatrical arts re-stage survivance stories as itself an act of de-institutionalization?

—Richard Fletcher

Note: All photos are from the performance of the play or the Zoom session, and are courtesy of the authors, unless otherwise stated.



Figure 1.

**Victoria Freeman:** Hello. My name is Victoria Freeman. I am a non-Indigenous writer, historian, and activist focusing on Indigenous-settler relations in Toronto and Canada. I'm also a theatre artist. I've worked for the past seven years with Haudenosaunee theatre director Ange Loft, Associate Artistic Director of Jumblies Theatre,

on a number of Talking Treaties projects.<sup>1</sup> and it's through this project that Richard Fletcher first heard of me. *Birds Make Me Think About Freedom* is a play about the experiences of those who were institutionalized for intellectual disability in Ontario, Canada. But it's not unrelated to my work on Indigenous and Canadian decolonization.

were launched against the Ontario government, alleging systemic abuse and neglect at these so-called "hospital schools."

The other perspective I brought to *Birds Make Me Think About Freedom* was my work on Indigenous issues. I had learned firsthand from Indigenous residential school survivors about the neglect, abuse, illness, and death at those supposedly educational institutions. Because I'd seen how important it was for residential school survivors to speak publicly about their experiences, I understood that when the class actions for the institutions for disability were settled out of court, the survivors lost an important opportunity to testify about their experiences and to be heard.

The settlement led to some compensation for those survivors who could verbally document their experiences, but many survivors received only \$ 2,000. Some leftover money from the settlement was made available to community projects supporting survivors and helped to fund *Birds Make Me Think About Freedom*. Since 2013, I'd been contributing as a dancer, actor, and writer to a number of productions created by L'Arche Toronto Sol Express (an ensemble whose core members have intellectual disabilities), including a show in response to the Ontario premier's apology for the institutions. Sol Express founder and director Cheryl Zinyk, a longtime L'Arche member and performance artist, and I developed a research process involving survivors and the members of Sol Express, who had never been institutionalized

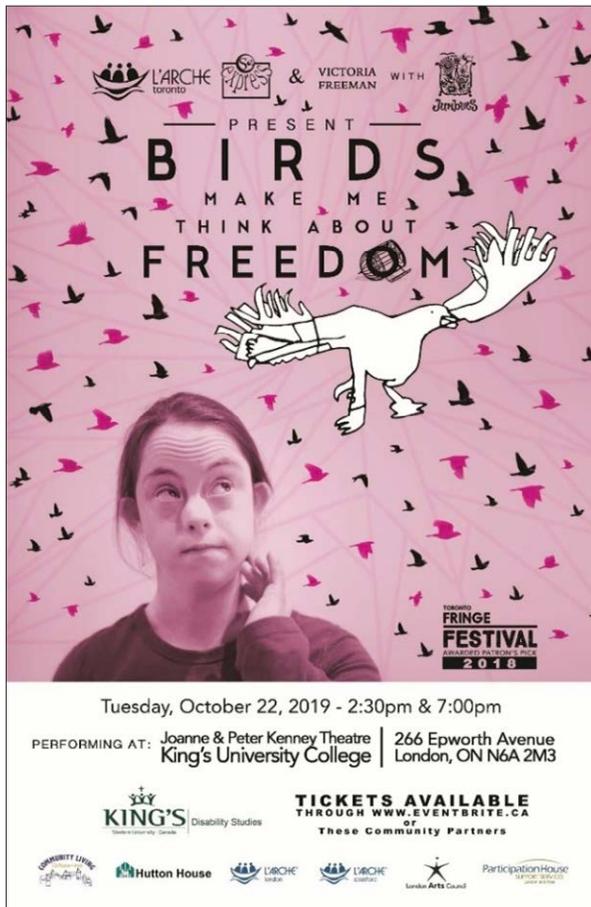


Figure 2.

I came to create *Birds Make Me Think About Freedom* from a double perspective. First, my younger sister Martha was sent to the Rideau Regional Centre near Smith Falls, Ontario, in 1960, when she was 20 months old, because she had Down Syndrome. She lived there for 13 years, and her institutionalization profoundly shaped both of our lives, a subject I explored in detail in my 2019 memoir, *A World without Martha: A Memoir of Sisters, Disability, and Difference*. My sister died in 2002, after living for almost thirty years in the community after her discharge from Rideau. Still, I remained haunted by how little I knew of my sister's experience at Rideau, a huge, isolated institution of 50 buildings, housing 2,600 residents at its height, which was finally closed in 2009. Beginning in 2010, several class actions



Figure 3.  
Two photographs of Martha Freeman from her institutional file.

themselves but had experienced much of the same prejudice and discrimination. Throughout the process, we were offered direction by two survivor-guides, one of whom contributed the reflection that became our title.

Cheryl, assistant director Matt Rawlins, and I worked hard to ensure that the play's creation and performance were not traumatizing or re-traumatizing for survivors, the Sol Express performers, or our audiences, which included many people with disabilities. We chose not to portray stories of abuse or neglect directly but rather to convey the most difficult experiences of the school indirectly through symbols and metaphor, haikus, visual art, song, sound, and movement. We focused equally on survival and resilience, both in the institutions and after release into the community.



Figure 4.

In the bare winter  
the spotted towhee  
finds hope in a red berry.

We looked at the way even small things can lead to change.

The bird flapped its wings...  
A single shifting of air  
Can alter the wind



Figure 5.

The cast co-wrote the final haiku:

Beat strong and steady  
Our hearts and wings together  
Fly with other birds.

Our play premiered at the Toronto Fringe Festival in 2018 and was performed at the ten-year commemoration of the closing of the last Ontario institutions in 2019. It was going strong when the pandemic put our plans for future performances on hold. You can watch a video of one of our last performances.<sup>2</sup>

As we conducted our research, we discovered that several Indigenous children and adults had been institutionalized at Rideau and other such institutions. This fact is not widely known or researched. In fact, it was the suicide of an Indigenous man, Elijah (Freddie) Sanderson, after he had been sent on a work placement at a local farm that sparked a 1971 provincial inquiry on the whole system of institutionalization for intellectual disability.<sup>3</sup> The report deemed the entire system a failure and called for the closing of the institutions and the reintegration of survivors into the community.



Figure 6.

Unfortunately, it took another 38 years for the last institutions, including Rideau, to be shut down. A Rideau survivor whose father had worked for the federal department of what was then called Indian Affairs told me that some Indigenous children considered troublemakers at residential schools were sent to institutions like Rideau. They were sent hundreds of miles from their families, who often had no means to visit them. It was unclear that all the Indigenous children at these institutions even had intellectual disabilities. Freddie Sanderson, for example, lost both parents before the age of four and was placed in thirteen foster homes before he was sent to Rideau at the age of seven. His delays at school were likely to be the result of colonial trauma as much as of his disability.

Residential schools were a genocidal assault on a whole culture and a whole people rather than on individuals deemed unworthy, yet children at residential schools were not sent to those schools for their entire lives as were many at institutions like Rideau. There are many unfortunate parallels between both kinds of institutions, including the high rates of abuse, neglect, illness, and death, the burial of some who died in unmarked graves,

and the travesty of institutions that basically incarcerated and warehoused unwanted people being called schools.

In *Birds Make Me Think About Freedom*, we told several Indigenous stories. Joe Clayton, who was at Rideau at the same time as my sister, was deeply influenced by Freddie Sanderson while in the institution. He told his story in a recorded voiceover in the play, as two young men in his ward begin to fight, and Freddie arrives and calms them down.

In addition to recording his story, Joe contributed an eagle staff that Jamie held as Freddie Sanderson, and Joe's wife Christina painted the image we projected that depicts Joe running away from the institution, guided by an eagle.

Cheryl and I wanted to ensure that both Indigenous survivors and those who did not survive were honored in our play. So we asked Anishinaabe actor Jamie Oshkabewisens, who I had worked with previously on Talking Treaties projects, to help me interview Joe Clayton and stage these stories in ways that were respectful and empowering. Jamie co-created the scenes telling Indigenous stories and played both Freddie Sanderson and another Indigenous survivor, Helen Blue. He also used his own drum in an honoring sequence inspired by the words of Marie Wilson, one of the commissioners of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which was struck to investigate the experiences of survivors at Indigenous residential schools in Canada. To the honor beats of Jamie's drum, the entire cast told institutional survivors. "We hear you. We believe you. We see you. We honor you."

We also remembered those who had been buried anonymously in the Huronia Regional Centre graveyard in unmarked graves or with markers that listed only their institutional numbers instead of their names. The community group Remember Every Name had identified many of those buried there, including several who were clearly Indigenous, such as Barbara Shingibis and Paskakawen, and our singers sang their names while the cast made offerings to honor them.

In these ways, we focused on survivance and the need for what both the deinstitutionalization and decolonization movements call for: freedom and choice, whether you are a person with an



Figure 7.



Figure 8.

intellectual disability or an Indigenous person or nation asserting your right to self-determination.

**Joe Clayton:** I'm really touched right now with this film [the video of *Birds Make Me Think About Freedom*]. I saw what we did for Freddie, and I'm just really touched right now... So what was it like when I first got into the institution? That was 1966. I went there by a worker and the worker brought me in, and when I got out of the car, all the buildings looked like tombstones, tall buildings...

**Jamie Oshkabwisens:** I'm Jamie Oshkabwisens from Wiikwemkoong Unceded Territory. Victoria invited me to go with her to visit Joe Clayton and interview him about his time in the residential... not residential [school], sorry! [chuckle]... the institution. Yeah, Joe Clayton is quite the storyteller. I can just sit there and listen to him for hours, about anything, really. He talked about Freddie Sanderson and how he and him spent time together in the institution and how Freddy was able to retain his culture and was able to share that with boys in this institution that didn't necessarily grow up knowing their culture and not knowing

who they are and what that means to them. I thought about how somebody can be so resilient and even though they're so confined in this institution and have all these different things, traumatizing things, happening to you, but still have the heart to share inside himself... what he knows and what he was shown growing up before being institutionalized.

After interviewing Joe and gathering all these stories, it was like "Where do we begin in going through the recording and gathering all these stories, and how can we collect these stories and put it into a theatrical performance in *Birds Make Me Think About Freedom*?" Because there's multiple stories within the show that we play with.

Joe offered to let us use his staff. He makes this beautiful artwork himself... this beautiful eagle staff that you see in the play.



Figure 9.



Figure 10.



Figure 11.  
Joe Clayton on the land with eagle staff.  
Photo: Christina Kearns

I wanted to use that with the Freddie Sanderson character because Joe explains there was a lot of fighting in the institution between the boys, and like Victoria said we didn't want to portray any violence or anything like that. So how can you portray that? With that hand clasp between Andreas and Nicholas pushing back and forth you can tell there's tension between these two boys inside this place, and then the presence of Freddie coming into that and having them break free of that tension and turn their attention to him. Joe explained that Freddie had this presence of just calming everybody in the room; he had this calming presence. He sounds like a really great storyteller to me from what he had told Joe and the other boys.

So how can I portray Freddie in a way where it's true to Joe's words as he's telling it? Freddie was a storyteller. And a lot of people in Indigenous communities are storytellers, whether they know it or not. And having myself as the character and doing these gestures of having a smudge [cleansing/purifying with smoke] in front of these individuals, because that's a part of purification and calming. You want to go through the day with good intention—see good intention, speak good intention, and always love from the heart. And then also tuning into the dreamcatcher—how Freddie would've taught individuals in the institution about different aspects of the culture. So having that dreamcatcher on the staff was another way.

Because it was a voiceover I couldn't say a word, so what kind of movements can I use as Freddie, so that way he's not just a still character? So trying to figure out different ways of moving and how to



Figure 12.



Figure 13.

use bigger actions with my hands or my body to portray somebody telling another, without words.

That was my experience of going through the interview process, the creative process, and then actually putting it into a theatrical performance. And I loved that, and also with other characters

like Helen Blue, another person that I was drawn to because she is originally from Manitoulin Island, where I'm from.

Hearing stories from different people that knew Helen, she just sounds like a person that has the room's attention, and she's a very big personality. I got that sort of attitude from listening to other people's caring intentions about her. She always brought a smile to people's faces; she lightened up the room, which is also what I love about the group [Sol Express] I worked with. The elder here in my community always said that there's nobody that's different. Everybody carries good medicine.

[Joe lost his connection at this point of the conversation, at which Victoria and Jamie talked about two of the central 'props' in the play—a shawl and



Figure 14.  
Jamie Oshkabewisens as Helen Blue  
(third from left).

a drum. Due to the word-limit constraints of this present publication we are not able to include this extended discussion here, but the authors are willing to share it with any reader who contacts us.]

Joe, I think we have you back!

**Joe:** Yes. Well, I flew away for a little while. I flew like a eagle. [chuckle] But I'm back, I landed back nice and safe. [chuckle] Anyways, humour is good for the soul... Well, like I said, about 1966, I went to Rideau Regional Hospital School, and a worker brought me there, and when I walked out of the car, I was very scared. I remember hanging on to my worker's hand 'cause I was really scared. He brought me into the ward, into the main section of the institution, and then a man came down and took me away, and I left the worker, and I went to



Figure 15.

the mission ward, where they strip you naked, and they measure you from head to toe, and then they have name tags on your clothes. Then you go into the... In the D ward, and you go there for... You go in the D ward for... When you go in the D ward...

I was there, and men were 18 to 19 to 20 years old, and these men were like giants to me, 'cause they were so tall, and I was only 12 and a half years old, and you imagine, to see all of these giants. And I remember that day very clearly. And it was very scary. Then I turned, and I saw the doors were locked, and it's like inside of me I felt there was no more freedom, I was gonna be... I didn't know what was happening because I was used to all the foster homes that I was going in.

**Richard:** Joe, we had a conversation in preparation for today's event, and we talked a lot about your art... And one of the things that really drew me to Victoria's work, as well as her collaborations with Ange Loft—and Jamie's been a collaborator on the Talking Treaties project as well—is this way in which art has this transforming, freeing power. And Joe, when we talked before, you spoke of how your art practice really released you, especially in the traumas of the experience that you went through... It was very moving to hear... the power art continues to have in your life after that.

**Joe:** When I was in the institution, there was Peter Doss, who was an art teacher there, and when you're in an institution, you want to get out of there really fast or... just go somewhere in the school... just to get away. And so I was taught art, and it really helped me and gave me peace, and then when I got out, I started doing art... off and on... but art helps me. Art helps me to heal, and it helps me to bring myself at peace to where I am today, and so that's what art has done for me

and has given me. I do a lot of my art. It's in the United States and it's going to be in a health magazine on [the] front cover... But yeah, I think art just helps me relax and brings me to the person that I am today.

**Jamie:** I do art myself, and art I find is a healing process. Everybody might not find the same feeling with art. But looking at somebody's art, you can take a feeling away or take something away that means something to you... you've done



Figure 16.  
Cheryl Zinyk (seated), the co-founder of SoI Express and director of *Birds Make Me Think About Freedom*. Matt Rawlins (in shadow), musician, assistant director, and videographer/ animator. Left to right: singer Lieke Van den Voort, Cheryl Zinyk, actor Robert Gray. Behind them: musician David Rawlins.



Figure 17.  
SoI Express actor Nafiz Ismail.

something in your artwork that is worthy of sharing with so many, and Joe has done that.

**Victoria:** Joe and his wife, artist Christina Kearns, run a rural art gallery, the Nature Natives Art Gallery. You can see more of his art on their gallery's Facebook page.<sup>4</sup>

**Joe's postscript:** It was great to see *Birds Make Me Think About Freedom* in Toronto and to see my Talking Stick and Christina's art that she did. The painting was called "Courage." The eagle symbol means freedom and courage, and strength. I am proud to see all the people performing in the play and to stand up for everyone's freedom. We will not go backward; we will go forward. Yes, we are free like an Eagle. Miigwetch. Thank You.

## ENDNOTES

- 1** Together, we created *The Talking Treaties Spectacle*, a site-specific performance about Toronto treaties, performed at Historic Fort York in Toronto in 2017 and 2018. With Martha Stiegman we created the video and art installation *By These Presents: 'Purchasing' Toronto* for the 2019 Toronto Biennial of Art. Our book, *A Treaty Guide for Torontonians*, was published in June 2022.
- 2** At <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C72MC7d1-I4>.
- 3** See Williston, W. (1971). *Present Arrangements for the Care and Supervision of Mentally Retarded Persons in Ontario*. Ontario Department of Health.
- 4** <https://www.facebook.com/NatureNativesArtGallery>