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Documenting De-colonial Practices through Comics: Joe Sacco's *Paying the Land*

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Abstract Being a "cool medium" (McLuhan 1964) comics provide less sensory information and therefore demands more involvement and/or 'completion' by the reader/viewer. They ask for slowness, as the viewer has to recompose, understand, and question the existing relation between words and pictures. This mode of fruition contrasts with the rapid way we generally consume news (even though they might use a similar visual-verbal syntax). Their slowness help comics visualize the stories of those who have been ignored/neglected by the international arena and makes the reader witness human rights violation and abuses (Chute 2016). This paper aims to discuss how Joe Sacco's *Paying the Land* (2020) (re)narrates the past and present relationship between Aboriginal people and (all) Canadians. This comics testifies to the existence of allied depictions (as Joe Sacco is not of Aboriginal descent and does not appropriate Indigenous stories) that aim to break (even controversially) the silence about past and present sufferings of the Dene peoples in Canada, but also shows forms of Indigenous activism and healing practices that aim to re-construct community ties.

Keywords Joe Sacco; documentary comics; Dene people; Canada; colonialism.

1. Documenting injustices through comics

By connecting comics to the broader social contexts in which they originate, circulate, and are consumed, scholars have shown how this hybrid medium can effectively tackle contemporary issues and historical events, challenging, contesting and subverting conventional and mainstream narratives (Witek 1989; Chute 2016; McKinney 2016; Mickwitz 2016; Cutter & Schlund-Vials 2018, among many others). As Nick Sousanis demonstrated in *Unflattening* (2015), comics invites us to consider things from a single perspective and instead draw on multiple ways of seeing to expand our understanding. Hence, this medium can be used to meta-narratively ask the reader to question historical sources and generally held assumptions, and to adopt a collaborative and active role in the historical reconstruction/investigation process.

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Being a "cool medium" (McLuhan 1964) comic provides less sensory information and therefore demands more involvement and/or 'completion' by the reader/viewer. Comics can distract/entertain us with their stories, but also teach us important lessons about the mechanisms of our environment (which comics reflects, but also actively contribute to shape), and its own functioning (due to their self-reflexive nature which constantly interrogates the consumer about the difference between looking and reading). This process can be exemplified by the presence of a 'manipulated point of view,' the 'gutter' and the inherent 'closure,' among many other techniques and 'grammatical features[1]'. The importance of these elements has been thoroughly discussed by Will Eisner (1985) and Scott McCloud (1993) pioneering works on the grammar of comics. For example, Eisner observed how the manipulation of the point of view allows artists "to clarify activities, orient the reader and stimulate emotion" (88). Similarly, McCloud conceived the gutter as a (blank) space where the reader imagines the connections (closures) among panels, "transform[ing] them into a single idea" (66). Yet, the narrative possibilities of the medium are not limited to linear relations, 'gaps to be filled', and the manipulation/use of different points of view. As Nick Sousanis observed, among others[2], comics can be conceived as,

> A connected space, not reliant on a chain-like sequence linearly proceeding from point to point… rather associations that stretch web-like across the page braiding fragments into a cohesive whole. Each element is thus: one with everything. This spatial interplay of sequential and simultaneous - imbues comics with a dual nature- both tree like, hierarchical and rhizomatic, interwoven in a single form. (Sousanis 2015: 62)

[1] The relationship between language and comics has been discussed, among others, by Miodrag (2013), who reconceives signifiers in comics through the structural linguistic concepts of *langue* and *parole*. Yet, Cohn (2014) has delineated the limits of structuralist approaches to describe comics, favoring one based on cognitive linguistics. Building on contemporary theories from linguistics and cognitive psychology, Neil Cohn (2013) argues that comics are written in a visual language of sequential images that combines with text. Like spoken and signed language, visual narratives use a lexicon of systematic patterns stored in memory. The scholar maintains that a hierarchic grammar governs the combination of sequential images into coherent expressions.

[2] Similarly, Hatfield (2005), Groensteen (1999; 2011) and Miodrag (2013) adopt a holistic approach, arguing that meaning is not generated exclusively from sequentiality. They observe that comics generates both linear and tabular relations. As Hatfield (2005: 58) pointed out, "we can see that the image-series alone does not determine timing in comics, for it is possible to have to have a series of panels in which no time seems to pass, as well as a single panel in moments, hours, even days, are compressed."

Given the above, the reader acquires an active role in the construction of meaning through "inferences[3]" (Cohn 2013; 2019). As Charles Hatfield (2005, xiv) observed, "the reader's responsibility for negotiating meaning can never be forgotten, for the breakdown of comics into discrete visual quanta continually foregrounds the reader's involvement. The very discontinuity of the page urges the reader to do the work of inference".

Thus, comics ask for slowness, as the viewer has to recompose, understand, and question the existing relation between words and pictures. This mode of fruition contrasts with the rapid way in which we generally consume news (even though they might use a similar visual-verbal syntax). News is generally valued for their capacity to document events and stories in real time, a process facilitated by contemporary recording and relay instruments[4]. Traditional journalists are concerned to convey "hot" news to the audience, and this often favors breadth to the detriment of depth and accurate research (often depending on institutional and authoritative sources, which can lead to sidelining dissenting or marginal voices). Mainstream media treats news as a commodity (using sensationalist tones[5]). In *Safe Area Gorazde: The War in Eastern Bosnia 1992-1995*, Joe Sacco (one of the most prominent contemporary comics journalists[6]) overtly criticizes fast-paced reportage and the short amount

[3] It is worth pointing out that this notion complicates McCloud's view on meaning creation in comics, going beyond the notion of sequentiality. According to Neil Cohn (2010: 135), McCloud's ideas should be implemented if not revised, "If closure occurs 'in the gaps between the panels' then how does it work if a reader cannot make such a connection until the second panel is reached? That is, the gap cannot be filled unless it has already been passed over, making closure an additive inference that occur at panels, not between them." It might also be worth highlighting the different methodological approach of McCloud and Cohn. Whereas the latter is a cognitivist/linguist, the former is a practitioner/artist. McCloud is more concerned about the technical/practical aspects of the creation of comics rather than theorization of meaning production in graphic narratives. For a further discussion on different approaches to comics, see Hescher (2016) and Smith & Duncan (2012), among others.

[4] In this regard, Joe Sacco's *Palestine* came out at a time when twenty-four-hours cables news station and the Internet created the illusion of synchronized time and collapsed distances.

[5] Yet it is worth mentioning that a comic strip character —Outcault's Yellow Kid— provided a term to describe early 20th century sensationalist reportage, the so called 'yellow journalism.' For an in-depth discussion of the character and early 19th century journalism, see Meyer (2019).

[6] Amy Kiste Nyberg (2012) defined the characteristics of the genre 'comics journalism' by analyzing in details Sacco's techniques. The contribution of Sacco to the genre is so important that, upon the release of *Footnotes in Gaza*, Gary Groth (2011) defined Sacco as "virtually a one-man comics genre: the cartoonist-journalist" despite acknowledging

of time dedicated by media to the coverage of the suffering of others (which often betrays a mixture of indifference and/or voyeurism), "Gorazde! Which was getting CNNed! NPRed! BBCed! But its proverbial 15 minutes were ticking away! Pretty soon no one was gonna remember Gorazde!" (Sacco 2000: 6). In contrast, comics are 'uneconomical' time-wise. Comics journalism involves travels, interviews, photos and recordings, transcriptions of the dialogues, storyboard creation and the drawing of each panel. Hence, comics journalism is always 'late,' as it "brings old news into focus" (Gardner 2015: 27).

In view of this, comics journalism is not meant to report hot news, but scrupulously investigate those marginal/personal stories that mainstream media do not relay. For example, Sacco's comics journalism blends the reporter's personal experience, testimonies, historical research, and geographical maps of the area. The latter helps readers situate the events, but also see how boundaries and borders are not discrete. The mixture of difference sources aims to show how polarized mainstream narratives may not render the full picture (exposing contradictions and omissions), often to the detriment of the victims, whose stories are inevitably sidelined. As Joe Sacco (2003 [1996]: 102) states in *Palestine*, "make no mistake, everywhere you go, not just in Marvel Comics, there's parallel universes." Hence, comics' slowness helps the medium visualize and focus on the stories of those who have been ignored and neglected by the international arena and make the reader witness human rights violation and abuses through secondary witnessing (Chute 2016).

This slowness is also imposed by the hybrid nature of the medium, which demands a new type of visual-verbal literacy that Marianne Hirsch (2010) defined as "biocular". The scholar has noticed how the hybridity of the medium can create narrative but also impede it[7]. Similarly, in his preface to Joe Sacco's *Palestine* (2003 [1996]), Edward Said praised the author's use of "unhurried

preexisting works by other artists. The relation between news and illustrations can be traced back to the Romans. However, reportage in the form of comics is a much more recent phenomenon. In the 1970s and 1980s Leonard Rifas, Dan O'Neil, and Joyce Brabner (among others) produced comics involving investigation. Yet, these comics are still linked to the tradition of political cartoon. In 1990s Carol Lay, Kim Deitch, and Robert Grossman would document the life in New York City. The 1990s also saw Sacco's aesthetics gradual transition from underground comix to New Journalism. The translation of *Palestine* in French would inspire *Le Monde diplomatique*, *Libération*, and *La Revue XXI* to publish reportage in comics forms. For a survey of non-fiction comics and comics journalism, see Duncan, Taylor & Stoddard (2016), Mickwitz (2016), and Schmid (2021).

[7] Images can compete with words and create a sudden shot in the eye, especially when representing traumatic events.

pace" and the power of "non-narrativity". This effect is evident in Sacco's use of dense images which hinder the reader's ability to process the information quickly, forcing him/her to 'decode' the scene and develop an independent/informed opinion about what he/she is witnessing. Joe Sacco often creates visually loaded pages which encapsulate a huge amount of textual and visual information, forcing the reader to slow down his/her pace of reading. Frequently, captions and texts do not follow a clear linear progression, which requires the reader to scan a panel or even the entire page in multiple directions.

The potentialities of the medium hitherto discussed are explored, in particular, by comics journalism, a genre that allows the reader to enter simultaneously the messy complexity of history and everyday life experiences. The use of comics by graphic journalists might be motivated by the medium's ability to represent modernity, being a point of intersection between traditional print media and the (relatively) 'new' visual culture. The combination of words and text allows the unflattening of reality by offering new ways of incorporating and reevaluating different points of view. Whereas text describes, images present things, create nonlinear narratives and complicate the act of reading. By doing so, images challenge the reader to experience storytelling also through the depth of its trans-media dimension, as they are not mere illustration accompanying a text. As Nick Sousanis discussed in *Unflattening*,

> In relying on text as the primary means of formulating understanding, what stands outside its linear structure is dismissed, labeled irrational - no more conceivable than the notion of 'upwards' to a flatlander. The visual provides expression where words fail. What have we been missing? And what can be made visible when we work in a form that is not only about, but is the thing itself. (Sousanis 2015: 59)

Therefore, comics can provide a terrain where to validate previously held assumptions, or to formulate new interpretative paradigms.

Hence, this medium challenges our understanding of the documentary genre by showing its porous boundaries. Comics journalism complicates the notion of 'empirical transparency' often associated with recording technologies used to inform reportages. Drawings are here used as a means to problematize the relation between representation and its referent. As Mickwitz (2016: 24) observed, "In case of documentary the evidential force and apparent transparency of the recorded image is underscored by the implied lack of manipulation or intentionality within the texts' overall presentation. This might be understood in terms of performed neutrality." Of course, the neutrality of

an image is often measured by the yardstick of its ability to mimic photography, a medium considered to be an extension of its referent, as the camera records the light it reflects, either electronically by means of an image sensor, or chemically by means of a light-sensitive material.

However, even though photography is generally perceived as objective and neutral, due to its indexical nature (a claim clearly complicated by contemporary digital technologies), photos are nonetheless the product of negotiation between reality and its representation[8]. In particular, photography mediates between reality and the photographer's (camera) eye which frames what the viewer can see (Sontag 2008 [1977]; 2004 [2003]). As any other medium, photography generates its own "medium bias" (Strate 2017) as it does not convey content neutrally not it directly links senders and receivers. Indeed, a medium always shapes our perception of reality, as per Marshall McLuhan famous maxim "the medium is the message". Yet, what is interesting about comics' representation of reality is that they make this mediation process explicit, as there is no element that could be possibly given-off unintentionally (as a sign of inherent authenticity). Whereas a photo functions as an index of an event, a drawing acts as an index of the hand of its creator(s), even though this relation is partially mitigated (if not eroded) when an image is reproduced several times through print technologies. However, it is important to remark that comics often "remediate" (Bolter & Grusin 1999) photographic images to question their (connotative and denotative)[9] meaning, contextualize them and/or use them as factual evidences to validate the comics' documentary research[10]. Photographs are often used to show that something has happened[11].

Similarly, comics journalism may recur to a wide range of styles and tones to complicate our understanding of reality, its representation and truth claims made by documentary projects. In fact, comics can commit to reality either by employing a hyper realistic style (mimicking photojournalism) or by adopting a more symbolic/abstract trait. Joe Sacco's work employs a combination of both.

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[8] For a further discussion on the ontology of photography, see, among others, Albertazzi (2017), Barthes (1981), Cartier-Bresson (1999), Ritchin (2013), Sontag (2008 [1977]; 2004 [2003]), and Zelizer (2010).

[9] According to Zelizer (2010: 13), denotation "grounds the image in reality", whereas connotation "carries the meaning of an image across a set of possible associations".

[10] As Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey (2015: 140) pointed out, "in the graphic novel, there is a descrete but irrefutable tendency to include photographic material next to drawn images".

[11] For a further discussion on the use of photographs in comics, see, among others, Chute (2010; 2016), Cook (2012), Earle (2017), Hatfield (2005), Pedri (2011; 2015), Mickwitz (2016), Watson (2008).

He has a keen attention to details: he portrays faces with ethnographic precision (not stereotyping the ethnic Other by cartooning its features), he skillfully renders the fabric of the clothes that his characters wear, and he reproduces places with high precision, as landscape is often a character shaping and being shaped by humans. Yet, Sacco also recurs to caricatures (a style derived from political cartoon), especially when drawing his diegetic persona. As Jim Chandler remarked,

> There is also something to be said about the way he represents himself in these graphic narratives. He always represents himself with no eyes behind his glasses. There are a number of interpretations one could place on this. Is this an act of representing a kind of Homeric blindness that allows him to see things others can't see? Is it the idea that his eyes reflect rather than see the world? Or are these empty spaces peepholes for us ourselves to see the world afresh? (Sacco & Mitchell 2014: 53)

This cartoonish style, if compared to the more realistic rendering of other characters, make Sacco's persona stand out, drawing the reader's attention towards the intrusive role that journalists inevitably play when they observe and record. Sacco's persona is clearly an outsider. His point of view is different from that of his testimonies. Whereas bombs might be an exceptional event in Sacco's life, Palestinians perceive them as an integral part of their daily life. Hence, comics always make the reader aware of their own mediation. They constantly remind viewers of the author's subjectivity and limited perspective, as the observer can perceive the author's presence through both its style and diegetic representation in the narration.

It is worth mentioning that the self-reflexivity of the medium is not limited to its pace and to the empathic responses it might trigger in the readership. Comics can display multiple points of view in a single moment. For example, comics can display the journalist's point of view while showing him/her inhabiting it. Thus, in a similar fashion to "historiographic metafiction" (Hutcheon 1988), comics make the frames through which stories are constructed visible. They do not just seek to represent an 'objective' historical reality, but they present history from a fictional vantage point, which is used to question the way in which historical events are narrated and (re)constructed. Interestingly, the mixing of the report formulae with personal accounts is reminiscent of the "New Journalists' vigorous combination of fictional techniques with the detailed combination of reports" (Taylor 2003: 19). As Norman Mailer (2018 [1968]: 262) argued, techniques derived from fiction

might be used to "replace history at precisely that point where experience is sufficiently emotional, spiritual, psychical, moral, existential or supernatural to expose the fact the historian in pursuing the experience would be obliged to quit the clearly demarcated limits of historic inquiry." Hence, it is no surprise that Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1977) deeply influenced Joe Sacco's works, informing both his aesthetical and ethical view on Journalism (Worden 2015). Like New Journalism, comics journalism engages with the subjectivities of author and reader, employs immersion reporting, uses character development, gives voice to ordinary people, and adopts an anti-official and anti-corporate attitude, while abiding to journalistic standards of accuracy. Yet, as Rocco Versaci (2008: 111) pointed out, "unlike the absorption of new journalism into the mainstream and the resulting dilution of its radical message, comics journalism retains, paradoxically, a powerful marginal status that will make it difficult for this work to ever be fully 'co-opted'."

In this regard, it is worth remarking that the 1960s and 1970s did not only influence comics journalism by providing new models of literary reportage. These years marked the emergence of the underground comix, which often featured confessional stories, and iconoclastic and politicized narratives (Estren 1993). As a matter of fact, the underground press shared many counterculture political positions: opposition to drug prohibition, requests for sexual liberation, advocacy for minority groups, mistrust toward the government, disapproval toward the Vietnam War and resistance to drafting. Artists engaged with controversial materials in order to show their audacity to disrobe government institutions. Comix used irreverence to provoke laughter, and nihilism to promote anti-authoritarian arguments. They also placed attention on underdogs. Hence, Joe Sacco's work retrieves from the 1970s the personal/confessional dimension and the social critique towards any form of imperialism.

This background might help explain why in Joe Sacco esthetics 'veracity' should not be associated exclusively to the notion of 'objectivity', but rather to concept of honesty. In an interview with W.J.T.Mitchell, Sacco stated,

> I would say that the important thing for me isn't so much objectivity. It is: I want the journalists to admit their context, their prejudices, somehow, or to know something about them. […] British journalists in papers like *The Guardian* and *Independent* use the pronoun "I" in their work. You begin to get a sense of that journalist and you begin to judge that journalist's work […] I'm going to extract something from that knowing that that's how he sees it. The problem with spin is, it is generally they are never telling you

> that they've got a prejudice or they've got an agenda. You know that I care about these people. I'm not going to pretend they are ants or flies (and I shouldn't say that about ants or flies). I have relations with them. […] I'm trying to present something honest. Objectivity is a different word to me than honesty. If someone whose cause I appreciate or I think I'm sympathetic to says something outrageous, to me as an honest journalist, I report the outrageous thing. (Sacco & Mitchell 2014: 70)

Therefore, the commitment towards subjectivity is here described as an ethical choice, capable of creating an aware reader. Sacco does not try to sell a definite history, but rather an honest, complex, and critical description of all the players involved, including himself. The reader is free to choose where to "position" (Winslade & Monk 2008) him/herself, as the communicative bias of the journalist/documentarist is made self-evident. Thus, in Sacco's opinion, subjectivity is not a drawback, but an asset precisely because it can preempt the reader's skepticism towards universal/absolute truth claims, and it reveals that knowledge is always situated. Yet, his being open about his methodology and the limits of (his) knowledge should not be interpreted as a lack of rigor.

2. Voicing the oppressed: a de-colonial practice

Sacco's comics journalism aims to bring the experience of the victims of different historical tragedies into public discourse. The title of one of his works about the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, *Footnotes in Gaza* (2009), clearly sets out his approach to history, trauma and historiography. As Kavaloski (2018: 125) highlighted, the title evokes three different (but often interrelated) uses of footnotes in scholarly discourses. First, footnotes reference sources. Second, they provide evidence without disturbing the main narrative. Third, they can marginalize information (or, in this case, experiences) not deemed relevant. This latter aspect is directly acknowledged by Sacco, who writes: "Well, like most footnotes, they [Palestinians] dropped to the bottom of history's pages, where they barely hang on" (Sacco 2009a: 8). This work is particularly interesting as it points out two types of victims: the victims of contemporary conflicts, whose life is endangered by war and/or settler colonialism, and the victims of History, whose tragic experience has been pushed to the margins of public memory and commemorations. His comics remind the reader that History, like any narrative, is an act of selection, as a total/inclusive memory of an event is unachievable, and thus memory and oblivion are two sides of the same coin.

Hence, Joe Sacco's (long and short) reportages put on the forefront neglected stories, giving voice to groups marginalized to the peripheries of global media and historical attentions. This concern towards the pain of others is a constant feature in his long and short comics on: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the West Bank and Gaza Strip (*Palestine*, *Footnote in Gaza*); the Bosnian War (*The Fixer*, *Safe Area Gorazde*, and *War's End*); the Caucasus ("Chechen War, Chechen Women," "What Refuges"); the American imperial project in Iraq ("Complacency Kills" "Down!Up!"); the African migration in the Mediterranean ("The Unwanted"); and poverty in India ("Kushinagar")—paying particular attention to those who were once deemed "Untouchable". Likewise, Joe Sacco's latest work *Paying the Land* shares a similar mission, giving voice the Dene people, an Indigenous group of First Nations who has lived in the Mackenzie River Valley (in the subarctic Canadian Northwest Territories) since immemorial time. In this graphic novel, he creates a counter-narrative to official documentation visualizing history through oral testimony, and recording previously unheard voices.

In *Paying the Land*, the retrieval of oral narratives may not just be linked to the reportage genre tradition —where different voices alternate in order to construct a complex mosaic about a given event— or a simple reiteration of the "He Said, She Said" formula (Rosen 2009)— where the symmetry of two sides making contradictory claims puts the reporter in the middle of polarized extremes. Retrieving oral narratives might be also considered as an attempt to decolonize[12] our knowledge about Indigenous people. The comics format forces the reader to listen and to watch in order to learn, somehow mimicking the traditional way in which First Nations have always passed knowledge[13] across

[12] Franz Fanon, one of the founders of decolonial thought, observed how colonized communities and subjects internalize dehumanizing discourses of colonial powers. Hence, building upon his ideas, many scholars (Tuck & Yang 2012; Coulthard 2014; Simpson 2017; Alfred & Corntassel 2015) interested in Indigenous communities have pointed out the need to a) make the dynamics of settler colonialism visible, b) privilege Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies, c) restoring traditional practices, and d) return the land and resources to Indigenous peoples. The accomplishment of these goals has often been described as 'resurgence'.

[13] In Western countries, the term Indigenous knowledge has often been associated with the primitive, the wild, the natural. In contrast, Indigenous knowledge must be understood as the way "in which the residents of an area have come to understand themselves in relationship to their natural environment and how they organize that folk knowledge of flora and fauna, cultural beliefs, and history to enhance their lives" (Semali & Kincheloe 2002b: 4). Therefore, Indigenous knowledge does not exist in a vacuum. It belongs to a community, and it can be accessed only through contact with said group. Indigenous people gather

generations. In a passage of the reportage, a young Dene woman stops writing down notes about the traditional way of doing things and starts imitating the elders, "She found herself sitting with an elder; pen in the hand. Jotting down every step was 'so Western,' Melaw realized. I just put my notebook away and started working. She was 'decolonizing' how she absorbed information, she says. The Dene way of learning is TO OBSERVE AND DO…" (Sacco 2020: 236, emphasis in the original). The emphasis on orality challenges the Western ideas of literature and knowledge, exposing how written alphabetic texts were used to repress and silence Indigenous oral stories and practices, on the false assumption that oral texts were a less developed version of the written texts. As the Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice highlighted,

> diverse stories can strengthen, wound, or utterly erase our humanity or connections, and how our stories are expressed or repressed, shared or isolated, recognized or dismissed. It's about the ways we understand that vexed and vexing idea of literature, and how assumptions about what is not 'literary' are used to privilege some voices and ignore others (Justice 2018: xvii).

In Indigenous culture, knowledge is not necessarily mediated by books, but it involves participatory practices and performances that colonial powers tried to eradicate through Indian agents, religion, residential schools, and traders. Hence, it is no surprise that the comic ends with reflections about language revival, hunting (and the Indigenous relation with the land and non-human beings), and gaming. All these activities are individual and collective experiences, underlining the importance of community and relationship. The comic highlights the importance of dialogue and debates as means to untangle complex topics, acknowledging and alternating different point of views. In contrast, written texts, such as treaties, have been used deceitfully by colonial powers to impose a singular interpretative pattern to events and relations (instituting a patriarchal hierarchy that transforms difference into deficiency).

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information from their own life experiences through trial and error. Empirical experiences taught them how to manage natural resources and provide health therapies to members of the community. Each Indigenous community has developed a way to pass on such local knowledge from one generation to the other. Yet, settlers often regarded many of these practices as the product of superstition and tried to eradicate them. The revival of this knowledge does not imply a desire to return to a romanticized uncontaminated pre-colonial past, but a way to move away from colonial frames and procedures. The recovery of Indigenous knowledge is an attempt to recognize how meaning production is culturally grounded. For a further discussion on the issue, see Semali & Kincheloe (2002a).

The awareness about these colonial structures leads Sacco to meta-narratively questions his assumption (as a Westerner immersed in colonial culture) and his actions (as a journalist). In Sacco's comics reportages, witnesses speak to him electively and are not compensated for their stories, as a sign of journalist ethics. Yet, in *Paying the Land* this action is problematized to show the extractive purpose of settler colonialism, and the relationship between Natives and Canada. Sacco is surprised and indignant when a Dene man pulls out of an interview upon learning he would not be compensated. Yet Deborah Simmons (a social scientist working in Tulít'a) asks him to reflect on his inquiry through the lenses of colonization. After this brief exchange, Sacco self-questions his approach,

> I listen with teeth clenched, but doesn't she have a point? After all, what's the difference between me and an oil company? We've both come here to extract something. Deborah says the Dene are known for sharing with their families and communities, and what exists outside of those spaces can fall into a more monetized sphere. The numerous state-funded workshops offer a prime example. The government has a large budget to inform indigenous people about policies and programs and to elicit their feedback, and workshop participants are often paid a couple of hundred dollars per day just to show up. Resource extraction companies pay even more, serve dinner, and give out prizes at their government-mandated "consultations" with the aboriginal people (Sacco 2020: 107).

Sacco cannot erase both his privileged status as an outsider and his view as a Westerner. However, his graphic novel requires readers to become aware of questions of hierarchy and subordination on both a visual-textual and an ethical-historical level, forcing them to reconstruct factual events by recomposing separate sets of words and picture spread throughout the page.

Moreover, the graphic novel resists the "orientalist[14]" (Said, 1979 [1978]) elements present in many documentaries, where the encounter with the Other

[14] Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979 [1978]), examined the literary conditions by which a static and regressive Orient was (and still is) constantly reproduced in Western literature and culture. Said clearly demonstrated how a distinct "vocabulary and imagery" (68) was used by Western observers of the East to constitute a veritable structure of knowledge and perception, collectively sustained and transmitted by different cultural institutions (including the press and universities). This process of othering can also be observed in the way in which Indigenous identities have been constructed by settler societies. Sacco's works discuss different forms of oppression that go from the Middle East to Northern Canada. Yet, despite the specificities of each region, one can observe similarities in the way capitalism and settler colonialism operate worldwide. Settler states (be it Canada or Israel) dispossess Indigenous

is framed as an exotic 'tour' into a distant geographical region where the journalist/reader/observer gets in contact with a different tradition[15]. In contrast, Sacco pays close attention to the relations that Indigenous people have established with each other, elders, future generations, the land, plants, animals, the non-human world, but also Canada's settler society. The land is not just part of the scenario, but a central character that claims (and is claimed by) Indigenous people.

In his journalistic and historical reconstruction, Sacco documents his investigation process, but also covers survivors and victims' memories. He acknowledges his limited point of view, but also highlights the importance of human relations as the trust he creates with the testimonies allows repressed stories of violence and oppression to resurface. As Andrea A. Lunsford and Adam Rosenblatt discussed:

> Sacco is content to try for the truth as he apprehends it. That truth, significantly, turns out to hinge on a series of human relationships involving everything from friendship to codependence and commerce. More often than not, the relationship Sacco builds in search of his 'story' winds up *becoming* the story. (Lunsford & Rosenblatt 2011: 132, emphasis in the original)

Sacco's comics require the reader to emancipate him/herself from ignorance. Shocking images of violence seek to make the observer aware and not

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people of their land, territories, and livelihood in non-consensual ways. They often attempt to hide the shameful atrocities they commit, burying them in the past, and assuming is entirely a matter of past actions, rather than taking full responsibility for present behaviors (Justice 2018). Hence, Sacco seems to take on Said's ethical and critical challenges, going beyond the suffering of particular nations and cultures to explore the universal elements of human suffering and oppression, that is "to universalize the crisis, to give greater scope to what a particular race or nation suffered, to associate that experience with the suffering of others" (Said 1994: 33).

[15] Whereas the notion of Orientalism discussed by Said (1979 [1978]) has been further expanded by other scholars, who developed new applications for the term in order to analyze new/recent phenomena, e.g. "neo-orientalism" (cf. Samiei 2010) and "re-orientalism"(cf. Lau 2009), what I want to discuss in this section is the interrelation between the travelogue (a documentary genre) and colonialism. As Raminder Kaur and John Hutnyk (1999: 6) discussed, contemporary travel is "acquisitive, exoticising, and, to a larger extent, dependent on the racial associations of the traveler." Indeed, as Said already observed, cross-cultural encounters brought about by voyages of conquest/discovery relied on hegemonic discourses of ethnocentricity. Indeed, "the idea of travel as a means of gathering and recording information is commonly found in societies that exercise a high degree of political power" (Kabbani 1988: 1).

compliant. The reader often visualizes a scene from a character's point of view, and thus he/she is forced to perform the role of the oppressed, inhabit his/her point of view and (traumatic) experiences (through secondary witnessing). For example, when Paul Andrew recalls his first day at Grollier Hall in Inuvik (a residential school), in the background, the reader can see what he saw: a nun lined the kids up and cut their hair in order to eliminate all traces of their Indigenous cultural heritage. The comic also portrays the fears that the Catholic (and Anglican) Church instilled in Aboriginal children through visual metaphors. A panel shows tons of children burning in Hell for being pagans. Even though ministers and priests taught Dene children that praying was their only path for salvation, infernal flames invade all the panels on the page, including those portraying young kids praying on their beds, a scene which contradicts the ideals of the ministers' preaching. This visual solution seemingly asks the reader whether the residential school was not already a living Hell for those children who had to endure both physical and sexual abuses.

Many panels feature the witness/informant ('represented participant') trying to establish a virtual eye contact with the 'interactive participants', thus 'demanding' the viewer to enter some kind of relation (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996). This aspect is particularly important because it tries to make the viewer accountable for what is happening in the scene. The pictures ask the spectator to be an active agent of political transformation and not a mere bystander or passive recorder of a scene. This technique aims to solicit an ethical response and a responsible readership. The voicing of different individuals who recall different opinions, family memories and experiences has also the effect of countering two myths that have been used to justify European colonization: America (the continent) as a *Terra Nullius*, and the Vanishing Indian *topos*, which has its literary roots in Fennimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1986 [1826]).

The comic also visualizes the experience of several informants and eyewitnesses to make a case for the use of oral testimony— when corroborated by documents and/or other testimonies— as evidence. The accumulation of several different experiences is used as a body of proof upon which to build a case. Indeed, in Sacco's journalism, "the history of the event can only appear as a dialectic—the emotional truth and the factual truth cannot coexist as a single, seamless narrative, but must instead serve as discontinuous indexes of one another, their discontinuity prompting the reader to further investigation (Owen 2015: 218). Therefore, the graphic novel pays attention to differentiate each character reconstructing their body, making it concrete and readable as

Other (from the Self), while avoiding creating an essentialist articulation of (Indigenous) identity. Hence, Sacco takes on the ethical challenge of representing the other as other, acknowledging his/her peculiarity, making the comic a place of intercultural dialogue where participants discuss key notions/events in order to build a common ground upon which to project the future. For example, the comic shows how the Dene responded to fracking activities. Environment activists oppose the extraction of natural resources fearing the impact that these actions would have on the ecosystems. Other opponents observe how the money brought by the oil industry "strokes social ills like alcoholism and drug abuse" (Sacco 2020: 40). Some others focus on tangible benefits of a relationship with the industry (e.g., gyms, hockey equipment, class size reduction in schools, and maintenance of winter roads, among others). Finally, there are those who position themselves in the middle: they do not oppose development, but they express concern for the environment and voice their will to participate in those projects right from the beginning, in order to control what is going on.

The comic shows how the settler's extractive economy dispossessed Indigenous people, but also created an emergent Aboriginal bourgeoisie thirst for profit and seeking independence via capitalist economic development, "I'd sooner have that on my land and making money from it. People talk about… the amount of money those fracking use. We see that as money. You can build a reservoir and hold that water for them… and let 'em use it and make sure they treat it" (Sacco 2020: 207). One of the key aspects of this economic project is the notion of self-reliance which, pushed to the extreme, can generate an invitation to go back to the bush while renouncing government welfare. On the other hand, the comic also portrays more egalitarian, non-authoritative, and sustainable cultural practices and forms of organization, showing a will to respect ancestral obligation to the land and others. Hence, this lifestyle stands against the homogenizing force of Western liberalism and free market capitalism by stressing the importance of community (against individual conscience) and the interconnection between human beings and other elements of creation (vs. exploitative/extractive relation with nature).

Hence, Sacco recurs to traditional journalistic techniques to introduce different point of views and present explicit counter points through dialectical engagement and turn-taking. On many occasions, Joe Sacco silences his own opinion and presents conflicting truth claims without generally assessing any of them. However, if one pays close attention to the narrative, one can see how Sacco does not assign equal value to each assertion, as the information gathered

up to that moment casts doubts on certain claims. Moreover, on extremely rare occasions, he even recurs to voice over his interviewee responses, thus imposing an authoritative perspective. For example, he expresses doubts about the coherence of Henry Deneron political view and his preaching about self-reliance and the return to the bush,

> This is the most radical idea I heard in the Northwest Territories and Harry Deneron is the last person I thought would articulate it. Or perhaps for the moment, he is feeling particularly battered. Perhaps the snarling and bucking transactional world has thrown Harry from its back today. But his logic is sound. If there is a place here where a person can truly practice the self-reliance Harry preaches, it is in the bush. But something tells me that he will climb back on that world again, and the bush will have to wait (Sacco 2020: 220)

While Sacco voices different opinions, he does not endorse all of them by recurring to claims of equivalence. Even when he does not overtly express his own view, silence is not equivalent to endorsement. Informants discuss/criticize what happens, frequently offering different/contrasting points of views. Thus, Sacco's comics let the reader make his/her own inferences.

Interestingly, in certain panels, the comic seems to adopt the point of view of the oppressor. For example, Sacco depicts hands hitting Indigenous kids without showing us the body of the nun doing the slapping, but just hints to her religious habit. This rendering seems to indicate that the responsibility of that violence extends well beyond the body of the single oppressor, and points to settlers' society at large. The comic shows how the settler society's violence manifests itself in two main (interrelated) forms: physical abuses and cultural erasure. Both practices aimed to break the relations and bonds that held Indigenous communities together, attacking families and their networks, but also hindering practices that enabled self-determination and damaging the community health (inducing depression, suicides, alcohol and drug abuses). Yet, one of the informants spares a thought for the nuns (without condoning them) who were also victims of abuses, thus complicating the picture[16],

> 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

[16]As Dominick LaCapra (2001: 79) discussed, 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."

> 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… (Sacco 2020: 143)

This testimony shows how settlers' society created a loop of violence where the abused became the abuser. This process is also visible in stories of 'student-on-students abuse,' "the kids that were two or the years older… who probably were abused themselves, [were] hitting on the young kids" (Sacco 2020: 141). Hence, in residential schools, Indigenous children were subject to the prison psychology[17] of the survival of the fittest. Similarly, the comic reports cases of domestic abuses and incest among Indigenous families. The colonial system disrupted family ties and induced many Aboriginal people to abuse alcohol and drugs as a coping mechanism. In certain cases, colonial violence, passed down through generations, also in the form of postmemory (Hirsch 2012), was turned inward and has caused a high number of suicides[18].

Finally, it is worth remarking how voices from settlers' society are (almost) absent. This omission might be seen as a way to put on the spotlight those experiences that are neglected by mainstream media. As Sacco wrote in the introduction of his comic collection *Journalism*

> I've picked the stories I wanted to tell, and by those selections my own sympathies should be clear. I chiefly concern myself with those who seldom get a hearing, and I don't feel it is incumbent on me to balance their voices with the well-crafted apologetics of the powerful. The powerful are generally excellently served by mainstream propaganda organs. The powerful should be quoted, yes, but to measure their pronouncements against the truth, not to obscure it. (Sacco 2012: xiv)

Thus, Sacco rejects any pretense of balance and equal distance in favor of honesty. As hitherto discussed, the intrinsic interpretative nature of the medium has allowed him to make his subjectivity as an observer visible, thus pushing the limits of traditional journalism.

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[17] Indigenous children developed violent behavior due to the effects of their imprisonment. Like prisons, Residential Schools were a quintessential government institution, with almost complete control over the lives of the people forced to spend time in them. Like prisons, Residential schools triggered in some cases suicide attempts, episodes of violence, and physical diseases.

[18] For a discussion of the intergenerational effects of the Residential School System, see, among others, Bombay, Matheson & Anisman (2014), Elias et al. (2012).

3. Retrieving the past, reconstructing relations, rebuilding communities

In *Paying the Land*, Joe Sacco focuses on documenting Dene Nation's relationship with the land and to resource extraction. When he first visited Northwest Territories, extraction industries had already been established in the region for years, but a global petroleum glut had temporarily stopped operations. Sacco and his guide, Shauna, visited several towns and collected a wide range of Indigenous testimonies and perspectives on the extraction industry. However, during his visits, Sacco soon realized that his journalist research about resource extraction in Northwest Territories was inextricable from larger issues that the Dene people had endured for generations. Sacco could not describe the conflicts over the land and its resources without understanding the colonization process enacted by the Canadian government via unjust treaties and the residential school system. The past had to be retrieved in order to better understand the current resistance of the Dene to the government, its (capitalist) policies, and the role of the extraction industry (be it oil, gas, or diamond). The focus on the different attitudes (settlers vs. indigenous) towards the land helps explain why the fight to regain control of Native land was (and still is) vital for Indigenous people.

Indeed, the control over the land would allow the Dene to maintain their independence and identity. As Patrick Wolfe noticed,

> Whatever settlers may say—and they generally have a lot to say—the primary motive for elimination [of the Natives] is not race (or religion, ethnicity, grade of civilization, etc.) but access to territory. Territoriality is settler colonialism's specific, irreducible element. (Wolfe 2006: 388)

Interestingly, this appropriation of Indigenous land occurred (and keeps occurring) on a legal, economic, territorial, and symbolic level. Settler society privatized (through dispossession and enclosure) collectively held territories, "The white people came in and wanted to share with us and asked if we could do something for them… But the question of the land was impossible… You don't sell your dad [and] you don't sell your mom" (Sacco 2020: 62). Hence, Indigenous people understanding of the concept *Terra Nullius* is very from the one attributed by the settler society. Whereas colonizers saw the land as an empty space to be conquered and exploited, Indigenous people saw the land as a common holding to be shared in harmony among its inhabitants (human and

non-human). As Tanya Talaga (2020: 48) pointed out, "The Indigenous people view their relationship to the land, to the water, to all life on Earth, as sacred; separation from the land is equivalent to a spiritual separation."

The Indigenous dispossession from their land had the effect of creating a class of workers compelled to enter the exploitative labor market to survive. This observation allowed Sacco to connect the XIX century fur trade system to contemporary industries, showing how the colonial system had not disappeared, but had just slightly changed his modes of pursuing its scopes. The fur trade introduced capitalism to Indigenous people, changing their relationship to the land, as they started taking from the land more than what they needed. They started competing for resources. Prior to their contact with settler society, they only hunted what they needed to survive.

However, the indigenous relation with the land should not be understood exclusively in a material sense, but also as "a system of reciprocal relations and obligation" (Coulthard 2014: 13). As Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg) observed in a conversation with Naomi Klein,

> Extraction and assimilation go together. Colonialism and capitalism are based on extracting and assimilating. My land is seen as a resource. My relatives in the plant and animal worlds are seen as resources. My culture and knowledge is a resource. My body is a resource and my children are a resource because they are the potential to grow, maintain, and uphold the extraction-assimilation system. The act of extraction removes all of the relationship that give whatever is being extracted meaning. Extracting is taking. Actually, extracting is stealing— it is taking without consent, without thought, without care or even knowledge of the impacts that extraction has on the other living things in that environment (Simpson 2017: 75)

Interestingly, colonial violence is not reconstructed solely through the testimonies of the survivors, but also through quotes and references to official documents that recognize the wrongdoing of the past, such as the Truth and Reconciliation final report, which condemned the churches as guilty of "cultural genocide." Yet, the comic indirectly warns us against the ambiguous connotations embedded in the term 'reconciliation,' especially since colonial practices have not ended yet. Hence, Canada might be considered (using Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's metaphor) as an abusive partner who wants to "reconcile," but "continues to physically, emotionally, spiritually, and mentally abuse his partner" (Simpson 2011: 21). Indeed, the reconciliation notion reveals "a tendency among Europeans to treat human relations as they

do money relations" (Maracle 1990: 162). The comic invites the reader to see a tight relation between the way settlers' culture exploits the land through extraction and the way in which settlers treated Indigenous people as commodities.

By contrast, the comic shows how in Dene culture, the land has a pedagogic function guiding and connecting an individual with the spiritual and physical elements of creation. The very practice of hunting, fishing, and living off the land (following traditional methods) is a challenge to capitalist societies as it privileges relations (built on reciprocity and ethical coexistence) over money. On this matter, the comic discusses the principle of praying and "paying the land" whenever one returns to the land. This is a way to treat gently the land, "You give something he says. A bullet perhaps water, tobacco, or tea. It's like visiting someone. You bring the land a gift." (Sacco 2020: 50). One of the final scenes of the graphic novel features Eugene Boulanger hunting and shooting a caribou (towards which he feels deep respect) and reconnecting to the land and to his ancestors.

In contrast, extraction industries pollute the land while taking resources from it, and without acknowledging the disturbance and paying back. This world view is clearly set in opposition to Aboriginal lifestyle. The land is in fact an integral part of Indigenous identities, "Without the land we cannot be Dene. Without the land, we don't have integrity. We would be a weak people" (Sacco 2020: 200). The relation between the land and Indigenous cultures allows Sacco to investigate how the Government attempted to eradicate traditional ways of living through the residential school system, which was seen a way to introduce modernity to what they considered backward people.

By collecting oral evidence, *Paying the Land* interrogates both past and present injustices. Yet, it is often impossible to separate the two experiences because of the intrinsic nature of trauma, but also because of how the past has shaped the present. By giving space to personal experiences, comics journalism visualizes how trauma can generate alternative temporalities, connecting past and present, thus rejecting the assumption that we all experience time in the same way. In this aspect, comics can represent "experiences of time outside the dominant 'proper' time of global capitalism and its networks" (Gardner 2015: 36). By reconnecting past and present, the graphic novel does not only comment on how trauma can be passed across generations in the form of postmemory, but it also shows how current generations are survivors in their own right. They still fight against capitalist forces that claim their land while reviving their culture and nationhood. As Frantz Fanon discussed,

> The claim to a national culture in the past does not only rehabilitate that nation and serve as a justification for the hope of a future national culture. In the sphere of psycho-affective equilibrium it is responsible for an important change in the native. Perhaps we have not sufficiently demonstrated that colonialism is not simply content to impose its rule upon the present and the future of a dominated country. Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it. This work of devaluing pre-colonial history takes on a dialectical significance today (Fanon 1963: 210).

The comic ends addressing these challenges, by showing how young Indigenous people are actively engaged in the revival of Indigenous culture (including language, knowledge, practices, games, performances, etc.). They heal the scars left by colonialism and strengthen their relations with the community, ancestors, the land, and the non-human world, while refusing victimhood. At the same time, the concern towards the land is linked to the survival of the community, which must prosper.

Finally, Sacco's *Paying the Land* does not only recollect the history and the struggles of Indigenous people in Canada, but it also raises questions about the sustainability of capitalist economy in the long term and from an ecological point of view. One of the closing scenes visualize Sacco and Shauna's visit to the defunct Giant Mine, a former gold extraction site. During his visit to the mine, he learns that when ore processing stopped in 1999, it left behind 237,000 tons of arsenic trioxide dust, a toxic by-product. While descending the mine, Sacco wonders "Where to put it?" Then he rapidly answers, "Well, down the mine of course!" Then he questions how future generations will deal with the problems left by the previous one and if they will be able to fix those damages. On the next page, Sacco walks alongside different infrastructures and machines, thinking about his journey "I will leave here with many unanswered questions about my indigenous hosts, but right now, standing hundreds of feet underground after listening to an earful about technological wonders of remediation, my biggest query is about my race, about <u>us</u>" (Sacco 2020, 249, emphasis in the original). Subsequently, Sacco asks in a series of captions laid across drawings of the dark mine, "What is the worldview of a people who mumble no thanks or prayers, who take what they want from the land, and pay it back with arsenic?" Therefore, the comic seems to extend the notion of relation to the settler society in order to hold settlers accountable for the

damages caused to the land and to the Indigenous people. In addition, Aboriginal people provide interesting insights (from experience) about possible ways to correct our own lifestyle, as it is no longer sustainable or ethical.

4. Conclusion

This paper discussed how contemporary comics (re)narrate the past and the present relationship between Aboriginal people and (all) Canadians by investigating Joe Sacco's (collaborative) documentary comic *Paying the Land*. This work is particularly interesting as it testifies to the existence of allied[19] depictions that aim to break (even controversially) the silence about past and present sufferings of the Dene peoples in Canada. The documentary format does not only homage the role that orality has always played in Native cultures, but it also allows the author to feature, contrast, and compare a wide range of Indigenous stories and experiences, without silencing any of them, while inviting the reader to actively listen to those testimonies carefully. Storytelling becomes a central practice to the articulation of a Dene selfhood and future. Finally, the comic points at Indigenous activism and healing practices as means to re-construct community ties, but is also an attempt at rethinking Western social and economic structures, imagining alternatives based on the ideas of kinship and relation, and encompassing both the human and the non-human world.

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[19] Allyship is certainly an important practice as it involves the active support of (minority) groups that are treated badly or unfairly, although one is not a member of said group. Of course, these representations are a step forwards in the recognition of the pain of others, however sometimes they tend to elide certain experiences. For instance, Chester Brown's *Louis Riel* (2017 [2003]) did not feature the perspective of Indigenous women. In contrast, Sacco portrays many different voices and allows Indigenous people to talk about themselves (almost) without any overt mediation. Moreover, it is worth remarking that allied comics often receive more attention that any Indigenous creator writing on the same issues. Hence, as Sylvain Rheault (2020: 515) highlighted, this unequal coverage "raises some uneasy questions".

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