

# Indigenous Resilience in Illustration: “Nimkii” and the Story of Survival

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Editors' note: Initially written as an assignment, this paper originally described the author's personal feelings about “Nimkii” in a separate paragraph and assumed readers' familiarity with the story and its context. We encouraged Kenneth to weave his feelings into his description of “Nimkii”'s plot and significance, and to give some brief allusions to the real-world events. As people who have not personally experienced the repercussions of the cultural genocide of Indigenous people in Canada, we wanted to ensure that none of our suggested edits diminished the powerful intent of the paper to advocate for Indigenous resilience. Rather, our intent was to concentrate the paper so that its message was clear and evocative.

*This Place: 150 Years Retold* is a graphic novel anthology emerging out of the ongoing tragedy and crisis Indigenous communities face across Canada. The colonial nation has actively sought to erase First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples through policies of assimilation, displacement, and cultural genocide. The resulting intergenerational trauma reverberates through the present day—Indigenous languages, traditions, and ways of life hover on the brink of extinction. Persistent injustices faced by Indigenous Peoples include the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, overrepresentation in the child welfare and prison systems, lack of clean drinking water on reserves, health disparities, the list is never completed (Brant; Clark; Blunt). Canada's 150th anniversary in 2017 prompted a sobering reckoning with this unjust reality. While the sesquicentennial sparked nationwide celebration for some, it represented 150 years of colonial violence for Indigenous Peoples.

Within this context, *This Place: 150 Years Retold* marks a watershed moment in the portrayal of Indigenous histories in Canada. As a graphic novel anthology crafted by Indigenous

creators, it turns the page on settler-centred narratives and restores narrative sovereignty. The stories offer an emotional journey through the past century and a half, exploring the resilience and resistance of communities that have endured a post-apocalyptic existence since the era of Contact. Readers bear witness to Indigenous imagination, psychic confrontations with the lingering impacts of genocide, and profound reflections on the nature of time and existence. Within the anthology, the story "Nimkii" stands out, offering a poignant representation of the resilience of Indigenous communities amidst the devastating historical event of the Sixties Scoop. Between the 1960s and 1980s, thousands of Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and communities by the Canadian government and placed into the child welfare system to be adopted out to predominantly non-Indigenous families. This mass displacement of children inflicted profound generational trauma and loss of culture and identity (Sinclair and Dainard). Crafted by the writing of Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm and the artwork of Ryan Howe and Jen Storm, "Nimkii"'s narrative is a testament to the indomitable spirit of Indigenous Peoples, their deeply rooted connections to one another, and their fight to heal the enduring scars of colonial oppression. The story intimately explores the life of Nimkii, a young Anishinaabe woman. She recounts to her daughter the sparse, pain-laden memories of her own mother, having been heart-wrenchingly separated from her long before the era of the Sixties Scoop. In her subsequent upbringing in an abusive non-Indigenous foster home, she formed a deep bond with another Indigenous adoptee named Teddy. Tragically, this friend was lost to her—a boy whose name bore heavy significance. He was named Teddy Bellingham, after a 16-year-old Indigenous teen who suffered a brutal, fatal beating (Harford). This poignant detail of Teddy's name serves as a stark reminder of the violence faced by Indigenous communities in modernity. As Nimkii recounts this heartbreaking story to her daughter, the comic conveys a

powerful representation of relationships—between family and home, between spiritual wisdom and historical trauma, between blood and kin. The bonds between Indigenous mothers and daughters demonstrating the sacred role of women as life givers and knowledge keepers. The matrilineal passing down of stories and teachings highlights the vital importance of women in Indigenous societies. The maternal figure embodies love, nurturing, strength and resilience. And tragically, the Sixties Scoop ruptured these sacred matrilineal bonds between generations of Indigenous women and their children. As Akiwenzie-Damm notes in the foreword of the comic, “Nimkii” is a composite image of her own lived experience, as well as “specific children in care” and the “shocking statistics about Indigenous children in the system” (138)—a story representing both those lost and those who made it triumphantly through Canada’s miscarriage of a child welfare system.

“Nimkii” presents an essential tool for exploring Indigenous history, and how it has been intertwined with—and irrevocably changed by the actions of—Canada’s government. Rather than prescribing an academic perspective, the narrative addresses a broader audience accessibly, illuminating the systemic injustices faced by Indigenous Peoples. “Nimkii” responds to the need for a greater understanding of the systemic injustices faced by Indigenous Peoples, presenting the absence of the Indigenous narrative in the mainstream Canadian understanding of the Sixties Scoop, and filling the void with poignant and powerful stories of resistance and renewal.

Throughout the comic, there are many colourful childhood illustrations, drawn by Ryan Howe and Jen Storm, of mythological creatures from Indigenous storytelling, such as “Giizhigokwe, the great horned serpents, the great lynx Mishi-biziw,” and the “Thunderbirds” (Akiwenzie-Damm 145) who battle them. Nimkii’s sketch of the Thunderbird on page 154, followed by their appearance on the last panel on page 164 are indicative of the creature’s position of hope and as

saviour. Inversely, the drawings of Mishi-biziw grabbing both Nimkii and Teddy—on pages 146 and 159 respectively—and the shadows of the Giizhigokwe on page 160 are especially telling in how they parallel the abusive men meant to be taking care of them (Hagerman). These illustrations powerfully portray a real-life understanding of these mythological beasts to non-Indigenous readers, and how such important stories are passed down and shared. Through Nimkii's experiences and her mother's teachings, the reader learns about the culture and traditions of the Anishinaabe people, making the narrative both a historical record and a cultural teaching tool.

In the comic's opening panels on pages 140 and 141, there is a significant emphasis on Nimkii's familial heritage, highlighting her mother, herself, and her daughter as the latest in an enduring lineage of Indigenous women on Turtle Island. This representation is profound, symbolizing the principle of renewal intrinsic to the Indigenous paradigm (Little Bear 27). It poignantly reflects the cyclical nature of life—a core concept that resonates deeply through Indigenous belief systems. The story of “Nimkii” shows how this cycle was severed, and almost entirely lost, by the Sixties Scoop and colonial assimilation, and was renewed and restored by the Indigenous community not allowing practice of violent erasure to continue. This is also displayed through the fact Nimkii has no photographs of her own mother and instead keeps her in her memory and her life by drawing her (Akiwenzie-Damm 147). Similarly, as soon as Nimkii meets Teddy, she feels instantly bonded and exclaims to him that he has her now and that she's his people (Akiwenzie-Damm 151), demonstrating the inherent interconnectedness shared between the two and their spirits. By passing her story and Teddy's story down to her own daughter, no matter how painful, Nimkii maintains the imperishable bond and intergenerational

spirit of hope, and one can imagine her granddaughter being told the story in an even brighter future tomorrow.

It is essential that the perspectives of Indigenous readers and scholars be centred in any academic discussion of Indigenous literature, especially within the Canadian context. For too long, Indigenous narratives have been filtered through an external or colonial lens, muting the voices of those with lived experience and intimate connections to these stories. Academia has the responsibility to create inclusive spaces where Indigenous students and faculty can share their insights, drawing on intergenerational knowledge and traditions often excluded from Western canon. The academy must undergo a process of decolonization, where Indigenous methodologies and pedagogies are respected, not just tolerated. Beyond the classroom, affirming these voices in the public discourse is vital to dispelling enduring stereotypes and challenging internalized oppression. When Indigenous communities are empowered to shape the narrative, a richer, more nuanced understanding of their histories and experiences emerges. Works like *This Place: 150 Years Retold* demonstrate the restoration of narrative sovereignty, as intergenerational trauma is unpacked through stories like “Nimkii” and told on Indigenous terms. Uplifting these perspectives fosters solidarity and healing.

Upon engaging with *This Place: 150 Years Retold* in its totality, the Indigenous reader, such as the author of this essay, ought to feel a sense of recognition and an emergent feeling of pride—sentiments that may seem foreign due to their scarcity in mainstream discourse surrounding Indigenous experiences. More often, the Indigenous reader may feel as though they are trapped in an endless abyss, desperately searching for a way out. The walls of this symbolic room are oppressive, engrained with the shame and guilt of an inescapable history. One is haunted by their ancestors’ anguish and the pain of their loss. There is immense hurt and anger

that is challenging to reconcile with a coherent sense of self and balanced perspective on the past. This feeling of emptiness and profound loss is further amplified when one looks inward at their reflection, constantly grappling to understand their identity as an Indigenous person disconnected from their heritage. The lack of knowledge, representation, and recognition in broader society has cultivated an acute sense of isolation. Stories like “Nimkii”, however, offer refuge from the dark emptiness—even after being ripped away from everything known, the Indigenous Peoples have persevered, “despite everything, we have survived” (Elliott, vi). Resistance isn’t just resistance—it’s renewal, it’s endurance, it’s a refusal to be forgotten. One must summon the courage to embrace their destiny, recognizing their place in the unbroken lineage of Turtle Island. There is a duty to honour those who endured immeasurable suffering, to believe in oneself and one’s people, and to share these stories. As Nimkii proclaims, “I made a vow that I would be the hero Teddy believed I was” (162). The act of honouring can be accomplished through preserving communal narratives, tirelessly combatting oppressive colonial forces, and reclaiming lost identities. True decolonization and Indigenization are impossibilities, lest the government of Canada is holistically dismantled, and all the land is given back to the tribes it truly belongs to. Resistance is Sisyphean and indefinite, but the oppressed must never stop striving for those ideals anyways. As Elliott frames in the foreword of this anthology, “Indigenous people live in a post-apocalyptic world”, the fact they are still here is a demonstration of how they are “hero[s] for simply existing” (vi). I will keep striving to be who I am, no matter how difficult the journey may be.

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