

**Visualizing Resistance: Decolonial Theory and the Assertion of
Sovereignty in Indigenous Graphic Narratives**

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Abstract

This paper studies Indigenous graphic novels. It looks at how they are powerful tools for resisting colonialism and reclaiming independence. Indigenous creators use these comics to fight back against the lasting, harmful effects of colonization. These effects include unfair power dynamics, racism, and false stories. For a long time, colonial stories have tried to erase Indigenous histories. They often painted Native people as disappearing, uncivilized, or just victims. This study shows how Indigenous artists are using comics to take back control of their own stories (a concept called "visual sovereignty"). These graphic novels also teach people the truth. They help restore community memory and voices.

The paper looks at three main strategies. First, it explores "decolonial aesthetics." This is how Indigenous artists reject Western art standards that have often ignored or dismissed their work. Second, the study examines creative changes to the comic book format. Some artists, like Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas in his "Haida Manga," reject straightforward timelines. They also cleverly use the blank spaces between panels. This challenges the old colonial idea of "empty land" (*terra nullius*).

Finally, the paper discusses "survivance" a concept that combines survival and resistance. By looking at books like *Ghost River* and *Surviving the City*, it shows how these stories focus on Indigenous points of view. They correct false histories and redefine Indigenous identity. This important work is about healing, keeping culture alive, and building a future free from colonial control.

Keywords: Decolonial Theory, Indigenous Graphic Novels, Visual Sovereignty, Settler Colonialism, Survivance,

Introduction

The study of art, and particularly of text-based art, shows a kind of striking global commonality. Despite its profound and myriad differences in philosophical, religious, and socio-political systems across the world, text-based art is a form that is not only evident but shared by everyone on the planet. It connects the same philosophical, artistic, and concrete regions. Contemporary indigenous graphic narratives show and deploy a global medium to engage in a global structure of coloniality. *Coloniality* refers to the persistent power relations that were installed globally since the sixteenth century. It operates through the capitalistic economic system and European modernity, and it demonstrates an encompassing radicalization.

This paper focuses on how Indigenous artists not only utilize this multimodal framework within the graphic novel but also assert a visual and narrative sovereignty. These novels respond specifically to historical and ongoing systems of oppression in which Indigenous culture and identity have been historically established as social categories of marginalization, particularly within the broader processes of nation-building around the world.

It must be noted that, for centuries, colonial narratives have systematically attempted to overwrite many Indigenous histories. They frame Native people as vanishing, portraying them as savage or victimized. This is a tactic intended to validate both cultural and physical violence, and it has been used to erase Indigenous stories. These narratives contribute to a collective colonial racial memory one that favours a single story of catastrophe and deficiency.

In response to this systematic erasure, Indigenous creators deploy graphic narratives as a visual and verbal form of text-based art. They use this form both as a vehicle to educate others and as a means to restore voice and memory. Vizner observes that “Indigenous comics function as visual sovereignty, using the interplay of word and image to assert presence against colonial erasure; as pedagogical texts,

they educate broad audiences while reinscribing community memory and survivance” (1).¹

It is important to notice the engagement with visual culture, as it brings out the scholarly fields that have recently undergone a pictorial and multimodal turn. In fact, this shift recognizes the limitations of centralizing language alone in the conceptualization of culture and instead seeks new understandings of colonial social relationships.

It is clear that Indigenous storytelling is inherently powerful and deeply complex, combining the power of language with the visual aesthetic to convey spiritual and symbolic messages. It weaves text and image together. Indigenous graphic novels not only provide critical insights but also reclaim narrative space by exposing the contradictions of coloniality through resistance, survival, and healing.

Decolonial Aesthetics and the Rejection of Coloniality

The first aspect to be considered is *decolonial aesthetics* and the rejection of colonial taste. Decolonial aesthetics and theory provide a critical framework for understanding how Indigenous graphic novels function, most notably, as acts of resistance. Decolonial aesthetics, in a way, challenge the hegemony of Western aesthetic categories. They question categories such as beauty and representation, which not only organise ideas and perceptions of power and identity but also aim to expose the contradictions of coloniality. For many years the Western standard has been used to marginalise these indigenous works.

The goal, however, is not merely to discuss beauty but to evoke emotions such as sadness, indignation, repentance, hope, and determination but to inspire change in the future. This approach finds critical support from Indigenous scholars like pre-artist Karen Brickolitte, who views text-based art, including graphic narratives, as an aesthetic vehicle for resistance. Similarly, Māori scholar Linda Smith examines how Western research practices have historically impeded social justice during colonization. Decolonial theory, often linked to the modernity/coloniality group, focuses on the persistent effects of power relationships. were installed globally since the sixteenth century. It defines *coloniality* as power itself. This stands in contrast to postcolonialism. In fact, while postcolonial thought emerges from the

cultural perspectives of English and French colonial histories some three hundred years later, Indigenous graphic narrators intervene directly in this coloniality of power.

Decolonial aesthetics asks why Western aesthetic categories like 'beauty' or 'representation' have come to dominate all discussion of art and its value, and how those categories organise the way we think of ourselves and others: as white or black, high or low, strong or weak, good or evil. Decolonial art, literature, architecture and other arts enact these critiques [...] to expose the contradictions of coloniality (Mignolo, Vázquez, et al.)

Similarly, for Indigenous peoples across the globe, artistic histories are deeply rooted in the primacy of language. Contemporary Indigenous texts incorporate both text and symbol to challenge false colonial narratives. In doing so, they revitalize and reclaim marginalized cultures and knowledge systems. Indigenous storytelling is crucial for survival and functions as a powerful strategy of resistance against settler-colonial rhetoric.

Formal Innovation: Visualizing Non-Settler Time and Space

The second important aspect is *formal innovation*: visualizing non-settler time and space. Indigenous graphic artists employ formal and structural innovations unique to the medium to actively resist the linear universalization of settler time. The concept of *Terra Nullius* illustrates how settler societies often portray Indigenous people as backward or disappearing. In contrast, Indigenous creators utilize graphic narratives to construct temporality as a multifaceted and shifting set of relations.

One of the prominent examples is Haida artist Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas, who developed the Haida genre of *Haida Manga*. This form not only undermines the conventions of the traditional comic print but also rejects the Western notion of the *gatha*. This rejection is explicitly political. The white space between panels is likened to *terra nullius* "beloved by colonizers because empty land meant "my land."

The artist's act of filling this space challenges the colonial premise of emptiness and availability. The Haida frame lines, which divide pages into panels while simultaneously forming a total tableau when rearranged, create multiple reading paths that exceed linearity. The Haida Manga style avoids essentializing nativist discourse by being intrinsically hybrid. It asserts the artist's hereditary right to engage with Haida's many cultural heritage forms.

By mobilizing Haida design within the sequential logics of manga, Yahgulanaas refuses the settler fantasy of an 'empty' Northwest Coast and reclaims the page as Indigenous space; the sinuous frame lines that coalesce into a larger image produce non-linear reading paths, while the work's hybrid form enacts cultural continuity without reducing Haida identity to an essentialized past (McKegney 98).

Similarly, Gordon Hill's *The 500 Years of Indigenous Resistance* presents a narrative structure that argues against Western Darwinism. The cosmic use of temporal and spatial ellipses creates a presentational sequence organised around thematic chapters such as "Invasion," "Resistance," "Assimilation," and "Revolt." The revised version of this work intensifies its Indigenous historical focus by emphasizing these ellipses, arguing that colonialism remains an ongoing process.

This technique allows Indigenous creators to recover a neglected past and to educate audiences about the present. It also facilitates the transmission of traditional stories across generations, reinforcing cultural memory and continuity.

Survivance, Reclamation, and the Decolonization of Identity

The final aspect is *survivance*, reclamation, and the decolonization of identity. Indigenous graphic narratives are powerful in restructuring and reclaiming Indigenous identities. They directly oppose colonial framings of Native people. This process is best understood through the concept of *survivance*, which involves actively preserving and expressing Indigenous identity while resisting narratives of subjugation and inertia.

For instance, the graphic novel *Ghost River* by Lee Francis reclaims the historical narrative of the 1793 Conestoga massacre by centering Indigenous perspectives and agency. Francis begins the narrative with a creation story drawn from oral tradition. This is an assertive invocation of Native presence and a clear act of resistance against colonial frameworks that attempt to define Indigenous history. In challenging the single colonial story, the work asserts that survival itself is an ongoing act of reclaiming space, history, and identity.

Ghost River offers a corrective to settler historiography by centering Conestoga perspectives and ceremonial knowledge; its opening

creation narrative asserts Indigenous presence and frames the massacre not as an origin of disappearance but as a site of survivance, where storytelling becomes an act of reclaiming land, history, and identity from the singularity of colonial memory (Estes 54).

In contemporary young-adult graphic novels as well, Indigenous creators continue to challenge the single story. Series such as Tasha Spillett's *Surviving the City* and Katherena Vermette's *A Girl Called Echo* illustrate how Indigenous girlhood is rooted in Indigenous time scopes rather than colonial ones. These works represent Indigenous youth as active knowledge-producers whose awareness of ancestral spirits reshapes history.

This visualization of cultural continuity and presence helps correct the falsities upheld by colonial racial memory. Through these counter-narratives, Indigenous creators not only expose historical violence but also reframe Native identity in relation to healing, survival, and sovereignty. Indigenous storytelling is not merely a response to violence; it is a method that actively resists its ideological and rhetorical foundations.

Indigenous graphic novels operate as crucial sites of decolonial struggle. They synthesize ancient traditions of storytelling with contemporary artistic practices. Through these works, the enduring structures of coloniality are also dismantled. By adopting decolonial aesthetic principles, various Indigenous artists reject the universalization of Western methods in favour of locally and culturally specific understandings of power, thought, and depiction.

The formal strategies employed, such as Yahgulanaas's rejection of the blank gutter as *terra nullius* and Hill's nonlinear construction of resistance history through visual media all serve to assert cultural continuity and survivance.

Conclusion

These graphic narratives are essential tools for visualizing Indigenous self-determination and reshaping narrative traditions. Certainly, this is a medium that translates readily across cultures. Through its visual-verbal condonement, the Indigenous graphic novel serves as both an accessible and potent intervention into collective colonial re-memory. It provides pathways toward healing and a determined vision for a decolonized future.

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