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Telling and Performing Past, Present, and Future Histories in Comics
Residential Schools as Cultural Trauma

Mattia Arioli

Abstract • This paper explores how Indigenous storytellers use graphic narratives to re-imagine Natives' relationships with Canada in the aftermath of the trauma caused by Residential Schools. The representation of this experience has become a central theme in Indigenous storytelling in Canada since the 1980s. By focusing on contemporary Indigenous comics, the paper outlines how these narratives recollect the experience of abused Indigenous children to condemn the racists and colonial ideals that allowed those sufferings. These comics show how traumatic experiences suffered by the ancestors can be inherited by subsequent generations. Through storytelling, the community is capable of recuperating missing pieces of culture and histories that had long gone lost from the repertoire of Indigenous stories. Finally, this traumatic experience also effects speculative fiction set in the future.

Keywords • Trauma; Comics; Indigeneity; Generation; Residential Schools.

Ledizioni

Telling and Performing Past, Present, and Future Histories in Comics
Residential Schools as Cultural/Historical Trauma

Mattia Arioli

1. Residential schools as an intergenerational, cultural and historical trauma

This paper explores how Indigenous storytellers (and allies) use graphic narratives to re-imagine Natives' relationships with Canada and all Canadians in the aftermath of the personal and cultural trauma caused by 'Indian Residential Schools' (IRS). This Institution had two main aims: first, it attempted «to remove and isolate children from the influence of their homes, families, traditions and cultures»; and second, it sought «to assimilate them into the dominant culture».[1] Government agencies endorsed the abduction of Aboriginal children in order to promote their assimilation into mainstream culture. Beginning in 1880s and continuing until the second half of the twentieth century (the last federally run residential school closed in 1996),[2] the government regularly removed Indigenous children from their homes, families, culture in order to assimilate them into the 'Canadian way of life' and convert them to Christianity. This (mal)practice was based on the false assumption that "whites" were inherently superior to the so-called "Indians," whose languages, cultures, knowledge, spiritual beliefs, life styles were patronizingly regarded as savage, uncivilized, and rooted in superstition. Sadly, Residential Schools sought to actively 'kill the Indian in the child' enforcing a *de facto* cultural genocide.

Of course, the abduction of children from their communities and the denial of their cultural identity through attacks on their family ties, language, spiritual beliefs, customs, lifestyle, rites were cruel. Yet, «these practices were compounded by the too frequent lack of basic care – the failure to provide adequate food, clothing, medical services and a healthful environment».[3] Moreover, IRSs failed to ensure the children's safety from teachers and staff who often assaulted them physically and/or abused them sexually and emotionally. Besides, the schools also failed from an educational point of view. The participation rates and grade achievement levels of Indigenous children lagged far behind those for non-Aboriginal students.[4] According to settler society, the future resided only in the children, as only them could undergo the conversion from the natural condition to that of civilization. Adults were not considered fit to join the march of progress. They were judged unable to be emancipated from their state of ignorance and superstition. They were deemed not only lost to civilization, but also an impediment to it. While they could not learn, they could, as

[1] Crown-Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, *Statement of Apology to Former Students of Indian Residential Schools*, June 112008, last modified 15 September 2010, web, last access: 15 March 15 2022, <https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1100100015644/1571589171655>.
[2] Marlene Brant Castellano *et al.*, *From Truth to Reconciliation: Transforming the Legacy of Residential Schools*, Ottawa, Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2008.
[3] Royal Commission on Aboriginal People, *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*, vol. I, *Looking Forward, Looking Back*, 1996, p. 172, web, last access: 15 March 2022, <http://data2.archives.ca/e/e448/e011188230-01.pdf>.
[4] *Ibid.*

parents, teach and influence their children. Hence, colonizers believed that a child's potential could only be realized outside the family. The State and Churches saw the eradication of Aboriginal languages as the central challenge to their attempt to civilize the children, as it was through language that children received their cultural heritage from parents and community members. In this regard, it is worth pointing out that there was a dark contradiction in the way IRS sought to 'civilize' the children: the use of corporal punishment to prompt obedience to authority, order and discipline. Students suffered beatings for speaking their Native language, bed-wetting (a common problem in IRSs) was met with punishments, runways were chased with hunting dogs, and, when caught, they were humiliated (e.g. their heads were shaved and/or they were kept in the soap closet for several days and nights).[5]

The IRS system had its origins in laws enacted before the formation of the Canadian Confederation, but it started being implemented only after the passage of the *Indian Act* in 1876. Indeed, the *Indian Act* and its invasiveness (prohibiting various Indigenous cultural practices such as traditional dances and mores) made policies on Residential Schools and relocations easier to implement – perhaps almost inevitable. In particular, it would be under Prime Minister John A. Macdonald that the Canadian government created the Residential School system, modeling it after the American Indian boarding schools, first introduced in the United States in 1879. In the US, the boarding schools were state-funded, church-run institutions modeled after the first off-reserve educational facility, the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, located in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. This school was created by Captain Richard Pratt who believed that Indians were born 'blank.' In his vision, the mission of settler society and the purpose of boarding schools were the promotion of civilization, a mission exemplified by his motto, «Kill the Indian in him, and save the man».[6] In Canada, Duncan Campbell Scott, who designed Canada's Residential School system, shared a similar sentiment and implemented an analogous resolution to what he perceived as the 'Indian problem.'[7]

The State and, maybe most critically, the Churches (Anglican, Catholic, Methodist and Presbyterian) felt that the development of the IRS system was a response to both a constitutional and a Christian obligation to the 'Indians'. However, they were also motivated by more prosaic drives. They thought that IRS's expenditures were a good investment, because in due course Aboriginal people would be able to contribute largely to the country, instead of being supported from the revenues of the same. The socializing power of education was deemed capable of providing a response to Canada's (as an industrial society) need for order, lawfulness, labor and security of property. Hence, IRSs were more than tools of social construction and control. They played a vital role in building and consolidating Canada as a nation-state, and they did so by fostering the marginalization of Indigenous communities.

Residential School students were drawn from First Nations (legally known as 'Indians'), Métis (Indigenous people of mixed Aboriginal and European descent), and Inuit (a distinct Indigenous group living in the Artic).[8] These children were recruited with coercion and their parents were discouraged from visiting them even when the school was close to home. Some children entered IRSs as young as five years old.[9] They were usually taken by rail,

[5] Jerry Wasserman, *"God of the Whiteman! God of the Indian! God Al-fucking-mighty!": The Residential School Legacy in Two Canadian Plays*, «Journal of Canadian Studies», 39, 1, 2004, pp. 28-29.
[6] Tanya Talaga, *All Our Relations. Indigenous Trauma in the Shadow of Colonialism*, London, Scribe, 2020, pp. 56-57.
[7] *Ibid.*
[8] Michael DeGagné, *Towards an Aboriginal Paradigm of Healing: Addressing the Legacy of Residential Schools*, «Australasian Psychiatry», 15, 2007, pp. 49-53.
[9] Marlene Brant Castellano, *Healing Residential School Trauma. The Case for Evidence-Based Policy and Community-Led Programs*, «Native Social Work Journal», 7, 2010, p. 15.

by boat, and by plane. It has been estimated that in Canada over 150,000 Indigenous children attended IRSs.[10]

Indigenous people strongly opposed the IRS system. However, nothing changed for decades, despite the presence of evidence testifying the abuses occurred in those schools. Only in the last decades of the 20th century, these accounts were brought to light, also thanks to testimonial literature. Since the late 1980s, the body of works (books, periodicals, dissertations, testimonials, videos, and plays) recollecting this traumatic past has been increasingly growing.[11] Hence, it becomes evident how storytelling is an important asset for liberation. Indeed, it is through the performance of stories that once invisible sites of oppression and neglected stories can be brought into public attention and create social change. In this regard, it is worth pointing out that in 2008, when Prime Minister Stephen Harper offered his formal apology, where he recognized how the government's «policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm, and has no place in our country»,[12] an Environics benchmark survey showed that only half of Canadians had read or heard something about the IRSs.[13] In fact, this piece of history has been long silenced from nationalist narratives about the building of the Canadian nation.

The Prime Minister's apology, which acknowledged the systemic cultural and intergenerational harms caused by the IRSs, was the result of a long legal struggle. Indeed, «in 2007, after twenty years of struggle in and out of the court system, survivors of the IRS system negotiated an out-of court settlement with the federal government and churches that ran the schools».[14] Sadly, «Under tort law, only physical and sexual abuse were considered to be legally actionable and the Canadian government's strategy from the late 1980s to early 2000s was largely to construct the violence of residential schools as crimes committed by individual pedophiles and abusers».[15] This strategy had clearly the intention of downplaying the pivotal role played by IRSs in the broader colonial project of assimilation. Consequently, survivors fought for the recognition of physical and sexual abuses, but also of the cultural/epistemological violence perpetuated by the IRS system. It was only in 2015 that the IRS system was officially recognized as an instrument of cultural genocide by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada in its final report.

While some children may have had positive experiences in the IRSs, the general impact on Native communities and families over seven generations has been frequently damaging. Scholars have demonstrated how the wounds inflicted by the IRS system to thousands of Indigenous

[10] Elazar Barkan, *Genocides of Indigenous Peoples: Rhetoric of Human Rights*, in *The Specter of Genocide: Mass Murder in Historical Perspective*, ed. by R. Gellately and B. Kiernan, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 130-131.
[11] Judith Leggat, *Reconciliation, Resistance, and Biskaabiiyang: Re-imagining Canadian Residential Schools in Indigenous Speculative Fiction*, in *Canadian Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror. Bridging the Solitudes*, ed. by Amy J. Ransom and Dominick Grace, Cham, Palgrave, 2019, pp. 135-149. A selective bibliography has been recollected in Amy Fish and Deborah Lee, *Native Residential Schools in Canada a Selective Bibliography*, Ottawa, National Library of Canada, 2022, web, last access: 15 March 2022, <https://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/native-residential/index-e.html>.
[12] Crown-Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, *op. cit.*
[13] *National Benchmark Survey*, «Environics», 2008, p. ii, web, last access: 15 March 2022, <http://www.nrsss.ca/IRSRC%20TRC%20National%20Survey%20Final%20Report.pdf>.
[14] Rosemary Nagy and Emily Gillespie, *Representing Reconciliation: A News Frame Analysis of Print Media Coverage of Indian Residential Schools*, «Transitional Justice Review», 1, 3, 2015, p. 3.
[15] *Ibid.*

people, once kids and now adults, endure in the present.[16] The effects of IRSs seep through generations, from child to parent, to family, to community. In fact, the IRS system increased suicidality and depression on individuals who attended the schools, but also among the children of those survivors.[17] The chronic childhood adversity faced by many IRS survivors influenced their ability to provide an adequate and safe environment for their children. Unsurprisingly, survivors are more likely to face various physical, mental and social health challenges, including PTSD, substance abuse, and depression. Hence, not unexpectedly, an adult offspring of a parent who attended IRS might be at more risk for mental health issues, including psychological distress and suicidal behaviors. IRS had a huge negative effect on the family structure of Indigenous communities in Canada. These effects can be observed through different aspects of their lives: education, health inequalities, and intimate partner violence.[18]

In literary studies, the possibility of intergenerational transmission of traumatic memories has been explored through the notions of «rememory»[19] and «postmemory».[20] Toni Morrison's «rememory» is a bodily form of re-membering[21] that one cannot escape. In this model, memory is transmitted to be repeated and reenacted and not worked through. In contrast, Hirsch's postmemory is a form of engagement with distant political and cultural memorial structure. This investment is resonant with individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression. Second-generation fiction, art, memoir and testimony attempt to describe the long-term effects of living with a person who has witnessed and/or survived a traumatic event. Hence, family life becomes entrenched in a collective imagery through projection.

Even though the concepts of «rememory» and «postmemory» both imply the possibility of inhabiting an event that one did not experience, on the basis of traces of someone else's memory, rememories exist also in the bodily form of scars (as the one on Sethe's back, in Morrison's *Beloved*), which function as permanent reminders of the endurance of violence. As Marianne Hirsch discussed

> Rememory is neither memory nor forgetting, but memory combined with (the threat of) repetition; it is neither noun nor verb, but both combined. Rememory is Morrison's attempt to re-conceive the memory of slavery, finding a way to re-member, and to do so differently, what an entire culture has been trying to repress.[22]

[16] Cf. Amy Bombay, Kimberly Matheson, and Hymie Anisman, *The Intergenerational Effects of Indian Residential Schools: Implications for the Concept of Historical Trauma*, «Transcultural psychiatry», 51, 3, 2014, pp. 320-338. Amy Bombay *et al.*, *Suicidal Thoughts and Attempts in First Nations Communities: Links to Parental Indian Residential School Attendance across Development*, «Journal of Developmental Origins of Health and Disease», 10, 1, 2019, pp. 1-9. Brenda Elias *et al.*, *Trauma and Suicide Behaviour. Histories among a Canadian Indigenous Population: An Empirical Exploration of the Potential Role of Canada's Residential School System*, «Social science & medicine», 74, 10, 2012, pp. 1560-1569.

[17] Joseph P. Gone *et al.*, *The Impact of Historical Trauma on Health Outcomes for Indigenous Populations in the USA and Canada: A Systematic Review*, «American Psychologist», 74, 1, 2019, p. 20.

[18] Katie Cowan, *How Residential Schools Led to Intergenerational Trauma in the Canadian Indigenous Population to Influence Parenting Styles and Family Structures over Generations*, «Canadian Journal of Family and Youth/Le Journal Canadien de Famille et de la Jeunesse», 12, 2, 2020, pp. 26-35.

[19] Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, New York, Vintage, 2007.

[20] Cf. Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames. Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2012. Ead., *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2012.

[21] The use of bodily metaphors to describe memory has been described, among others, by Aleida Assmann, *Ricordare. Forme e mutamenti della memoria culturale*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2002.

[22] Hirsch, *Maternity and Rememory: Toni Morrison's* Beloved, in *Representations of Motherhood*, ed. by Donna Bassin, Margaret Honey and Meryle Mahrer Kaplan, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1994, p. 94.

Therefore, whereas rememory implies an immersive (and unhealthy) relation with the past, postmemory retains a certain critical distance that allows the authors to engage with the possibilities of coming to terms with one's traumatic past, while opening up opportunities for healing. Interestingly, Indigenous recollections of the IRS traumatic experience seem to oscillate between these two modes. Cultural genocide and assimilation practices have occurred over the course of many generations, and they continue to effect the mental health and identity of many contemporary Indigenous people and their families. On this matter, it is important to remind that

> As the federal government began to phase out residential schools after the Second World War, the state-led apprehension of Indigenous children did not end, but rather shifted and took a new form – the widespread practice from the 1960s into the 1980s of child welfare workers removing Indigenous children from their homes and placing them with non-Indigenous foster and adoptive parents.[23]

In fact, what has become known as the «Sixties Scoop»[24] testifies a continuity of colonial practices to the detriment of Aboriginal population. Past colonial prejudices and discourses can still be seen in contemporary Canada's Child Welfare.

Nonetheless, Indigenous artists and scholars attempt to work through the scars left by IRS system by strengthening those ties (with the community, ancestors, language, culture, land, and non-human world) that colonialism has severed. Hence, the elaboration of the trauma induced by the IRS system seems to be stuck between the «acting out» and «working through» phases.[25] Following Freud, LaCapra observes how in acting out, « the past is performatively regenerated or relived as if it were fully present rather than represented in memory and inscription, and it hauntingly returns as the repressed».[26] In contrast, «working through» implies one's ability «to distinguish between past and present and to recall in memory that something happened to one (or one's people) back then while realizing that one is living here and now with openings to the future».[27] Indigenous writings about IRSs do not attempt to remain in the closest proximity to trauma, indulging in an endlessly melancholic, impossible mourning, nor show a resistance to working through.

In contrast, their recovery of the past is a means to heal and understand the damages inflicted by colonialism. Indigenous communities do not present themselves as mere survivors of an apocalypse, but as «resugent».[28] Probably, this engagement with healing harbors an ambition that goes well beyond the expectations set by the notion of resilience. It demands a retrieval of the traditional ways. As Martin Brokenleg discussed,

[23] Holly A. McKenzie *et al.*, *Disrupting the Continuities among Residential Schools, the Sixties Scoop, and Child Welfare: An Analysis of Colonial and Neocolonial Discourses*, «International Indigenous Policy Journal», 7, 2, 2016, p.2.
[24] Patrick Johnston, *Native Children and the Child Welfare System*, Ottawa, Canadian Council on Social development, 1983.
[25] Dominick LaCapra. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 2001.
[26] Ivi, p. 70.
[27] Ivi, p. 22.
[28] Cf. Alfred Taiaiake and Jeff Corntassel, *Being Indigenous: Resurgences against Contemporary Colonialism*, «Government and Opposition», 40, 2005, pp. 597-614. Leanne Simpson, *Our Elder Brothers: The Lifeblood of Resurgence*, in Ead., *Lighting the Eighth fire: The Liberation, Resurgence, and Protection of Indigenous Nations*, Winnipeg, Arbeiter Ring Publishing, 2008, pp. 73-87.

> This may involve reclaiming our traditional ways, even if it [sic] simply knowing a few expressions in our Native language. In my Lakota tongue, the word for child is unlike the inferiority-nuanced English word. Instead, children are called *Wakan* which literally means sacred. Such is the culture that was stripped from us by colonization.[29]

Even though trauma has been traditionally described as a personal experience or wound owned by someone,[30] different scholars have pointed out how psychocentric approaches to trauma may not be the best methods to deal with the effects of IRSs.[31] These studies have discussed how sociocentric, ecocentric, and cosmocentric approaches might be more efficient. As a matter of fact, the intergenerational transmission of trauma can occur on at least two levels: interpersonal and societal. Hence, it might be useful to investigate the effects of IRS systems through the lenses of «historical trauma»[32] and «cultural trauma».[33] According to Evan-Campbell, historical trauma

> is conceptualized as a collective complex trauma inflicted on a group of people who share a specific group identity or affiliation—ethnicity, nationality, and religious affiliation. It is the legacy of numerous traumatic events a community experiences over generations and encompasses the psychological and social responses to such events.[34]

The scholar also maintains that the concept of historical trauma «has served as both a description of trauma responses among oppressed peoples and a causal explanation for them».[35] Historical trauma is collective because many members of a community read their experiences as acute losses; and events occurred at different times (and even across multiple generations) are interpreted as parts of a single traumatic trajectory.

Cultural trauma theorists push such arguments further, maintaining that

> cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identities in fundamental and irrevocable ways.[36]

[29] Martin Brokenleg. *Transforming Cultural Trauma into Resilience*, «Reclaiming Children and Youth», 21, 3, 2012, p. 12.
[30] Cf. Cathy Caruth, *Trauma. Explorations in Memory*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1995.
[31] Cf. DeGagné, *op. cit.* Rachel L. Burrage, Sandra L. Momper, and Joseph P. Gone, *Beyond trauma: Decolonizing Understandings of Loss and Healing in the Indian Residential School System of Canada*, «Journal of Social», 78, 1, 2022, pp. 27-52. A. Bombay *et al.*, *Suicidal Thoughts and Attempts in First Nations Communities: Links to Parental Indian Residential School Attendance across Development*, «Journal of Developmental Origins of Health and Disease», 10, 1, 2019, pp. 1-9. Marlene Brant Castellano, *Healing Residential School Trauma. The Case for Evidence-Based Policy and Community-Led Programs*, «Native Social Work Journal», 7, 2010, pp.11-31.
[32] Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, *The Return to the Sacred Path: Healing the Historical Trauma and Historical Unresolved Grief Response among the Lakota through a Psychoeducational Group Intervention*, «Smith College Studies in Social Work», 68, 3, 1998, pp. 287-305. Teresa Evans-Campbell, *Historical Trauma in American Indian/Native Alaska Communities: A Multilevel Framework for Exploring Impacts on Individuals, Families, and Communities*, «Journal of interpersonal violence», 23, 3, 2008, pp. 316-338.
[33] Cf. Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2012. Jeffrey C. Alexander *et al.*, *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, Berkley, University of California Press, 2004. Ron Eyerman, *Memory, Trauma and Identity*, Cham, Palgrave, 2019.
[34] Evans-Campbell, *op. cit.*, p. 320.
[35] *Ibid.*
[36] Alexander, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

Consequently, cultural trauma is embedded within society, and it interferes both with the formation of personal memory and with the long-term construction of the individual and collective identity. However, the features of trauma are not indissolubly entrenched to a traumatic event from the very beginning, but are rather assigned to it. After all, traumas are «made not born».[37] In fact, cultural trauma stems from a process of attribution of meaning and is interconnected with «the social processes that lead to its representation and acceptance».[38] Hence, cultural trauma bridges the gap between an event and its representation (a negotiable space for agency and intervention). Society is guided towards the interpretation, acceptance and construction of certain meanings and shared values by *carriers group*,[39] who re-actualize an event by making it enter the public sphere in the form of trauma through storytelling. They consciously or unconsciously contribute to the public attribution of meaning. They often do so by quoting from History (the traumatic event), while making sense of it through fiction. As Neil J. Smelser pointed out, cultural trauma is

> a memory accepted and publicly given credence by a relevant membership group and evoking an event or situation which is a) laden with negative affect, b) represented as indelible, and c) regarded as threatening a society's existence or violating one or more of its fundamental cultural presuppositions.[40]

Therefore, cultural trauma is the result of the work performed by social actors who struggle for the recognition of their sufferings; and in «their attempt to convey intended meanings, carrier groups seek to make an emotional and psychological connection with the wider group».[41] To achieve this aim, carrier groups often use different material resources, including several forms of mediation, such as newspapers, TV, documentaries, among many others.

Thus, from a cultural trauma perspective, the focus should not be placed on the empirical reality of the IRS system, but on the way in which it has been narratively represented as a tragedy. The representation of the IRS system as a traumatic experience started between the late 1960s and 1980s with the formation of pan-Canadian Indigenous movements, the formation of the National Indian Brotherhood, and the legal proceeding for sexual abuses (after former students spoke publicly about their experiences). The performative dimension of trauma occurs through the narration of a new version of history that comprises four main elements: the nature of suffering, the nature of the victim, the relationship between the victim of trauma and the audience, and the attribution of responsibility.[42] Yet, Brieg Capitaine warns that we should not embrace a macro-sociology to the detriment of

[37] Eyerman, *op. cit.*, p. 13.
[38] Ivi, p. 3.
[39] Carrier groups are extremely heterogeneous and they might include (even though not exclusively) politicians, activists, artists, researchers, journalists, and so on.
[40] Neil J. Smelser, *Psychological and Cultural Trauma*, in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, ed. by Jeffrey C. Alexander *et al.*, Berkley, University of California Press, 2004, p. 44.
[41] Eric Taylor Woods, *On the Making of a National Tragedy: The Transformation of the Meaning of the Indian Residential Schools*, in *Power through Testimony: Reframing Residential Schools in the Age of Reconciliation*, ed. by Brieg Capitaine and Karine Vanthuyne, Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 2017, p. 31.
[42] Alexander, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-19.

micro-sociology.[43] Indeed, the scholar argues, «Identification with trauma becomes possible when the narrative is situated midway between biography and history – when a collective belief system is expressed through the singularity of an individual's experience».[44] In particular, Native activists and writers actively produced «counter-memories»,[45] disturbing and challenging the selective process of remembering of official history.

From a narrative perspective, cultural trauma theory seems to place particular attention to an event, its depiction, the characterization, the attribution of meaning to the story, and the dynamics of audience response. After all, one of the tenets of narrative as rhetoric is that «*Narrative is somebody telling somebody else, on some occasion, and for some purposes, that something happened to someone or something*».[46]

Comics is just one of the multiple languages through which carrier groups can convey their stories, fostering a certain understanding of the past. As Harriet E. H. Earle discussed comics «uses its arsenal of formal representational techniques to produce affect in the reader, and in doing so, mimics (some part of) the feelings and experiences of trauma[47]». Comics is a particularly interesting medium because of its hybrid nature. For example, in her analysis of *In the Shadow of No Towers*,[48] Hirsch noticed how "Spiegelman's work is a mediation on such traumatic seeing – its wounding impact, its repetition, its resistance to narrative elaboration, its 'excessive expressivity'».[49] The visual language of comics provides the artist an opportunity to discuss the power of images while testing the limits of narrative and representation. Whereas words can narrate, describe and represent through plot progression, images work on a deeper/subliminal level,

> Although words can clearly serve sense memory, vision has a very different relationship to affective experience – especially to experience that cannot be spoken as it is felt. […]. images have the capacity to address the spectator's own bodily memory; to touch the viewer who feels rather than simply sees the event, drawn into the picture through a process of affect contagion[50]

Consequently, the hybrid nature of comics can create a cognitive engagement through the stimulation of the senses, which can be used to produce new knowledge and/or critical/political consciousness, allowing the transmission across society of empathy for the traumatic experience of others.

[43] 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. by Brieg Capitaine and Karine Vanthuyne, Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 2017, pp. 50-73.
[44] Capitaine, *op. cit*., p.53.
[45] George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1990.
[46] James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz, *Narrative as Rhetoric*. In *Narrative Theory: Core Concepts and Critical Debates*, ed. by David Herman *et al.*, Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 2012, p. 3.
[47] Harriet E. H. Earle, *Comics, Trauma, and the New Art of War*, Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2017, p. 43.
[48] Art Spiegelman, *In the Shadow of No Towers*, New York, Pantheon Books, 2004.
[49] Hirsch, *Visual Culture*, in *Teaching Narrative Theory*, ed. by David Herman, Brian McHale and James Phelan, New York, Modern Language Association, 2010, p. 218.
[50] Jill Bennet, *Empathic Vision. Affect Trauma, and Contemporary Art*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2005, pp. 35-36.

2. A haunting past: the transmission of trauma across generations

C. Richard King rightfully remarked how «alter/native comics» offer Indigenous creators the possibility to «reimagine themselves, defining themselves in their own terms, while determining acceptable modes of address and the means of circulation, they afford them important occasions to assert representational or visual sovereignty».[51] Therefore, Native artists embrace the potentials of alternative comics to challenge the mainstream representation of Indigeneity and Aboriginal history in North America. Independent publishers (like High Water Press and Arsenal Pulp) have encouraged the emergence of Indigenous counter-narratives. It is noteworthy, even though unsurprisingly, given what hitherto discussed, how many different artists have addressed the memory of the Indian Residential Schools. Thus, one might observe how a crisis that has harmed both the individual and the collectivity may become a pivotal event in the definition of a group's identity. Interestingly, Indigenous artists are not the only ones engaged in the retrieval of this traumatic memory. Acting as allies, comics creators Gord Downie and Jeff Lemire, and graphic journalist Joe Sacco retrieve in *Secret Path* and *Paying the Land*, respectively, IRS memories to indict the endurance of colonial practices in Canada.[52] Whereas these works are certainly a step forward towards the recognition of the suffering of Indigenous people, testifying a growing concern about the topic, it is important to point out how Gord Downie (a famous singer), Jeff Lemire (a renown graphic artist) and Joe Sacco (an acclaimed graphic journalist) all received more attention that any Indigenous creator writing on the same issues. As Sylvain Rheault highlighted, this unequal coverage «raises some uneasy questions».[53]

Many of these comics depict the stories of (real and fictive) IRS victims.[54] The authors (Indigenous and allies) visualize this traumatic experience through tangible symbols of pain: tears, haunting nightmares, physical separation from the community, somber dorms, coercive practices that aimed to destruct Indigenous culture, induced feelings of shame for being Indigenous, sadness, and episodes of harassment, brutal violence, and even sexual abuses. The narrative focus is set on the victims and their experiences. These stories are often centered on the experience of the main protagonist. However, these comics show how the individual is not the only one to be under attack, but also Indigenous languages, customs, mores, traditions, identity, family ties, and the community as a whole (with its relations to both the human and non-human world). Whereas the children felt those experiences as abuses, nuns and priests who run the schools intended those actions to be means to enforce civilization. Probably, one of the most (recurring) traumatic acts acted against Indigenous children upon their arrival was the cutting of their hair, a marker of Indigenous identity, «Sister Marie tried in that cold water, in that darkness, to get the 'dirt' off. She scrubbed violently and didn't stop until my skin was sore and red. Afterwards, they cut my beautiful long hair. Looking back, I don't know which hurt more».[55] Even though these comics show images of violence, they never illustrate gore, thus resisting a pornographic

[51] C. Richard King, *Alter/Native Heroes: Native Americans, Comic Books, and the Struggle for Self-Definition*, «Cultural Studies – Critical Methodologies», 9, 2, 2009, p. 222.
[52] Gord Downie and Jeff Lemire, *Secret Path*. Toronto, Simon and Schuster, 2016. Joe Sacco, *Paying the Land*, London, Jonathan Cape, 2020.
[53] Sylvain Rheault, *A Surge of Indigenous Graphic Novels*, «Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics», 11, 5-6, 2020, p. 515.
[54] David A. Robertson and Scott B. Henderson, *Sugar Falls: A Residential School Story*, Winnipeg, High Water Press. David A. Robertson and Scott B. Henderson, *7 Generations: A Plains Cree Saga*, Winnipeg, High Water Press, 2012. Jason EagleSpeaker, *UNeducation: A Residential School Graphic Novel*, vol. 1, Calgary, The Connection, 2014.
[55] Robertson and Henderson, *Sugar Falls*, cit., p.19.

depiction of the suffering of others, which might cause an empathic anesthesia in the observer/reader of the scene. In fact, the hunt for dramatic images is part of our Western culture(s) were «shock has become a leading stimulus of consumption and source of value».[56] The reticence to show images of violence also highlights the distance between the protagonists and the reader. The main character does not know what is going to happen and cannot even describe the full extent of those abuses, «You could kill yourself thinking about things like that. About things you would have changed if you only knew…».[57] In contrast, the reader is capable of interpreting and anticipating the predatory acts committed by the priests and the nuns thanks to the holistic, multidirectional and multilinear reading required by the comics.

Another common feature among these works is the use of color. Whereas outdoor spaces (often linked to Indigenous practices of cultural transmission) are colorful and bright, the colors representing residential schools, its staff, and violence are dark and somber. This chromatic depiction is set in stark contrast to the colonial idea of Native people as 'blank' individual to be civilized according to western and Christian values. Nature in its bright color serves a pedagogic function to Indigenous kids. They learn new things by staying out in the open. In contrast, the dark colors of the schools are a constant reminder of the cultural genocide occurring in these Institutions. This chromatic dichotomy can be observed, in particular, in *Sugar Falls: A residential School Story* and *Lost Innocence*.[58] Gord Downie and Jeff Lemire's *Secret Path* accentuates this use of color by using a blue palette to portray Chanie Wenjack's experience in the IRS and his fleeing the institution. Warm colors are used to portray his sweet memories and hallucinations about home before death. Since this comic does not feature any dialogue (just lyrics before any section), the drama is conveyed mainly through facial expression and the use of color. The absence of words emphasizes the feelings of loneliness, incommunicability (between Indigenous and settler society), but also testifies the authors' intention (as allies) to not voice over Indigenous experiences. The reader is simply invited to reconstruct the story through the ruptures created by the gutter and trauma. The authors do not provide any commentary; they just present a scene. Whereas, many of these stories use similar techniques to recollect IRS's violence, the outcome of each story is different: some of the kids survived, others commited suicide, and others died trying to escape. Some were victims of abuse, and others were not. Even though the endings differ, the condemnation of the IRS constitutes a common ground.

Even though IRS comics are generally centered around a main protagonist, the personal pronoun oscillates between the first person singular (I) and the first person plural (we), «My **unanswered** prayers were for home […] and we could pretend to be there. Sometimes, we pretended we could even touch the other side. But, though close… we were so far away».[59] This solution often testifies an inability to distinguish personal forms of trauma from the collective experience of the community. Hence, the protagonist performs the role of the exemplary victim, as his/her suffering can be extended to the whole group. Similarly, the perpetrator(s) are always identified as *they*. This choice infers that the guilt should not be attributed solely to individuals, but to colonial society at large as these events were not isolated episodes. Those abuses are part of the settler culture that does not recognize the value of Indigenous cultures and lives. *Betty: The Helen Betty Osborne Story* captures how this culture extends beyond the wall of IRS.[60] The comic details the final hours of her life,

[56] Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, London, Penguin, 2004, p. 20.
[57] Robertson and Henderson, *7 Generations: A Plains Cree Saga*, cit., p. 86.
[58] Brandon Mitchelland Tara Audibert, *Lost Innocence*, Courtenay, Healthy Aboriginal Network, 2013.
[59] Robertson and Henderson, *Sugar Falls*, cit., pp. 21-22, emphasis in original.
[60] Idd., *Betty: The Helen Betty Osborne Story*, Winnipeg: High Water Press, 2015.

following her before, during, and after her brutal beating and murder. While the comic gives the reader few information about her life before her murder, two pages of the book describes Betty's time in the Guy Hill Residential School before moving to the day of her murder. As James J Donahue observed,

> Robertson specifically set this moment in a residential school, thus alluding to the history of violence against Indigenous children perpetrated within the walls of such institutions. As such, Robertson is subtly suggesting that Betty's murder should be read as part of a larger history of institutional violence against Indigenous people, and especially Indigenous women.[61]

Hence, the scope of these comics is not limited to a recollection of past experiences aiming at creating a counter memory, but they also foster a new version of history by focusing on the nature of the suffering, the victims, the relation between the trauma and the audience, and demands for accountability. Interestingly, Sacco's *Paying the Land* is the only comic to address the trauma of the perpetrators, as one of his Indigenous informants recalls,

> It was a common practice in Québec for big families— typically the mom— to promise one of their sons to priesthood and one of the daughters to the convent. Many of the girls would have been 13, 14, or 15 years old, she tell us, and just coming into their own sexuality. I'm sure there were people who were forced into sexual denial, who were frustrated beyond all measure, and probably some of them had love interests which they were torn from.[62]

Hence, the comic discusses how the nuns were victimized and made victimizers in turn by the oppressive patriarchal/colonial system. Even though perpetrator trauma «must itself be acknowledged and in some sense worked through […] Such trauma does not, however, entail the equation or identification of the perpetrator and the victim».[63]

Moreover, Indigenous comics about IRSs also show how traumatic experiences suffered by the ancestors can be inherited by subsequent generations in forms that oscillates between postmemory and rememory, demonstrating how the past is inevitably linked to the present. *7 Generations* clearly illustrates this process. It narrates how different members of a community (across multiple generations) have experienced trauma, giving the impression of the existence of a single traumatic trajectory. The graphic novel tells the story of one family over the course of seven generations in order to address traditional ways of living, the effect of Smallpox on Indigenous people, the IRS system, the intergenerational effects of such system, mourning, personal healing, and intergenerational reconciliation.

The comic begins in the present with the attempted suicide of the male protagonist Edwin, a Cree teenager estranged from his father. While he is recovering, his mother narrates the stories of his ancestors, focusing on the paternal line. These stories creates visual and narrative parallelisms between past and present traumas. Each generation seems to suffer the loss or the estrangement from a loved one. At the same time, the comic depicts cultural engagement as a means to resist isolation. Kinship is vital against colonial traumas. Indeed, the story ends with Edwin learning about his father's (James) experience in the IRS, where he witnessed impotently the death of his little brother. James is haunted by survivor's guilt.

[61] James J. Donahue, *Graphic (Narrative) Presentations of Violence against Indigenous Women: Responses to the MMIW Crisis in North America*, in *The Routledge Companion to Gender and Sexuality in Comic Book Studies*, ed. by Frederick Luis Aldama, New York, Routledge, 2020, p. 123.
[62] Sacco, *op. cit.*, p. 143.
[63] LaCapra, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

He could not protect his brother Thomas from the sexual abuses perpetrated by the head priest and he was unable to save his sibling from his impending death. His feelings of guilt turn James into an alcoholic. Yet, the alcohol does not have the anesthetizing effects, he hoped. In contrast, James realizes how the abuse of alcohol may potentially make him perpetuate the same mistreatments he and his brother experienced. The posture he assumes, while attempting to punish his young son, echoes the one assumed by the high priest. This visual parallelism shows how the IRS system replaced positive parental role models with abusive conducts. These resonances (that occurs throughout the graphic novel) show how colonialism disrupted family ties and Indigenous cultural values. Yet, the graphic novel ends with a positive note, having James and Edwin reconcile and understand each other's suffering.

The return to Indigenous cultural practices (symbolized by a return to the woods) and the narration of past injustices serve as the bases for a healing model grounded in a clear acknowledgement of the impact of Canada's colonial history on Indigenous lives. Therefore, in this comic, the reader can discern how different generations have experienced different forms of trauma, while still acknowledging the affiliative connection that links each character. This intergenerational accumulation of trauma is powerfully depicted also by a bleed[64] in Patti LaBoucane-Benson and Kelly Mellings's *The Outside Circle. A Graphic Novel*.[65] When Pete is accepted into a gang, he is forced to make a tattoo as part of an initiation rite. The comic zooms on Pete's arms, which starts bleeding. The blood extends as different pathways down his arms. Each pathway is labeled with a different historical event, composing *de facto* a timeline narrating different forms colonial oppression. The implication is that contemporary poverty, abuse, and gang violence are the direct results of past colonial policies, which include 1850 Act for the Better Protection of the Lands and Property of Indians, 1857 Gradual Civilization Act, 1860 Indian Lands Act, 1867 Indian Act, 1869 Act for the Gradual Enfranchisement of Indians, Residential Schools, and 1960s Scoop.

Finally, another important aspect to consider while analyzing these cultural products is the intended audience of these texts. By placing close attention to the rhetoric used, one can infer two possible (and not mutually exclusive) implied readers: Indigenous people and settler society. As hitherto discussed, many of the graphic novels point out the possibility of healing through an acknowledgement of past and present sites of oppression, and a recuperation of traditional healing practices. This engagement with the past is clearly exemplified by Patti LaBoucane-Benson and Kelly Mellings's *The Outside Circle. A Graphic Novel,* which advertises the 'In Search of Your Warrior Program.' The comic addresses how colonial policies has caused a great deal of intergenerational pain among Aboriginal people and how the retrieval of traditional healing practices can help Indigenous communities to reconcile with the past and set change in motion. Many of the problems that Native people face today are rooted in historical traumas. Healing is a spiritual, physical, and emotional journey. It requires self-determination, reconciliation with the past, and the acknowledgment of one's interconnectedness with others. Of course, this interconnectedness entails both rights and obligations. Pete's story is a coming-of-age narrative where the protagonist atones/rehabilitates from his past crimes and starts a new life by assuming the role of protector (a traditional gendered duty attributed by Indigenous communities to young men).

[64] Bleeds are images that run outside the border of the panel and they are a powerful dramatic tool in comics. This technique removes the reader's ability to control the timescale of the narrative, which is usually regulated by the gutters and panel borders.

[65] Patti LaBoucane-Benson and Kelly Mellings, *The Outside Circle. A Graphic Novel*, Toronto, House of Anansi Press, 2015.

The performance of this function is essential for Pete (and his community of reference) as it allows the revival of those societal structures that colonialism tried to eradicate.

Because the voice of trauma emerges from the wounds of colonialism, Indigenous texts stress on the role of the victim as witness to address settler society and make it accountable for past and present injustices. Sometimes, this address is explicated within the text. For example, in *Sugar Falls*, a young (white) student named Daniel is assigned to find a survivor of the IRS system and listen to his/her story. Daniel seeks help from a classmate, April, whose Kokum (grandmother) is a survivor of the IRS system. Daniel and April are invited into Betty's (April's Kokum) round room where they hear her story «with all the sacred medicines and within the star blanket». Daniel's actions provide a contemporary frame for Betty's story, which takes up most of the narrative. The presence of a white Canadian can be interpreted as an attempt to 1) force settler society to listen to a neglected historical event; 2) make Canada accountable; 3) acknowledge the relations with settler society as part of the ties to be rebuilt. The need to involve settler society into the discussion is clearly explicated by Jason EagleSpeaker in *UNeducation: A Residential School graphic novel. Volume 1*, where he states,

> WHAT CAN YOU DO? BE AWARE and educate others. As an ndn [Native] person whose family still suffers from the impacts of residential school, all I ever ask is for people to BE AWARE. You owe it to yourself to have an informed perspective on history. BE AWARE of the resilience of Native people and our unrecognized ability to adapt. BE AWARE of what Native family's [sic] have gone through and empathize with our situation. BE AWARE of our desire to heal and move forward. BE AWARE that although we are strong, we can't do this alone – we need you. What you choose to do with your new found awareness is up to you[66].

In addition to the sequential art parts, *UNeducation* features many clips from different newspapers, clearly indicating to the reader that the horrors of the residential schools system were not a secret. This information was available for the general public to read. Documents are used to authenticate facts about the past. Photographs of survivors and newspaper articles function as indexical elements testifying that something has happened. This collection of clips constitutes a body of proof against which EagleSpeaker constructs his argument.

The comic also indirectly addresses the importance that Indigenous movements had in the creation of momentum, galvanizing public attention on the topic, generating empathy, and acting for change. The comic does not only remediate old articles, but it also appropriates their font to create new (mock) ones. Through this creative solution, EagleSpeaker expands our knowledge on the IRSs, giving voice to Indigenous people and showing how the IRS system still effects Indigenous lives. The second part of the book features a series of strips, which function as a counter-argument to colonial prejudice, claims, sugarcoating of the impact of colonialism on Indigenous life, and even forms of historical revisionism. Usually, each section is introduced by a quote from documents or speeches delivered by past Canadian authorities. For example, the first section begins with a quote from Prime Minister Stephen Harper, who at the G20 Summit press conference stated that Canada had «no history of colonialism». The comic counters such claims by showing the brutality of the IRSs. Interestingly, there are two version of *UNeducation.* One is labeled 'PG' and the other 'Uncut'. The only difference between these two versions is that latter features panels addressing sexual abuses. Finally, it might be important to point out how the title *UNeducation* does not only

[66] EagleSpeaker, *op. cit.* p. 14

eloquently address cultural genocide and violence (imposed on Indigenous people by the IRS system), but it also discusses settler society's need to unlearn previously held assumption about Native people and correct its vision of history by including voices from the margins.

3. Futurity and trauma: what does the future hold for Indigenous people?

Storytelling offers an opportunity to create change. By reclaiming the past, the community is able to heal. Through storytelling, the community is capable of recuperating missing pieces of culture and histories that had long gone lost from the repertoire of Indigenous stories. As hitherto discussed, Indigenous comics interrogate past and present injustices. Yet, it is often impossible to distinguish the two experiences because of the intrinsic nature of trauma, and its intergenerational forms of transmission. By giving space to personal experiences, comics visualize how trauma can generate alternative temporalities, connecting past and present, thus rejecting the assumption that we all experience time in same way. Indeed, comics can represent «experiences of time outside the dominant 'proper' time of global capitalism and its networks».[67] By reconnecting past and present, these graphic novels do not only comment on how trauma can be passed across generations in the form of postmemory, rememory, or intersections of these two modes, but they also show how current generations are survivors in their own right.

Indeed, it worth remarking how this traumatic experience also effects speculative fiction set in the future, that is Indigenous futurist texts. As Daniel Heath Justice argued,

> In its most transformative modes, speculative fiction offers a complementary and distinctive range of reading and interpretative strategies that can undo the violence of the deficit models of 'the real' and offer transformative visions of their lives, experiences, and histories. Fantasy, science fiction, horror merit consideration as serious literature with ethical import, deserving of critical and pedagogical regard. It's time for a reappraisal of the relationship between the realism and the fantastic, especially when considering the work that marginalized writers are doing to challenge oppressive lived realities through the international employment of the fantastic to imagine otherwise.[68]

Hence, the endurance of Residential School references in futuristic scenarios does not only testify that, as Alexander observed, «events are not inherently traumatic. Trauma is a socially mediated attribution»,[69] but it also shows the persistence of colonial practices, the ambiguity of the notion of reconciliation (as it paves the way to new forms of cultural assimilation), as well as the ability of Indigenous population to survive.

The ability to survive harsh situations and fight back exploitative and colonial practices is at the center of *Dakwäkãda Warriors*,[70] a futuristic comic created by the Tahltan comic artist Cole Pauls. In this comic, two Earth Protectors (two Natives wearing wolf and crow inspired suits)[71] are charged with saving the planet from evil pioneers and cyborg sasquatches. The comic serves as a blatant allegory for colonialism. The first issue features a bunch of actions, whereas the second one focuses on the villains' characterization, and the

[67] Jared Gardner, *Time under Siege*. In *The Comics of Joe Sacco: Journalism in a Visual World*, ed. by Worden Daniel, Jackson, University of Mississippi, 2015, p. 36.
[68] Daniel Heath Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, Waterloo, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 20018, pp. 142-143.
[69] Alexander, *op. cit.*, p. 13.
[70] Cole Pauls, *Dakwäkãda Warriors*, Gauvin, Condrum Press, 2019.
[71] The Southern Tutchone clans, the wolf and the crow, inspire these suits.

third issue focuses on the heroes themselves. The second issue is particularly interesting as it presents the backstory of Cyber Nàa'į, who was once stolen and assimilated into becoming a villain. Of course, this episode is a flagrant reference to the way in which IRSs attempted to eliminate Indigenous culture through coercive forms of assimilation. Yet, this comic does not present indigenous people as mere victims, but warriors who have already survived the apocalypse. The recuperation of the past should not be interpreted as a symptom of what LaCapra termed traumatropism,[72] which is the repetition of trauma, not as an experience to be worked through, but as a bond linking the traumatized individual to the haunting presence of dead intimates. In contrast, here, the past informs present forms of resistance, providing insights on colonialism and ways of fighting back. It is not a chance that the founder of the Dakwäkãda Warriors is Annie Ned, an elder who strives to maintain her culture intact from the attack of colonialism, preserving the language and various cultural practices. It might important to point out that the term *Dakwäkãda* refers to a traditional dance. The comic itself is a project of linguistic revival that blends English and Southern Tutchone. Similarly, it visually mixes the Western comic tradition with Indigenous aesthetics (e.g. the *horror vacui*). Therefore, what awaits in the future of Indigenous people is the resurgence of a community.

[72] LaCapra, *op. cit.*, p. xv.