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How Do You Wake a Sleeping Giant? A Review of Tanya Talaga's *Seven Fallen Feathers: Racism, Death, and Hard Truths in a Northern City*

There is a basaltic rock formation on the edge of the Canadian city of Thunder Bay, Ontario. It is a series of mesas with sheer vertical walls, flat tops, and stunning views. The Anishinaabe First Nations, who have lived in that region for thousands of years, personify the mesas as a single giant known as Nanabijou (Talaga 1). Nanabijou is a significant being for the Ojibwe people in particular, and as a part of the landscape they live on, the giant is integral to their culture and their history. The giant was the protector of the Ojibwe until Nanabijou was betrayed by the white-faced people and turned to stone (Talaga 2-3). To this day, Nanabijou remains captured in his stony sleep. This "Sleeping Giant" is the geological spine of the Thunder Bay landscape. In *Seven Fallen Feathers: Racism, Death, and Hard Truths in a Northern City*, Nanabijou is the backbone of the story. Indeed, Nanabijou is the first persona that author Tanya Talaga introduces to the reader (1), and the giant acts as the story's timekeeper and witness.

In *Seven Fallen Feathers*, Talaga uses the giant's massive sleeping frame, stretching out across the horizon, to contain the story's themes of racism and injustice. Talaga recounts the tragic pattern behind the deaths of seven Indigenous youths between the years of 2000 and 2011, the "Seven Feathers," who all died in the process of seeking an education outside of the limited resources of their remote northern Ontario communities. Canada's grim legacy of cultural

genocide, societal ambivalence, and federal neglect, combined with the trauma of the residential school system and the underfunding of health care and education in Indigenous communities, have created monumental obstacles for First Nations' children, not only to their thriving but to their survival (Talaga 11). Moreover, "[a]ll this happened while Nanabijou slept" (11).

The slumbering Nanabijou is the book's timekeeper. The fact that the giant continues to sleep creates tension, for what is sleeping must one day awaken. There is an unsettling feeling with Nanabijou's presence in the book, as though, at any point, the giant will stir and shake off the centuries of accumulated sediment, and, as the giant rises, the surrounding terrain will shift and groan as the city of Thunder Bay topples onto its side. The disquieting presence of Nanabijou carries the question, "What will happen when the giant wakes?"

While Nanabijou sleeps, Talaga weaves the youths' stories forward and back through time, not only to create dramatic tension in the retelling of their short lives but to provide historical and legal context for readers on Canada's racist systems, which inevitably influenced Canadian society's attitudes toward Indigenous people.

Talaga understands that by interspersing scenes with information, she can immerse the reader in the Feathers' stories to get the essential details of injustice across, and she does this with precision, aimed at the readers' hearts (Gutkind 123). Talaga interrupts the chapters dedicated to each of the youths' disappearance with factual context, evoking the dread of time slowly passing until their bodies are found. As readers, we want the crimes solved and the questions answered; sadly, the answers do not come from a sense of closure, from the "bad guy" being caught, but in the awareness that we are all, at every level of Canadian society, complicit in their deaths. By prolonging the portions of the book detailing the moments leading up to a youth's disappearance to the time their bodies are found, Talaga is not only creating suspense but

appealing to those painful moments of unknowing to hint at the weight of dread that the youths' families must have endured (Gutkind 119). Talaga's writing conjures the heaviness that comes with waiting, the agonizing hours that seem to stand still, and as the minutes creep forward, the diminishing sense of hope and "the hollowness of not knowing" (Talaga 155).

Nanabijou is a witness. The giant is witness to the lives of Indigenous people before colonialism left its brutal mark upon them. Nanabijou witnesses the first interactions with the white-faced people, the early settlers, but in the book, the giant sleeps while the scenes of the stories play out. In *Seven Fallen Feathers*, what is striking about the pattern of the youth's deaths is how few witnesses there were to their last moments, and this lack of information is further aggravated by the failure of the Thunder Bay Police to do their due diligence: not only do they not begin their investigations promptly, but they also fail to inform families and loved ones in an appropriate time frame. The police and coroners are quick to rule the deaths as accidental, with alcohol as a contributing factor to their drownings. But how can all these young people, still legally children, all be dying in the same way? "Homicide, in a coroner's inquest, does not require proof of intention—it is simply the killing of a human being due to the act or omission of another" (Talaga 199).

While Nanabijou sleeps, the giant cannot witness the Anishinaabe people, and what the giant can't see, the giant cannot protect. Likewise, what the Canadian people cannot see or refuse to see, they cannot protect. The fact that the seven deaths, all following a similar pattern, went under-reported at the time speaks to the nation's ignorance. At the beginning of the book, Talaga acknowledges, "I knew a missing grade nine Indigenous student in Thunder Bay would not make the news in urban Toronto" (16). As Canadians, we like to think we are the guardians of all the nation's children, yet we sleep while Canadian children suffer.

The literary theorist Northrop Frye once asked us Canadians to locate our national identities with the question, “Where is here” (253)? In *Seven Fallen Feathers*, Talaga describes Thunder Bay in a manner that could make it any small to mid-sized Canadian city: the Tim Hortons and the movie theatres, the industrial parks and the strip malls, the bus stops, and the hidden places for young people to congregate, the wilderness shoved aside by the city’s limits and the remote vastness in the mysterious beyond. By describing Thunder Bay, Talaga “imagines it into being for the rest of us” (Francis 7). As a result, readers cannot help but imagine the same tragedies playing out in their towns and cities, making the reality of the Seven Feathers’ deaths more unfathomable. Thunder Bay is far away for most of us, but each of our cities, in shape and essence, *is* Thunder Bay. The Seven Feathers, Jethro, Curran, Robyn, Paul, Reggie, Kyle, and Jordon, are the children of our Canadian towns.

*Seven Fallen Feathers: Racism, Death, and Hard Truth in a Northern City* was published in 2017. On December 18, 2023, the body of Mackenzie Moonias, a 14-year-old from Neskantaga First Nation, was found at a Thunder Bay marina. Mackenzie was in Thunder Bay to attend high school, just like the Seven Feathers were. The Chief of the Neskantaga First Nation told the CBC, “A lot of our community members go through isolation, loneliness and stuff like that when they leave for high school.... If we had a choice, we'd have a high school in the community — we just don't have the support” (qtd. in Law). At the end of *Seven Fallen Feathers*, Talaga does not mention Nanabijou and the silence of his absence is deafening. Nanabijou sleeps.

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