

Weaving Words and Images: Multimodal Discourse in Indigenous Graphic Novels

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Abstract

This paper explores how Indigenous graphic novels use multimodal discourse to tell stories that are visually, linguistically, and culturally layered. Through the combination of text, image, colour, and layout, these works present complex histories and identities in accessible and emotionally resonant ways. They challenge colonial narratives by reclaiming Indigenous voices and aesthetics within the framework of contemporary visual storytelling. The discussion highlights how creators employ multimodality not only as a form of artistic expression but also as a tool for decolonization, healing, and education. By examining themes such as residential school trauma, missing and murdered Indigenous women, and cultural sovereignty, the paper shows how Indigenous artists rebuild and reaffirm traditions while engaging with global audiences. The multimodal structure of these narratives becomes a space of resistance, creativity, and self-determination where Indigenous heritage, memory, and innovation converge to shape new forms of storytelling that are historically grounded and future-oriented.

Keywords: Indigenous graphic novels, multimodal discourse, decolonization, cultural sovereignty

Introduction

Multimodal discourse usually involves making meaning through several semiotic modes, such as visual elements, which might include image, layout, and colour. It can also include linguistic elements like text and dialogue. This paper will

analyse how Indigenous graphic novels utilize multimodal discourse. Graphic novels are a relatively young medium that combines text and illustration and it is a prime example of multimodal discourse.

Multimodal medium certainly offers a powerful understanding that not only helps reinforce complex ideas quickly, but also serves as an important tool for accessibility. It makes weighty subjects digestible for readers because of the visual elements. Many readers might struggle with long prose, but with text and graphics, it is easier to understand the story. Indigenous comics and graphic novels are crucial sites of self-determination. What has existed in the mainstream, and what graphic novels have been doing all this time, was to show mainstream ideas, while unseen ideas and marginalized people and their voices were curtailed. They were not given this place. The cultural control was with the majority. However, Indigenous creators can use this platform where Native people can speak for themselves and control the narrative and their own images.

The multimodal nature of Indigenous graphic novels is interestingly leveraged by many creators in North America, for example, Māori and others elsewhere, to critique settler colonialism. It explores intergenerational trauma and revitalizes traditional storytelling through innovative aesthetic choices.

Indigenous comics mobilize the multimodality of the form—its braiding of image, text, and visual design—to enact critique of settler colonialism while renewing tribal storyways. Through graphic strategies that render memory, ceremony, and kinship across generations, these works visualize intergenerational trauma and foreground cultural resurgence rather than loss (Vizenor and Justice 14).

Similarly, an exploration of formal mechanics of multimodality, followed by the resulting decolonial narrative and discourse, and finally the specific ways in which cultural identity informs aesthetic and production practices are examined. All these ideas are explored in this paper.

The Multimodal Mechanics of Indigenous Storytelling

The first important idea is the multimodal mechanics of Indigenous storytelling. It is the interplay of modes, that is, there is the text and there is also the image. Graphic novels fundamentally break traditional conventions because book text is limited in its ability to offer images, and there is very little room for paintings. By combining text with illustrations, the art form allows readers to experience the work as a whole.

Comics' interdependence of word and image makes them a powerful medium for Indigenous storytellers, whose traditions are often multimodal, involving song, performance, visual art, and narrative. The graphic novel thus disrupts print's privileging of linear, alphabetic text by insisting on a holistic reading in which images and words co-construct meaning (Smith 42).

This holistic reading gives multimodality work as a reinforcement. The use of multiple semiotic modes, such as images and emotions conveyed through colour, ensures that meaning is made not just through language but through the whole ensemble. This idea allows complex or painful historical events to be observed and reinforced. By doing so, the text and imagery create a different sensory pathway. There are, of course, historical Indigenous roots in sequential art. Indigenous sequential art is not new. In fact, people like James Sinclair argue that sequential art first developed in North America at least 50,000 years ago in the form of pictographic writing, used by Indigenous people on rock faces or carved into birch bark. Another important aspect is that the multimodal framework acts as a genre.

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Decolonial Discourse, Resistance, and the Politics of Representation

A central theme across many Indigenous graphic novels is the commitment to portray decolonization. This is shown through powerful storytelling that depicts the historical and various mechanisms of settler colonialism in North America. One of the most important aspects is addressing residential school trauma. In fact, the graphic novel format is used effectively to explore the trauma of the school system in Canada. Examples include David A. Robertson's *Seven Generations*, which follows a family through three centuries of colonization and trauma. It also includes *Sugar Falls*, which is based on the true story of a survivor enduring abuse. Houde observes that:

Indigenous comics and graphic novels have become a crucial site for representing decolonization, particularly through testimonies of residential school survivance. The interplay of image and text enables creators to visualize intergenerational trauma and colonial mechanisms with a specificity that prose alone often cannot, as works like Robertson's *Seven Generations* and *Sugar Falls* demonstrate (112).

Works articulate specific political and historical discourses. They present and transform topics such as the Spanish conquest and the Oka Crisis, emphasizing the strength of Indigenous resistance. For instance, *500 Years of Indigenous Resistance* was ground-breaking when it was first published.

Multimodal texts are used to shed light on difficult, often ignored contemporary issues. They address the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women. *If I Go Missing* combines fiction and nonfiction and was inspired by a real letter that urges people not to treat the author as an Indigenous person in case she is reported missing. Another important work is *Betty: The Helen Betty Osborne Story*, which depicts the abduction and murder of Indigenous women. All these works reflect the ongoing crisis of missing and murdered women in Canada. Graphic novels like *Borders* by Thomas King explore a foundational question of nationhood and Indigeneity through a mother and son stuck in limbo between the Canadian and American borders because they answer “Blackfoot” when asked their nationality. This is represented through the spatial layout of the comic medium, which visualizes a political and cultural limbo.

Stories often confront difficult subjects such as gangs, drugs, and trauma, while simultaneously focusing on reconciliation and traditional healing. For example, *The Outside Circle* follows a young Indigenous man’s journey toward rehabilitation and traditional healing after incarceration.

Cultural Sovereignty and the Aesthetics of Protection

All Indigenous artists focus on the importance of Native stories told by Native voices, as the production process allows creators to ensure culturally appropriate and accurate themes. The ultimate goal is often to provide inspirational blueprints for a glimpse of the future they want to see. There is also a blending of traditional and modern aesthetics. Creators utilize multimodal resources to synthesize cultural heritage with contemporary artistic styles. For example, works such as *Haida Manga* by Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas merge Japanese illustration techniques with Haida oral tradition. There is also the formline style, as Jeffrey Veregge showcases classic superheroes reimagined in his unique Northwest Coast formline style, reflecting his Native background in both artwork and writing. Many graphic novels, such as *The Son-Tamer*, are designed for children, created with guidance from Mana Venua, further emphasizing culture and identity.

Collections like *Moonshot: The Indigenous Comics Collection* showcase the variety and richness of Indigenous storytelling. They not only present traditional tales but also explore speculative futures. For example, *Trickster: Native American Tales*

adapts over twenty Native American stories and emphasizes collaboration between Indigenous storytellers and illustrators. Indigenous artists are challenging industry norms by embracing distinctive and evocative styles. Some major creators, such as Kyle Charles, use heavy linework and shadow to explore horror and LGBTQ+ themes. Writers such as Weshoyot Alvitre incorporate pen-and-ink techniques, while Sean Beaulieu focuses on strong female characters that reflect contemporary Indigenous culture.

It is clear that artists are actively creating stories that move beyond being solely focused on oppression or struggle. They seek to showcase new kinds of narratives. Their works feature genre-blending stories, a slice-of-life and queer Indigenous romance, thereby expanding what is considered Indigenous storytelling.

Conclusion

Indigenous graphic novels demonstrate that the convergence of multiple modes: visual, verbal, and stylistic. It is a controlled format that provides a uniquely powerful and transformative tool. This multimodal approach helps educate readers about historical truths by integrating emotional content with factual information. In fact, these works affirm cultural resilience because they are more than accounts of trauma; they are a means to express resilience, heritage, and hope. Indigenous artists not only participate in creating these texts but also shape them. They are rebuilding what was lost and reviving traditions in contemporary, globally accessible formats. The growing legitimacy of the graphic novel genre in literature and academia, as seen through university collections and publications, shows that this field is crucial. Social and cultural landscapes emphasize the need for sustained, Indigenous-led storytelling. Analog to solidifying understanding, this shows that multimodal discourse in Indigenous graphic novels is like studying a tapestry. One cannot understand it by looking at a single thread—the text—or the patterned images individually, but rather by observing how the color, texture, and weave, the modes of production and design, come together. It becomes clear that their convergence helps create a story that is historically grounded and artistically complex, uniquely reflecting each creator's intent and cultural sovereignty.

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